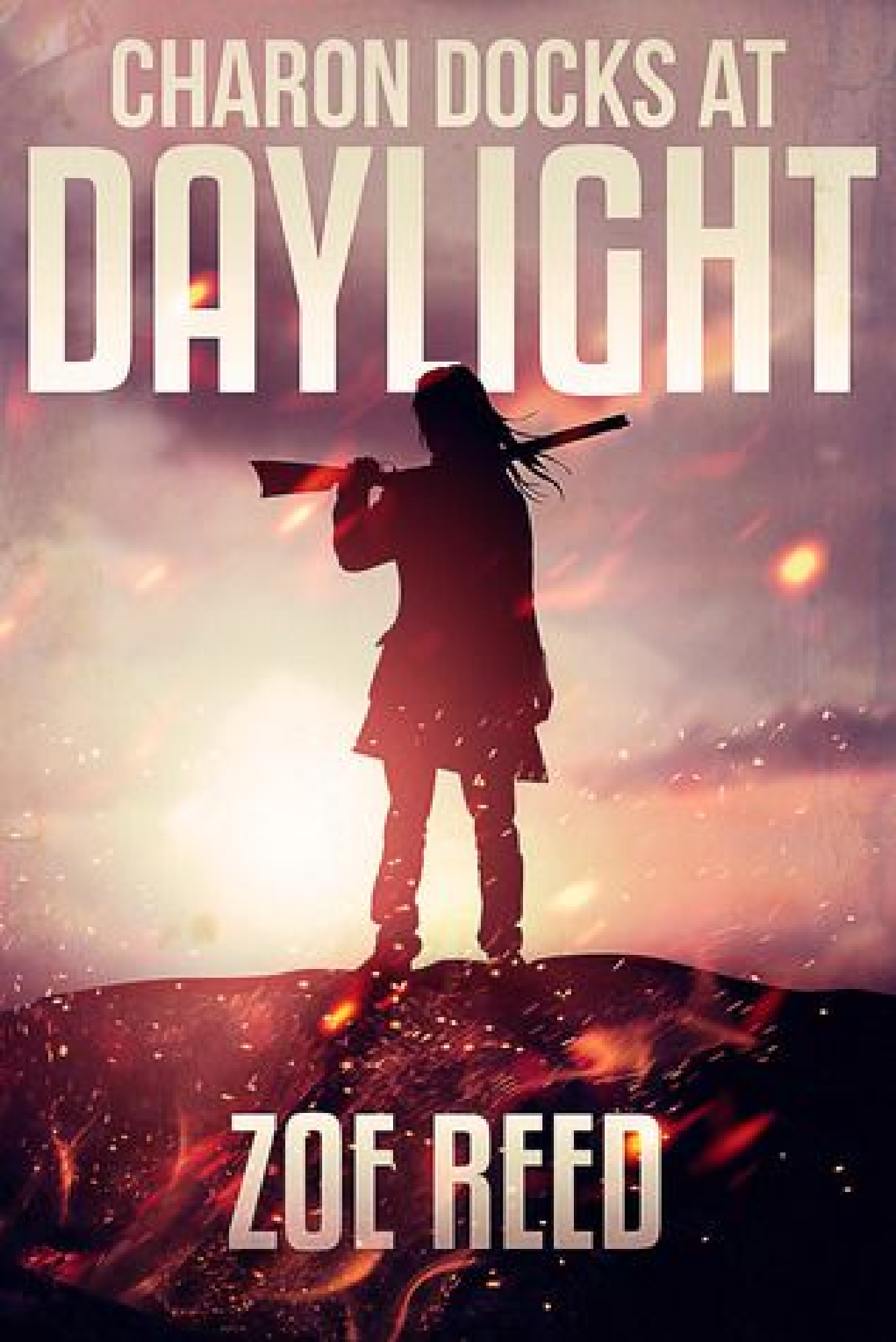

CHARON DOCKS AT
DAYLIGHT
ZOE REED

Charon Docks At Daylight

by ZoeReed

It's six years after an infection turned a majority of the population into ferocious, zombie-like creatures that hunt during the day, forcing the living into a nocturnal state of existence. Survival is a continuous struggle when it's hide or fight, and the creatures aren't the only threat in a wasted America. Sometimes fighting is the only answer. f/f

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Welcome To The New Age

A/N – Hello there! I'm happy to announce that this story is finally getting the editing it deserves. It'll be a slow process, but I'll eventually have it polished enough to publish as a Kindle book. It is and always will be free, so read whenever and as many times as you'd like :)

Some things to help you know what to expect –

The story will be told from the perspectives of three different characters, so keep an eye out for whose chapter it is at the beginning.

There will be f/f between the two female characters, and I'm debating on a romantic interest for the male lead.

Last but not least, the chapter titles will be references to songs or literature (mostly songs, it gives me an excuse to find new music or rediscover old stuff :P). I'll put the info at the beginning of each chapter.

That's it, hope you like it!

Radioactive - Imagine Dragons

Welcome To The New Age

Genevieve

Flickers of red light shifted through the darkness, illuminating what the moon couldn't of the large library. I held my own small flashlight between my teeth, directing the cardinal beam downward onto the book in my hands. The scientific title had seemed promising, but as I scanned the inside I found it was only a superficial account of the human body – definitely not the in-depth information about the nervous system that we were looking for. As quietly as I could, I set the book back on the shelf, the only audible sound the slight rub as it slid into place.

I pulled the flashlight out of my mouth, running it over the spines of other books until I found another that looked interesting, and then gripped it

between my teeth again to free my hands. As I reached for the book, there was a faint whoosh, and a much louder thud as a heavy text hit the floor, echoing off the high library ceiling. Startled, I jumped, instinctively turning toward the noise as my hand shot to the twelve-inch knife belted to my thigh. Luckily I had a good enough hold on my flashlight that I didn't drop it and add to the clatter. Every other red light in the long row of shelves directed toward the noise, barely illuminating the soldier who'd dropped the book, and I could almost make out eleven inhales as each of us held our breath.

I waited, the only sound I could hear in the dark silence was the frightened pounding of my heart as we all waited for a dreaded response to the noise. My hand was still tensed over the knife, and though it was the weapon of choice among us for its silence, I felt even more comforted by the weight of the rifle strung over my shoulder. After thirty seconds of silence, the red beams shifted toward me, and I could see my limbs outlined by the light as they looked at me for orders. I waited another thirty seconds, listening intently for any sound that might indicate our mission was about to get a lot more dangerous. When none came, I gave an audible sigh.

"As you were," I whispered, just loud enough so my comrades could hear me. Releasing my hold on the knife, I grabbed my light and shined it on the one who'd dropped the book. "Jarvis, be more careful."

"Sorry, LT," he whispered back, and before I removed my light from him I watched him take a firm hold of the heavy book so it wouldn't slip from his fingers.

We'd been searching through Harvard's library for over an hour now, and with almost every shelf scanned we still hadn't found what we were looking for: a book, any book for that matter, that was extremely detailed about the human brain. Not just the different parts and what they were for, but also chemicals, hormones, and affects on the rest of the body – the kind of book that would give a first time reader enough knowledge to be a brain surgeon. There were plenty of biology textbooks about human anatomy, but none I'd seen yet that were specific enough. Nor did it help that a good number of the books had been thrown about and strewn all

over the floor in a former chaos. The lack of vision and the layer of dust that reflected my red light back at me made it hard to scan the dropped titles quickly and accurately, and the disorder made searching troublesome.

"Genevieve." There was a quiet whisper behind me as I continued to scan the shelves. The familiar voice belonged to Blake McMahan. "How you doing over here?"

"Well," I started and turned to face him, my flashlight turning his short blonde hair a dark pink and shining back at me in his hazel eyes. At six-foot-three he loomed over me, and I'm sure his broad shoulders and hugely muscular body made him look at least three times my size. "I never got to finish high school, so I don't *really* know what the hell we're looking for."

His shoulders shook as he let out short huffs of breath in the quietest laugh he could manage. "No shit. I barely know the biology books from the psychology books."

Blake was a year older than me, but he was just a junior in high school when the world fell apart. A lot of us who didn't go from student to dead overnight went from student to soldier, and education had taken a back seat to survival for the last six years. I couldn't say I'd minded, seeing as I never liked school much anyway.

As he answered, I felt the tug of nature calling, so I waved for him to follow me as I started in the likely direction the bathrooms would be in. "Captain Greely needs to let us bring the Doc, instead of sending us out on these pointless searches bringing back books that don't help." Were I talking to anyone else, I wouldn't be expressing such disapproval with the Captain. But McMahan was like a brother to me, and as long as I followed the Captain's orders, he would too, no matter how much I disliked them.

Six years ago, before all of this started, I would have laughed in somebody's face if they told me I'd be listening to some old veteran like he was my own father. If they told me that that same veteran would trust me so much he'd put other soldiers' lives in my hands. If they told me that

me so much he'd put other soldiers' lives in my hands. If they told me that my new best friend would be an M4. The joke wouldn't have been too funny though, because now I slept with that M4 laid snug across my chest every night. With that twelve-inch, double-edged hunting knife still strapped to my thigh.

Blake and I turned slowly down a short hall at the end of the long building, and with a sweep of my flashlight I sighted the door with the circular blue 'women' sign on it. It didn't matter to anyone nowadays which restroom I went in, but I didn't mind maintaining certain formalities every once in a while. When we reached the door I pushed it open just a hair and pulled the knife out of its sheath, careful not to make a sound. With my ear pressed against the opening I held my breath, listening for the slightest noise coming from the other side. Usually it would be the deep, steady breath of a sleeping Feral that would let us know we weren't alone. Sometimes there'd even be the slow shift or footstep of one roused from slumber.

Now, however, my ear reported silence. With my knife in one hand and my flashlight in the other, I pushed the door all the way open, scanning the bathroom and stalls with Blake at my side. Finding the area empty I set my backpack down and made my way into one of the stalls, leaving it wide open so I could make a quick comeback in case we fell suddenly under attack. McMahan wouldn't mind. He'd stay where he couldn't see anyway.

"So," I started, just to make conversation while I took care of business. "Casey, huh?"

I couldn't help teasing him about the newcomer who seemed to have already developed a crush on him. A quarter of our settlement's soldiers were constantly out looking for other survivors, but these days it was getting rare to find people who needed somewhere to call home. There were three types of people left. The normal folks like us and most other survivors, who formed groups with close companions, usually family or friends from before. The foragers, who preferred to go it alone because they thought it was less conspicuous and therefore safer. They survived by scavenging, and trading the goods they found with groups for things they needed.

they needed.

Then there were raiders, though most groups of raiders had their own names for themselves. They were dangerous, all of them. They took what they needed, or simply wanted, and killed anyone who got in the way. I suppose the only good thing about the raiders was that a lot of them went after Ferals with guns blazing, making life easier for the rest of us. But even then they were loud, creating a raucous everywhere they went, and if you were near enough to hear them then you were near enough to get caught in the bloodshed. We weren't here to start wars with the uninfected, so whenever we could, we avoided them. Fortunately, that worked out for us most the time, because we traveled in a big enough group that they rarely wanted to engage in a firefight.

Blake chuckled, and there was a pause as I heard a metallic click, followed by a deep inhale. I'd learned over the years it was true what they always said, about your other senses being more alert in the dark. It was so true that as Blake inhaled I could hear the soft crackling of hot embers, and I knew he'd lit a cigarette. "She's cute," he said slowly, almost as a question, like he was avoiding the topic.

As I came out of the stall I was still buttoning my jeans. "Cross your fingers," I told him, reaching for the handle on the sink faucet. He made a show of crossing his fingers as I gave it a twist, and a huge grin spread over my face as water poured into the basin. I'd turned the handle with a red 'h' on it, and even though the water didn't come out hot, it wasn't freezing, courtesy of warmish summer nights in Boston. "What's the matter? She's not your type?" I asked him, and then added, "Shine your light over here, will ya?"

It had been ages since I'd looked in a mirror, and as he directed the light over, I almost wished I hadn't. With grooming having taken a back seat to, well, almost everything, my black hair went from wavy to downright frazzled, like it hadn't been brushed in months. At least I kept it cut short, the tips barely reaching my shoulders. And there was so much dirt on my face my normally fair complexion looked murky. Really, I was a muddled mess, and the dirt speckled the smooth skin of my thin cheeks in such a way it almost looked like I had freckles.

"No, she *is* my type. I just don't want a girl." I'd begun splashing water over my face to clean off the grime, but when he paused at that I passed him a teasingly suspicious look. "Shut up," he laughed, catching the gay joke behind my glance. His face was illuminated in a reddish glow as he puffed on the cigarette. "I don't need to be out on missions worrying about the girl back home worrying about me. You're enough of a worry for me already."

"I can take care of myself." The glare I gave was half serious. I knew that he knew I could take care of myself, but I didn't want him to start doubting it.

I wiped the water off of my now clean face and shook it from my hands. My skin looked better, but now I could tell exactly how much sleep I wasn't getting. My eyes were usually such a soft, light brown that they were almost golden, but in the dim of the flashlight they looked dark and sullen. So did the bags beneath them, which were exaggerated by the heavy shadows in the room. I couldn't wait to be back at camp where I could finally catch up on much needed rest.

At least my clothes were in okay condition. Which was good, considering they were about the only set I had aside from the light sweater in my backpack and the winter coat back at camp. My dark brown tank top had faded to a leathery beige, and the edges along the neckline and waist were only slightly frayed. My dark blue jeans had held their color nicely, though they too had incurred a small tear over my left knee. The shirt and my jeans hugged every inch of my skin and nonexistent curves tight, which I preferred since I didn't have to worry about baggy clothes getting caught on things if I needed to run from something, or someone. Though I wouldn't mind an extra pair of clothes, I wouldn't trade my tan combat boots for anything. The soft leather was worn and pliable, and the durable sole was molded so perfectly to my foot that sometimes it didn't feel like I was wearing shoes at all.

"Sure you can, pipsqueak," Blake teased, letting go of the cigarette when I reached for it.

I rolled my eyes, and after taking a breath of smoke and handing it back

to him I grabbed my backpack. By now I was accustomed to people taking jabs at my size. It wasn't so much my lack of height, which at five-foot-five was pretty average. It was more about my lack of brawn. I was thin and, quite frankly, frail looking. It probably didn't help that my clothes were snug and food rations were tight, neither adding much bulk at all to my frame. Even so, people learned quickly not to mistake my weight for a weakness. The Captain had taught me early on how to handle myself, and what I lacked in strength I made up for in marksmanship. Put a gun in my hand and I'd shut anyone up real quick.

McMahan followed me back out to the main part of the library. Some of the guys were still looking through the shelves, and the rest of them were huddled near one of the few wood tables that hadn't been overturned, whispering sportily to each other. Instead of making my way over to them I strolled quietly to the librarian's counter to search for anything useful. There wasn't much in the drawers beside pencils, staplers and paperwork. The same went for the mess that littered the countertop. I did find a box of Mickey Mouse bandages, and with a smile put them inside my backpack. One of the hardest things about an apocalypse was keeping morale high, and I knew the kids would love those little bandages. Who can't smile when there are happy kids around?

I'd almost given up on searching for anything else that might be of use when at the far end of the counter I spotted a lonely cupboard. My eyebrow raised curiously as my made my way over to it, and when I opened it, I fought to hold back a grin. Blake craned his neck over the counter to see what had caused my reaction, and he laughed and shook his head as I discreetly put the bottle of brandy into my backpack.

"You know how much trouble you're going to be in when the Cap finds out Mr. Putnam's been getting all that alcohol from *you*?" he asked, his face a mixture of amusement and disapproval. Alcohol was allowed back at camp, but because we were camped in the middle of a forest and didn't want people stumbling off into the wilderness, it was monitored carefully and only given in small increments at mealtimes.

"Hey, we're allowed to trade goods and services with each other," I chuckled, giving a shrug that let him know I wasn't worried about it. "Old man Putnam is the best weapons expert at the camp. Why do you think

man Putnam is the best weapons expert at the camp. Why do you think this thing looks so pretty and handles like a dream?" I pointed to the rifle over my shoulder, and then joked, "Besides, he's a quiet drunk."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night LT," Blake teased.

He only called me 'LT' when he was messing with me, but he was the only one who got away with taking digs at my 'rank'. When the Cap first assigned me as the lieutenant in charge of twenty other soldiers, those soldiers didn't take it too well. Mostly because I was one of the few who wasn't military before everything fell apart. Also, it was because of my age. I was just fifteen when it all started. I was lucky the Captain took me under his wing after I lost my family, and three years after he did he decided he trusted my decision making enough to put me in charge of the first platoon.

When he first gave me the title, I didn't know enough about military life to even know what a platoon was. Needless to say, I didn't get much of a response when I tried to give orders. The Cap had told me to 'whip 'em into shape and show 'em who's boss'. Based on his advice, at the beginning I'm pretty sure all my soldiers thought I was just some dumb bitch. Even after three years of leading the group, I was still learning things I wasn't aware I should know in the first place. But they'd learned that for every decision I made, their safety was the most important thing to me. So for that, they trusted me, even if some of them still thought I was a bitch.

Before I could respond to Blake's jest, there was a collection of flickering blue lights in the corner of my eye, coming from the direction of the entrance to the building. That flickering of lights was how we recognized friendlies in all the pitch-black silence. Because if we went around sneaking up on each other it would only get a good number of us killed. And we always used red or blue. I was told it's because those colors didn't mess up that our eyes were already adjusted for night vision. I'd never tested it to see if it was true or not, but there was no need to test it when I never found a problem with it.

The people coming in the entrance was Bravo squad, the other half of my twenty soldiers, returning from the hospital across the river. As the ten

lights flickered off and they filtered into the library, Blake looked at me for instruction. I nodded my head toward the new arrivals, prompting him to go get information. I think the technical word for it was debriefing, but I tried to avoid giving those kinds of orders out loud just in case I got the lingo wrong.

"Oh, hey," I whispered quickly to stop McMahan before he got too far. He paused, and in the moonlit darkness I could see him turn back to face me. "Find out if the rest of Alpha found anything useful too."

After what faintly looked like a nod, I saw him turn and head off. Now that I was alone, or felt more alone in the darkness, I was beginning to feel as tired as I looked. I fell back into the cushiony chair behind me, folding my arms across the top of the counter and resting my head on top of them. The Ferals were active during the day, which meant if we wanted to survive on these missions we had to do all of our traveling at night. During the day we hid somewhere, resting until it was safe to move again. I'd never been the kind of person who could fall asleep easily unless I was somewhere intimate and comfortable, and the fact that we hunkered down when the sun was blazing didn't help either. It was always too bright.

Right now I was so tired that I'd almost dozed into an alert half-sleep, until there was a clunk of someone settling down on the counter next to me. "Ma'am." I could hear the grin in the greeting even before I picked my head up.

I plastered on a smile and returned the salutation. "Kellan."

Kellan Wieczorek. Everyone just called him Kellan because his last name was so hard to pronounce. I still wasn't even sure I knew how to spell it correctly. He was the definition of tall, dark, and handsome. Six foot, medium-length black hair that curled at the edges like those perfect Roman statues. He was built like one of those statues too, with a smooth jawline and lean muscle that rippled beneath his shirt. To top it all off he had the most gorgeous green eyes I'd ever seen. Believe it or not, he had the biggest crush on me. If it wasn't clear because he tried hitting on me any time we shirked the formalities of rank back at camp, it was obvious

in the way he leered at me.

He was a good seven years older than I, but when he flashed that perfect, goofy grin it was young and playful, almost enough to make me forget about the age difference. So what's the problem? Why didn't I settle down or at least sleep with the man? Because he was far from modest about his conquests around the camp, and with nearly a hundred and twenty females alone, he had a decent pool to fish from. The way I caught him looking at me sometimes told me I'd only be another conquest, only another piece of meat to spoil and toss away, and just thinking about it made me feel dirty. It was a shame too, because he was quite a looker. Unfortunately for both of us, my self-respect hadn't died with the rest of the world.

"You look tired," he mused from his seat on top of the counter, ruffling his dirtied hair with a hand so it didn't look quite so grungy.

"I could think of safer places to be than Boston," I offered as an explanation for why I couldn't sleep. Before the epidemic, big cities meant more people and more excitement. Now they just meant more Ferals and more danger. Until we were back at camp I wouldn't be able to fully relax. Even if I managed to doze off, my senses remained alert for threats, meaning I didn't really get adequate rest.

Kellan nodded understandingly, and then leaned back over the counter and extended a hand to my shoulder. "You want a massage or something?"

The second he touched me I reclined back in the chair, as far as I could with the bag and rifle at my back, taking myself out of his arm's reach. "I'm good, thanks."

He gave a smug grin, only visible because he was close enough that I could make it out in what moonlight shone through the large skylights in the ceiling. Did I think he had real feelings for me? No. Aside from a physical attraction, I think he just enjoyed the challenge. That flirty curve in his lips confirmed repeatedly that it was all a game. Hey, at least I was winning.

Before Kellan could come up with some coy comment, Blake returned, and he stood silently at the edge of the counter until Kellan lumbered away. "The rest of ours found a couple books they think might work for the Doc." He started his report in a quiet whisper, leaning forward so I could hear him. "Bravo scavenged what they could from the hospital, but they only found a few supplies. There was a clan of Ferals near the pharmacy. Said one squad could take care of it if you wanted to hit it for meds."

I sat there for a moment, taking in what he'd said. So far this assignment hadn't yielded anything of importance, and I hated making any travels longer than two days for nothing. I also knew for a fact that the camp was running low on things like antibiotics, and insulin for the one or two diabetics. Getting those things, however, meant a fight. I grabbed my flashlight from the clip on my belt loop, shining it at the silver windup watch on my wrist to check the time. Ten minutes until three, which meant we had a little over two hours until sunrise. Two hours to get over to the hospital, get the supplies we needed, and find somewhere to hide.

I gave a deep sigh, running the options through my mind. Then I whistled two short hoots, the first one high and the second low, the signal that I wanted someone's attention. It was quiet enough not to give us away but loud enough they could all hear me. "Powers," I whispered loudly.

There was a shuffling through the dark as Powers, Bravo's leader, found his way to Blake and I. "Ma'am?" he asked expectantly when he got to the counter.

"You guys scout roof access from the hospital?" I asked quietly.

Rooftops were our hiding place of choice when we were away from camp. Normally I'd have thought it was crazy. Trapping yourself at the top of a building with only one way down while the Ferals roamed the earth beneath you. Hell, in high school I used to yell at the television whenever I'd watch scary movies and the characters would run upstairs to escape the killer. As crazy as it was, it was perfect. It wasn't that the Ferals couldn't climb or walk up stairs. They very well could. During the day they went looking for food. They might be stupid sons of bitches, but

they had mind enough to know there was nothing to eat on rooftops. If we could get in quietly enough, they'd never even know we were there.

"Yes ma'am," he answered quickly. Powers was military before the breakout, and he definitely knew what he was doing. Sometimes, though, I preferred delegating to the nonmilitary. I got squeamish being called 'ma'am' all the time, like I was somebody's grandmother. Somebody's twenty-one year old grandmother... Gross. It was even worse when they called me sir. I didn't mind LT too much though. It felt more like a nickname. "The hall was clear when we passed through."

"How many at the pharmacy?"

"Twelve," he told me, and after a short pause added, "Scattered."

"Thanks." That was all I needed to know from him, and with a nod at my dismissal he strode back to where he was before I called him.

"Twelve Ferals ain't bad," Blake whispered, his voice taking on urgency as our time was ticking away. "And they'll be sound asleep for another two hours at least."

"It's not ideal either," I told him thoughtfully. I didn't like taking risks, and would have been much more comfortable if we weren't going to be in such a confined space. "But if we wait until to tomorrow then we'll have to send Bravo back for another recon, and it's a whole night's walk just to get back to the vehicles." He nodded, and I knew we both mentally added to the list how we'd run out of food yesterday. As much as we hated it, food was heavy and bulky. If starving for a couple days meant not being weighed down when we had to run, it was worth it.

"Do we have to raid the pharmacy?" His voice sounded so hopeful it made me seriously reconsider.

But I shook the doubts away. "Doc was complaining that they were running low on supplies *last* month. If we come back with nothing, Cap is sending us right back out."

He nodded again, and then leaned forward with his elbows over the

counter. "Twenty-one soldiers are a bit much though, don't you think? We draw too much attention in that enclosed space and we won't have a cavalry to call in."

"What are you thinking? Keep one from Bravo and send the rest to scout the rooftop?" I squinted through the dark, wishing I could read his face to get a better idea of what was going through his mind.

Blake just mhm-ed. "Yeah, that way we got a straight getaway to the roof."

"Okay," I agreed, glad I had him to bounce ideas off of. I don't know if I would have survived this long without him. I flicked my light over my watch one more time. Two minutes until three. I gave a long, high-pitched whistle to signal a meeting, and waited while everyone gathered near the counter. I didn't bother standing up from the chair to talk to them. They couldn't really see me anyway. "We're going back to the hospital." I heard a soft groan or two when I paused. Couldn't say I blamed them. "Alpha squad, we got the pharmacy. Hit and run, we get in and we get out. Quick and quiet. Hatfield," I paused again to address the one other girl in our platoon. "You're coming with Alpha to dispatch the Ferals. Powers, I want you to take the rest of Bravo and make sure we have a clear path to the roof."

I could see the faint outline of heads bobbing up and down in understanding. "I don't want to hear a single gunshot in that building, got it?" More nodding. "Questions?" Because we were running out of time, I was glad that no one spoke up with a question. "Let's move."

As I finally stood I clicked on my light, turning the lens from red to blue. From what I gathered, we also used blue when we wanted our beams to blend with the moonlight. Red was for when we didn't want to be seen from afar, I guess. That's what one of my soldiers told me anyway – that red light doesn't travel as far as blue or white. He said it was a physics thing. I never quite reached physics in school.

I led the way to the entrance of the library, the footsteps behind me soft but comforting. At the door I poked my head out, closing my eyes and straining my ears for the sound of any nearby disturbance. It was eerily

quiet except for the wind, which howled around the corners of the building and only made it more frightening. I could never be sure if it was the dark that scared me or just the thought of what I knew was lurking in every obscure corner, but in my growing discomfort I shifted my flashlight to my left hand, and used my right to unsheathe my hunting knife. That in hand I opened my eyes, scanning the moonlit outlines for any movement other than the quivering of plants in the breeze.

As I took my first, silent step out of the library I took a deep breath through my nose, utilizing every sense I could to aid my reduced vision. The stench that met my nostrils only succeeded in reminding me of another reason I hated the city. It reeked of death and decay. After six years the visual evidence of death was long gone, but the smell remained. Like it had soaked into the concrete and into the very foundations of the district, only to seep from the cracks in the sidewalk. To flow from the leaves of the increasingly untamed shrubs and trees, which had soaked it into their roots to thrive. To serve as a constant reminder of everything we'd lost, and in case we grew too comfortable, to remind us that we could be next.

A shiver traveled up my spine, so with another deep breath as I tried to calm my nerves, I led the group left and away from the library. It was strange, walking on a college campus and knowing that there was probably nobody left, and that nobody would ever learn here again. The branches of the trees that lined either side of the narrow road had grown lengthwise above us, creating a thick canopy and shutting out the glow of the moon. Even though the blue lens of my flashlight blended well into the night, I refused to shine the beam back and forth lest the movement caught a Feral's eye. Instead I kept it on the ground in front of me, illuminating a few feet ahead so I wouldn't trip on anything.

When we reached an intersecting road we veered right, and hardly five hundred feet later we were crossing the bridge. It was almost peaceful, the lapping sound of the water against the riverbanks and the reflection of the sky dancing over the surface. There were a few scattered cars on the short bridge, and I ducked behind each one for cover with Blake at my side, advancing only when I was sure the path ahead was devoid of life. All of the cars had been sitting there so long that the flat tires had

cracked and dried, and began to blend with the asphalt. As I approached the last car at the very end of the bridge I slowed. The door was open, and while I'd never known a Feral to hunker down in vehicle, it didn't hurt to be prepared.

My grip tightened on the knife in my hand, and I crouched behind the tail end. When I heard every footstep stop behind me, I pitched myself toward the open door, shining my light inside, prepared to stab at whatever lay inside. It was empty, and satisfied that we could continue, I started forward off the bridge. From what I gathered on the map, it was only about a mile further to get to the hospital, a forty-five minute walk when moving as cautiously as we were.

More cars and trucks littered the street, which we used for cover as we followed the road along the side of the river. I could see the outline of a large building coming up in the distance, and in my excitement at almost being done for the night, I felt my pace pick up. As I left my spot behind the bed of a truck to zigzag to the next vehicle there was a throaty growl, the clunk of something hitting a car, and then a grainy skid. I pushed Blake back behind the truck and dove behind it myself just as a pair of Ferals fell into the road, and I resisted the strong urge to bolt in the opposite direction. Six years fighting these things, and the flight instinct never dwindled.

I peeked around the tail end of the truck just enough to catch a glimpse. Every time I saw one, I didn't want to believe they used to be like any of us. One of the Ferals was completely unclothed, whatever attire it had been wearing before becoming infected had since worn out and fell away. It looked like the other had on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, both holey and frayed and thinned beyond recognition. In what little moonlight lit the pair, you could tell by looking at the naked one that they were thin and bony.

One thing I was more and more sure of with every encounter, Ferals were no longer human. They were vile, vicious animals. Back before there were hardly any of us left, there was a theory going around about what caused the outbreak: it was a parasite that spread only through saliva. The government had been working on some kind of weapon, and

something about the parasite destroyed the complex parts of the human brain. Killed everything that made us empathetic or civilized, and turned us into savage, territorial creatures incapable of logic or rationalization, incapable even of speech. When Ferals caught a glimpse of an uninfected, it attacked for two reasons: it was protecting its territory, and it was hunting a meal where meals were scarce. Either way, even if you had the man or gun power to defend yourself, it was best not to be seen at all.

The gaunt figures ahead of us were making a racket, letting out barely human yowls as they clawed and snapped at each other. They were fighting over something, though I couldn't begin to venture what. If they kept it up, one would undoubtedly kill the other, but before that, they'd draw attention. It was likely any Feral in the vicinity had already heard the noise, and with us crouched down nearby, that was the last thing we needed. The noise hadn't brought any other Ferals out yet, but I had to do something before we got caught by more than we could handle.

Knife still in hand, I checked to make sure none of my soldiers were visible, then I brought the butt end of it hard against the side of the truck. The metallic thud rang through the night, and as both Ferals stopped their scuffle, and both of their heads shot in my direction, I pulled back behind the cover of the truck. It was dead silent for a second, and with the slap of bare feet headed our direction the fear really started kicking in. Before I had time to chicken out, I put my flashlight back onto my belt and pushed Blake toward the side of the truck, the opposite side the Ferals were coming up on.

He already knew what I wanted, and with his own knife held secure in his hand he started to wrap around to the front of the truck. The patter of feet got closer, and once it went by us on the opposite side of our cover we circled all the way to the front end. I took a deep breath, preparing myself for the worst. Then the footsteps stopped, and I could picture the Ferals standing there, knowing they'd heard something from this exact spot but not knowing what it was. Before they had time to do much searching, Blake and I rushed out of our spot so swiftly and silently I could almost hear the whoosh of our knives in the air.

Like the Captain had trained me to do, I wrapped my left arm around the Feral's eyes to keep it away from its mouth, and then brought my knife through its neck as deep as I possibly could, that way it couldn't scream. Blake completed the same motion I did, though he didn't have to jump to reach its head like I needed to. It took a few seconds for both of the lifeless bodies to collapse, and once they did we stood there for a quiet minute. It sounded like we'd shut the Ferals up quick enough that no other ones were wandering around yet. When I was satisfied we were safe I clicked my light back on and waved it forward and back through the air, motioning to the others to keep moving.

I led the rest of the way to the hospital at a brisk pace, moving from cover to cover hastily. It was no longer excitement at seeing the building in the distance that made me hurry. It was the pair Blake and I had dispatched. The Ferals were already stirring from sleep, probably because of the painful scarcity of food. I knew even *I* would have a hard time sleeping, the way my stomach was cramping with hunger, I couldn't image how little the infected were finding to eat.

Luckily, we reached the hospital without another sighting, and I snuck toward the entrance of the large building. I could hear Blake's footsteps close behind me as we crept near the walls. When we got to the main doors at the lobby I took a step forward, ready to push them apart, when both doors went sliding open. The electronic whir and swoosh was so unexpected I gasped and jumped back, thankful I'd never been a screamer when frightened. As far as I knew, electricity everywhere had failed not long after the outbreak, and it had been almost six years since I'd seen anything electric without using a generator. Whatever power plant or back up system was powering the hospital had to be the last working one in the country.

Even worse than the hammering of my heart from the doors – the lights inside were automatic, and the second the doors whooshed open the interior lit up, bright white light flowing into the dark night. Powers hadn't mentioned any of this during debriefing.

Blake was still chuckling quietly at my reaction, and now that it wasn't so dark outside, he could see it when I glared at him. "Get me Powers," I

told him, and he turned to the soldier directly behind him.

There was a quiet murmuring down the line, and eventually Powers had made his way up to me. "Ma'am?"

"What the hell?" I whispered angrily, motioning toward the illuminated building.

"We went in through the back," Powers said, "Didn't make it all the way to the lobby." Then he leaned over and pointed to a darkened window inside, at the very back of the lobby. "That's the pharmacy. Lights weren't automatic anywhere else." I followed the direction of his finger to a hallway near the darkened window of the pharmacy. "Second we reached that hallway we saw the Ferals outside the pharmacy and turned back, but there's a stairwell right in there."

I studied the inside for a minute, considering his words. Alpha squad didn't have time to go all the way to the back of the enormous building, just to come back through the inside to where we practically were now. There was close to an hour before sunrise, if the Ferals were even still sleeping to begin with. I also couldn't leave Bravo out here or in the light of the lobby like sitting ducks, waiting for us to dispatch the Ferals by the pharmacy so we could all go up the stairwell to the roof together. It was too late for that.

I sighed a leaned my back against the wall. "Take Bravo around back, the way you went the first time, and head to the roof," I instructed Powers, "We'll meet you guys up there. Make sure Hatfield stays."

In the faint light that filtered out of the building, I could see Powers hesitate. He knew as well as I did that if we separated right now, Bravo squad wouldn't be near enough to have our backs if something went wrong. But I wasn't risking the *whole* platoon for a couple meds. After a few seconds of studying me unsurely, Powers nodded and hurried back down the line to gather his group.

"Blake," I started, turning toward McMahan. "If the Ferals are still sleeping, we surround them, and wait for my order to strike. If they're awake…" I stopped because I didn't want to think that they could already

be waking. If that were the case, we'd have to go in for unconcealed hand to hand.

Blake nodded before I finished, already knowing what I was thinking, and started to whisper the order down the line. I waited until Bravo squad had disappeared around the corner, and then took one last look into the lobby, jumping once more when the doors, which had closed, slid open again. The two-story entranceway was completely lifeless, and our footsteps echoed off the high, empty area. For some reason, the silence was creepier in the light. I was used to the chatter and laughter back at camp during the day, and the fact that this bright place was dead quiet was frightening.

I didn't bother clicking off my flashlight as we made our way carefully toward the dark hallway, which would lead to the pharmacy. Though, I was slightly aggravated at the burning the illumination of the building caused in my eyes. Night vision was crucial, and now we'd have to go into the pharmacy partially blind until we readjusted. Reaching the start of the closed-off hallway, I set my hand on the doorknob and pushed on it, and then I pulled the door open inch by inch, praying the hinges wouldn't squeak. When I had it all the way open I tiptoed in, closely followed by Blake.

The hallway branched off in two directions. To our right was the longest stretch of it, and I could see a door-less area not far down, which must be the pharmacy. Straight ahead was the shorter stretch, and Powers was right, there was a stairwell just a few feet ahead, next to some elevators that I'm sure would work if we tried. I veered right, taking my time in the newly dimmed area and giving myself occasion to see again. I risked shining my light ahead, looking out for any Ferals making their way down the narrow corridor.

I had my back against the wall, facing away from the lobby, and the moment we neared the pharmacy I could smell them. It was the wretched stench of crammed together bodies that hadn't been bathed in years, along with the decaying scent of something they must have feasted on. My stomached lurched with disgust at the smell, and I stopped at the edge of the wall, knowing I could peer around it and catch a glimpse of

the Ferals.

I held my breath, straining my ears for the sound of any shuffling, listening to see if they were awake or not. When no sound but raspy wheezing came, I poked my head around the corner and lifted my light around the open area in front of the pharmacy. The dark blue beam of my flashlight hit something reflective. A pair of open eyes. Instinctively I drew back behind the wall, tensing my fingers around my hunting knife to comfort the wildly unnerved beat of my heart. I expected that I'd been seen, and waited for some kind of holler before being charged.

Nothing. Not even the scuttle of footsteps heading our way. It took a minute before I calmed enough to venture another look. The pair of eyes was gone, and I was comforted to find each of the Ferals were fast asleep. I thought I could make out the dismembered and decaying skeleton of a cat in the corner, the source of the second unpalatable smell.

This was it. I started forward into the den. I knew my comrades were behind me, even though we were all being so guardedly silent that I couldn't hear them. The Ferals were a scattered heap of stinking bodies, breathing heavily throughout the small area. Some huddled together, some retired on their own a few feet from the others. I slunk around the edges of the clan, body tense and ready should one of them suddenly wake up. Thankfully, Powers had counted correctly, and there was one of us for each of our opposition. I moved around until I was at the far side of the pharmacy's foyer, standing directly above a Feral.

I kept a close eye on the mangled female beneath me, with my peripherals watching until a blue light illuminated each Feral, until we were set in position to ambush and destroy. My heart was beating so torturously fast I was sure everyone in the room could hear it. Never before had we needed to compromise ourselves like this in such a tight space, and the stimulating flow of adrenaline had me itching to finish it. Shortly, it appeared that each of my soldiers was in position, so I took my eyes off the Feral to glance up and make sure.

Each of them was tensed with a knife in their hand, ready for the assault. I glanced back down to pick the spot I'd thrust my knife, and there they

I glanced back down to pick the spot I'd thrust my knife, and there they were. Another pair of glowing eyes, looking straight up at me. The second the Feral's eyes met mine my heart dropped with terror. It's like the creature didn't recognize me until we locked gazes, but once it did it mobilized. It let out a long, blood-curdling scream, so full of fury and animosity I felt my veins ice over.

"Now!" I shouted over the wailing and before any of the other Ferals could react.

The one beneath me had already began to scramble up, so I made a jab at its midsection with my knife, trying not to get my arm anywhere it could bite at me with its mouth. I only managed to swipe across its lower stomach, and as it stood it let out another furious yell, and its hands extended toward me. I ducked out of the way as it lunged, and the moment I heard it hit the wall I turned and pinned it from behind. I could barely keep it in place because it was frenziedly pushing back against the wall and struggling to break from my hold. Before it could escape I plunged my knife deep into its back.

It threw its head back and howled in pain, putting me in the perfect position to get my arm around its neck. I grabbed it from behind and pulled it away from the wall, exposing its front where I drove my knife into its chest to put it out of its misery. I tossed the lifeless body aside and took frantic breaths to calm me down. Everything was quiet behind me, and when I turned I counted my soldiers, hands on my knees while I continued to gasp past the horrified pulsing in my chest.

"Everyone good?" I asked, lifting my light to each of my companions. A few of them whispered 'yeah', the rest nodded. "McMahan, Garcia, Hunt and Lee, give your packs to someone and stand guard out here. The rest of you, fit as many meds and supplies in the bags as you can."

I grabbed Blake's backpack from him and shuffled into the blackened pharmacy behind the rest of my guys. I hopped over the pharmacist's counter and scanned the shelves, picking out the drug names I recognized as ones the Doc had used many times, mostly painkillers and antibiotics. It appeared we weren't the first ones to raid the hospital, because while there were still more supplies than we could carry, it was

clear the shelves had been half-emptied. Along with the meds, I grabbed as many bandages and wound-cleaning materials as I could fit.

When everyone was finished loading up we headed back out into the foyer, and then down the hall toward the stairwell. There had to be at least twelve floors to the building, tempting me to see if the elevators really worked or not. Instead, we jogged silently up step by step. We had to be close to the ninth floor when something caused me to stop. In such an enclosed space the smell was overpowering, but I couldn't hear or see where it was coming from. I took a cautious step forward to shine my light up the next bend in the flights of stairs, and the moment I got there something came crashing down at me, jaws wide and ready to take a chunk from my flesh.

I used the Feral's momentum to turn it and push it away from me and into the wall. It barely touched the concrete surface when it ricocheted and leapt again, knocking me onto my back on the stairs. I threw my hands around its neck, trying with all my strength to keep its teeth away as it pushed all its weight down on me, snapping at me. It seemed almost as quick as it had started, it was over. There was a low crack as Blake broke its neck, and I shoved the no longer struggling creature off of me and clambered to my feet.

"Goddammit," I growled, more from shock than anger, and then I gave McMahan a thankful pat on the shoulder.

I picked up my flashlight off the ground and searched around for the knife I'd also dropped, and once I found it I started upwards again. We reached the roof a few flights later, and I took a watchful glance around, looking for Bravo squad, before going all the out. Bravo was huddled near the center, and when I got there I collapsed onto the surface of the roof with a deep sigh.

Blake plopped down next to me, and with a chuckle he rummaged through the backpack I'd thrown off my back. He pulled out my sweater and draped it over my eyes to shield them from the light when the sun came up.

¨Thanks,¨ I gave him a grateful smile. Then I folded my hands behind my head and finally took a somewhat-relaxed breath. "Goodnight."

Black

Black by Kari Kimmel

Black

Echo

I sat there with my legs dangling over the edge of the fire escape, leaning forward against the metal baluster and staring out over the water. I couldn't really discern anything aside from the bright red cherry at the end of my nose, which flared and deepened every time I inhaled a breath of smoke. Even if watching the glowing embers didn't temporarily blind me, it was a moonless night – there wasn't much to see anyway. The city on the opposite side of the river, just like the one behind me, was completely unidentifiable against the black sky, but I knew it was there. I'd grown up on that side of the river, and I could picture it perfectly.

My feet were swinging back and forth, and after I took the cigarette out of my mouth I tapped a bored rhythm against the metal railing with my free hand. After a minute of it the sound gave me déjà vu, and I thought it was a song I used to know. I sang some lyrics in my head, trying to match the words to the beat. *Justify your soul? Sell your soul?* Neither was satisfying. *Something, something, hope.*

"Oh, forget it," I mumbled to myself and fell onto my back, raising the cigarette to my lips once more. It had been years since I'd heard any real music, no wonder I couldn't remember.

What I missed even more than music was books. There was a library close by, but it was overrun with Biters. Every once in a while I'd find a good book in some home or store I scavenged in. On those nights I did I'd always hunker down in a corner, reading with my flashlight and getting so lost in it that only the gray of dawn could pull me away. I never took them back with me. I could only imagine the others making snide comments about it.

I wriggled against the grated surface I was lying on, and when I couldn't adjust to a comfortable position I reached under me and grabbed the 9mm out of the waist of my baggy black cargo pants. Setting it beside me, I smiled. Now I could gaze at the stars in comfort. There wasn't much else to do after the sun went down, and the night was still young. I could always go back to the complex and play a heated game of poker with the others, and in a couple hours I'd probably be bored enough that I would. But for now, just like every other night, this was how I got my space. I hated the complex, and the people in it.

It was nice being able to see so many stars. Before the outbreak the city lights were always so bright you couldn't see a single one. I used to go camping with my family once a year, with my parents and my two sisters. We loved getting away from the city, going out in the woods to be alone. If only they could see me now. I'd never been so alone, and I'd certainly never seen so many stars. It was a testimony to how truly dark the world had gone.

I lay there for a good hour before the boredom won out. Pushing myself up, I swung my legs back onto the fire escape, grabbed my gun and backpack, and stood. Despite not being able to see the handlebars or the ground, I climbed easily down the ladder and jumped the last couple feet to the concrete alley below, landing with a hushed thud. I had a small flashlight in one of my pockets, but I'd grown accustom to the black. Strangely, in spite of knowing what was out there in the darkness, I felt more at ease at night than I did during the day. Maybe I couldn't see perfectly, but that meant the Biters couldn't either. I'd always been light on my feet, quick and quiet, and I could feel where I was going better than a flashlight could show me.

Coming out the alley and back onto the main street, I turned away from the direction of the complex to explore the deeper parts of the city. The years I'd been here had been more than enough time for me to scavenge the buildings along the main streets. If I wanted to find anything, I'd have to wander for bit. So I stayed close to the walls, moving silently from shadow to shadow, and swung down a smaller side road.

Car after car lined the intersection I was strolling beside, the vehicles of those who didn't make it out of the city because there were just too many

those who didn't make it out of the city because there were just too many people trying to evacuate. The rate of infection during the initial outbreak was exponential. I wasn't even sure when it really started, or what caused it. Just a lot more missing persons than normal, then a quiet couple days because that's how long it takes for the virus to set in. That was the first wave.

The second wave was when those missing persons were found. They went right back home, back to their families, attacking anyone in sight on the way. That's how I know the Biters like to stay somewhere familiar. Those first-wavers went back home, and something inside of them was telling them to infect their loved ones. Some were put down before they made it back, others got to their spouses, parents, even their children.

After that, things exploded. The final wave of outbreak was chaotic. There were enough Biters after the second set that it was like a full-blown war on the home front. The government was slow to respond, or there weren't enough military to defend every county in the nation, and police and riot squads weren't well equipped enough to deal with the scale of the infection and panic. So people started to evacuate the cities on their own. Most of them never made it out, but some of us were smart enough to stay put. To hide.

I passed one car with the doors open, silently peering in out of curiosity. The sight within almost caused me to stumble back. There was a Biter inside, ugly as all the rest. I hadn't been expecting to see one in the vehicle, seeing as they usually stayed in groups too large to all fit in a small car like this one. Fortunately it didn't see me poke my head around. *It was sleeping the evil out of itself,* snoring with every raspy, pallid breath.

I tiptoed away from the repugnant creature, and before long I reached a residential neighborhood that didn't seem like it belonged here, didn't fit in here in this metropolis. The houses were big and suburb-y, not the normal scrunched together condos I was used to. This place was upscale, and it was like finding an oasis in a dark, barren wasteland. I could only hope that the insides were as promising as the outsides looked.

The next street I was passing was a cul-de-sac, so I turned onto the sidewalk and headed in. A lot of the homes still had cars in the driveways, but I didn't think it was because they'd stuck around. I wouldn't be surprised if the people who owned these places also owned two or three vehicles. Most of them were expensive sports coupes, and some were luxury family vans. I knew the kind of house I was looking for though, and it wasn't one from folks who only lived the pampered lifestyle.

I stopped in front of a house near the end and grinned. This is what I was looking for. Basketball hoop attached to the garage, large, raised truck with massive mud tires in the driveway, hammock on the front porch. The kind of house where the owners were athletic, and just maybe enjoyed the outdoors enough to have camping gear or anything else useful.

I crept up the stairs of the porch, and when I reached the front door I gave the handle a gentle twist. Locked. So far, that was a good sign. It meant the place might be clear of Biters. Then I made my way back down and around to the fenced in backyard. The wooden gate was shut, but probably not locked, and as I got to it I pulled the fold-up knife out of my pocket. I felt like a kid, but it always made me smile when I had that knife in my hand because the handle was glow-in-the-dark. Got to enjoy the little things.

I held my breath and listened against the quiet night for a moment, alert for the sound of any Biters behind the fence. Then, with my knife in hand I stretched my arm over the top of the gate. It took me a second of feeling around to find the latch, but when I did I pulled it up and leaned my shoulder against the gate. It started swinging open, but I winced when the first soft squeal of a creak reached my ears. I paused, waiting to see if anything was around to have heard it. When nothing responded I began to push the wooden door open again, slower this time so it wouldn't make a sound. Once the gate was open just enough for me to slip in, I squeezed through the opening, carefully closing it behind me.

I stood at the entrance of the backyard, squinting into the darkness with my ears attentive. Then I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to smell that rank stench that lets you know Biters are around, but there was

no breeze to carry the scent to me. Eventually I took a tentative step forward, then another, knife poised and ready. I walked the perimeter of the yard, trudging through the overgrown grass, and finding it empty I finally made my way to the back door. Just like the front, it was locked.

Kneeling down so I was at eye level with the door handle I gripped the knife between my teeth and grabbed at the braided bracelet on my wrist, pulling out the two halves of a bobby pin that I'd stored in the inside strands. The bobby pin wasn't stuck in the bracelet so I could hide it, seeing as I'd never been in a position where I needed to secretly open something. It was more so I wouldn't have to go inconveniently digging around in my pockets for the two small pieces every time I wanted to scavenge somewhere. I'd asked one of the guys back at the complex to teach me how to pick locks years ago, the second I realized that even through the panic, people still thought it was necessary to bolt their doors behind them.

I stuck one of the pins into the bottom of the keyhole, turning it a little to see which way I'd need to push. Once I figured it out I pushed the other one into the top, and gently fiddled around with the pins on the inside. It took a minute of habitual jimmying, but eventually I was able to turn the bottom pin completely, freeing the latch. Only, when I tried to push the door open, it held fast, and I realized the owners had also secured the deadbolt just above the handle.

With a sigh, I moved up, repeating the process on the deadbolt. I winced again when it slid back with a click. It probably wasn't even that loud, but everything around me was so still that the unavoidable metallic sound was deafening. Now that everything was unlocked, I took the knife out of my mouth, separated the door from the frame, and with my first step indoors I took an instinctual whiff through my nostrils. Still no sign of trouble, I closed and re-bolted the door behind me.

The back door opened up into a large kitchen. Directly to my left was a long countertop with a sink in the middle, and the stove and oven were under a shorter counter adjacent to that. Beside the stove was a small door, which looked like it might open up to a pantry. On the wall across from me was the refrigerator, next to that the door-less entryway to the

rest of the house, and on my right another entry to the dining room.

Without thinking, I strode over to the refrigerator and swung it open, gagging and almost slamming it shut a second after I did. *That was a mistake.* Whatever food had been in there was long decayed, but the unbearably rancid smell had soaked into the lining of the appliance. I don't know why I even opened it in the first place. A thoughtless instinct from a long-dead life, maybe, but definitely something I'd have to make sure never to do again.

Thinking I'd have better luck with the pantry, I made my way over and pressed my ear to the door, just in case. No noise coming from the other side I opened it up. I couldn't read any of the labels because it was way too dark, but I could definitely see some canned goods on the shelves, and that brought a smile to my face. Now I finally pulled out my flashlight, clicking it on and shining the beam around. My smile widened, and the sight of one thing in particular made my stomach growl voraciously. Honey. A big, bear-shaped, gold-filled bottle of it.

I snatched it off the shelf like it would disappear if I didn't grab it that instant, and wrapped my arms around it in a pleased hug. "Oh Pooh Bear, you made my night," I whispered happily, clutching the bottle to my chest.

The liquid had started to crystallize a little, but not so much that I couldn't dip my finger in once I twisted off the cap. I scooped so much honey onto my fingertip that it was trickling off, and I hastily shoved it onto my tongue so I wouldn't lose any more precious drops. My eyes rolled back euphorically at the sweet tingling that saturated my mouth. I could have finished all of it right then and there. The only thing that stopped me was thinking if I ate it all now, I wouldn't have any for later. I screwed the lid back on and pulled my empty backpack off my shoulders, dropping it to the bottom.

There were a total of nine cans in that pantry – beans, vegetables, and spaghetti sauce – and with every one I put into my bag my stomach grew more and more impatient. The last can I grabbed was chili. Real, beef-filled chili. And spicy too, it said so right there on the label. I reached into the side pocket of my pack and grabbed my tiny little can opener. Then I

the side pocket of my pack and grabbed my tiny little can opener. Then I hopped up onto the kitchen counter, opened the can, bent the lid into a scooper, and shoveled down that delicious food. Every drop of chili-flavored remains was cleared from the sides of the can before I knew it, and I had half a mind to open something else. But food had been getting more and more scarce. If the doors weren't locked like they were at this house, the Biters got in and demolished everything that looked or smelled even remotely edible. It would be irresponsible of me to finished two cans in five minutes.

After I satisfied my hunger, I went back to the pantry, checking to see if I missed anything. There was a half-empty bag of rice at the bottom, but when I picked it up all the grains spilled out the bottom through a mouse-chewed hole. There were also three bottles of water, so I gulped down one and put the other two in the backpack. Just to make sure, I opened up all the cupboards that lined the walls of the kitchen. Aside from things like spices however, they were all filled with dishes and baking utensils.

I made my way out of the kitchen and to a large hallway, keeping my senses alert for any threat. I kept my flashlight on now, using it so I could spot anything that I might want to take back with me. The beam illuminated a small area in front of me as I continued forward, showing me the various things scattered about the floor. It appeared the tenants had vacated in a hurry. As I glanced around I made the mistake of looking at a picture on the wall, a nice family portrait of two young boys and happy young couple. I could just picture the kids staring on, frightened, watching as mom and dad frantically gathered the things they thought were important, and throwing everything else over their shoulders in the search. There was a dog in the picture too, but I couldn't be sure whether they'd taken it with them or not.

When I reached another doorway I ventured into a living room. The massive flat screen television was still mounted on the wall, once fresh but now rotted wood in the fireplace at the far end. I couldn't imagine the kind of useful things I would find in here, and after a quick glance around with my light I went back out to the hall. I passed the garage door, but decided I'd save the best for last, and instead made my way upstairs. I took each step carefully, and when I felt it giving beneath me, knowing it would creak, I adjusted my position so as not to make a sound.

would creak, I adjusted my position so as not to make a sound.

I reached the top of the stairs, clenching my knife in my hand because every door up here was open and close together. I could get attacked from any direction at any time. One step forward, and I was another step closer to the first door. Another step. Step. When I reached the first room I peered around the corner into it. It was a bathroom, and it was as empty as I could have hoped. As I turned to make my way to the next room, something squeaked and scurried across the floor toward me. My heart skipped, and I reactively pulled my arm back, ready to stab whatever was going to rush me. But the critter stopped, looked up at me, and with another squeak it darted away.

"Stupid mouse," I laughed quietly, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Once I regained my confidence, I continued through the upstairs. There wasn't much around aside from some fresh soap bars and toothpaste under the sinks. After I put those in my bag I went back downstairs and to the garage. I spotted the box for the camping tent right away, and it made me hopeful of what else I might find. There was a tool cabinet in the far corner, so I checked that first. Not much I could take except for a screwdriver, because I was pretty sure Martin broke the one he had. I found some duct tape too, and you could never have enough of that. In another box near the tent was some camping gear. Some lighter fluid, a small hatchet, and a better pair of winter gloves than the ones I had back at the complex were the things I put into my pack.

I didn't get as much stuff as I was hoping, but maybe that was a good thing, because my backpack was already pretty heavy. Once I left the house and made it back to the street, I hit a few more places. There was nothing nearly as good as the first spot. A lot of residencies had been picked clean already, plenty of others invaded by Biters. The night was only halfway over, but I decided to go back to the complex anyway to share my spoils with the others. Not the honey though, I'd keep that to myself.

I was hardly a block away from home, still creeping through the darkness, when I heard some muffled footsteps from an alley up ahead. It always

irked me when a Biter got restless and started wandering the streets hours before dawn. It also freaked me out, and the second I heard that sound I dove behind a car on the road. I was debating with myself over whether to take my chances and sneak past, or to go back and circle around, when I heard a soft whisper coming from the same spot. It wasn't a Biter. There was somebody over there, and it wasn't one of my own. We didn't sneak around in alleys.

I took another second to contemplate, and then I pulled the gun out of my waistband and started stealthily forward. Shooting off a gun right now was the last thing on earth I wanted to do, but if whoever was down there had one pointed at me, at least I'd have better chances than pulling my knife. I pressed my back against the wall, careful not to make the slightest sound as I shuffled forward. When I got to the entrance of the alley I paused to get my flashlight, then I counted to three.

On three, I shot out, at the same time clicking on my light and shining it down the narrow passage. There was definitely someone down there, but my beam wasn't bright enough to reach the end. So I took a step forward, my finger tensed over the trigger. Whoever it was could undoubtedly see me, but they didn't say anything, just stayed huddled at the back wall.

"Hey," I whispered just loud enough for the person to hear me. "No trouble, okay?"

Still the small figure didn't respond, and I began to wonder if this wasn't the best idea. But I could handle myself, and I continued forward, repeating that I didn't want any trouble. As I passed by a dumpster, I maneuvered and shined my light around it, making sure nobody was hiding there to ambush me. Then I moved it back to the figure, and now I could see. It was a young girl, seventeen, maybe eighteen years old, and she looked terrified of me.

I moved my sights off of her so she wouldn't feel as threatened, but as I opened my mouth to speak to her again, I felt something hard and round press against the top of my back. *Shit.* I hadn't heard whoever was behind me coming. Hadn't even seen another hiding place in the alley, but I must have been too eager. And now I was screwed.

"The gun," the male voice ordered. He sounded older, at least twenty years older.

I cleared my throat so he wouldn't hear the click as I flipped the safety on, then I held my arm and the gun over my shoulder, still forward enough that he'd have to reach for it. He did exactly what I wanted him to, and the second he reached for the gun I dropped it. Pivoting on my heels I ducked enough to avoid it if he got a shot off, and grabbing the barrel of his gun I pulled hard, wrenching it out of his hand. Not a moment after I gained possession I sent both hands into his chest, knocking him off his feet and sending him tumbling to the ground. He seemed wildly unprepared for any kind of counterattack, and even in the dark his face showed his panic.

I was going to point the gun I now held, his gun, at the girl before she had time to come at me, but as I turned with it in hand, I could tell it didn't feel right. I spared a swift glance down at what was in my grasp. A flashlight.

"Seriously?" I chuckled, half amusement and half disbelief. "A flashlight?" He made a move to rush forward at the gun I'd dropped, but he was too far away. I had my foot on the weapon and my knife in my hand before he even got halfway. "Don't be stupid," I whispered angrily.

I didn't like the position he was putting me in. I wasn't going to hurt them, but he seemed intent on getting at me. Since he couldn't be trusted, I held my knife toward him, keeping the girl in my peripheral vision while I bent over for my gun. When I had it back in my hand I turned the safety off and motioned him over to the girl, that way I wouldn't have to work so hard at watching both of them. He stood bitterly with a scowl on his face, and as he passed me he eyed my weapon, and I saw his body tense.

"I swear to God, if you try anything, I will shoot you," I warned, knowing he was thinking about lunging.

He plopped down beside the girl, patting her soothingly on the back. Then he looked at me pleadingly. "Please, don't kill us. I didn't mean anything."

"Shh," I shushed him. He was talking too loud. Putting us all at risk. "You

"Shh," I shushed him. He was talking too loud. Putting us all at risk. "You pulled a pretend gun on me," I accused, mildly annoyed.

"You had a real one on my daughter," he whispered back, angry but taking my shushing seriously. He had a point, so I lowered my gun, keeping it ready at my side. He studied me for a second, and when he spoke again he sounded scared. "I saw that tattoo, on your wrist. Are you a raider?"

"Not the one you need to worry about," I told him in a hushed murmur, glimpsing down at the ink. All of us had it, like a gang sign. I hated it, and never wanted it in the first place. But I already didn't fit in well with the group. I couldn't insult them by being the only one without the mark. It was three daggers, set in the shape of an 'A', with a circle around it in the background. Anarchy. "But there are others close by. You can't stay here."

"We have nowhere else to go." The girl spoke for the first time, her voice an exhausted whine. "We've been travelling for so long."

"Where're you headed?" I asked, glancing back out of the alley from a growing sense of unease. These people were in more danger than they realized sitting here, and I was in danger just talking to them.

"Nowhere in particular. Our group got separated a few weeks ago," the man said, and getting more comfortable that they wouldn't try anything, I strode forward and handed him his flashlight. "We're looking for somewhere permanent."

"Well, it isn't here." I took a step back away from him, out of striking distance just in case, and squatted down to their level. "You're not safe here. You seriously need to leave."

The man just shook his head, patting the near empty backpack sitting across his daughter's thighs. "We were hoping to scavenge. We don't have any food, not enough water to make it another day on the road, and those things…"

"There are worse things than Biters in this city," I said impatiently. He didn't understand what I was telling him. If the others found them, they

didn't understand what I was telling him. If the others found them, they were dead for sure, or worse in the girl's case. The girl sniffled, and when she noticed I'd seen the tear glitter down her cheek she dropped her head. Her father did the same when I glanced at him. Damn these people for doing this, but I couldn't just leave them here, stranded. "If I give you some food, some water, will you promise to leave? Not tomorrow, not in a few hours. Now. Go back the way you came, and avoid being seen or heard at all costs."

The man looked at me, and he was quiet for a few thoughtful seconds. Then he nodded, and even though it wasn't entirely convincing, I pulled the backpack off my shoulders and set it on the ground in front of me. I rummaged around in it for a second with one hand, still holding onto my gun with the other, and pulled out two cans of food and a bottle of water. The second I set them down the girl picked up a can, sniffling again as she licked her lips and turned it over in her hands. The man's stomach growled loudly too. Poor guys were probably starving.

My hand hesitated over the hatchet, and I looked at the man thoughtfully for a second. If he pointed a flashlight at me, it must have meant that they didn't have a single weapon. They were vulnerable, and I knew how terrible a feeling that was. I pulled out the hatchet, carefully handing it to the man, watching him in case he'd get the idea he could rob me for everything else in my pack. He just took it into his lap, giving a defeated but grateful nod.

"Hey," I said softly, reaching out and gently nudging the girl's chin. "Keep your head up. Your dad's doing the best he can." She nodded, wiping her nose on the cuff of her long-sleeved shirt. I didn't like seeing people like this, so desperate for whatever they could get. It tugged at my heartstrings. "Do you like honey?" I asked her. I hated it, but *that's* how bad I felt for these guys. If this was a con, they were pulling it off flawlessly. But I'd survive without this stuff, they probably wouldn't.

The girl's eyes widened, and she looked up at me like she couldn't believe it. When she nodded I reached to the bottom of my bag, pulling out that precious bottle of honey and handing it to her. It was almost hard for me to let it go when she took hold of it, but the smile on her face was worth it. I stood after that and threw my bag back over my shoulders

worth it. I stood after that and threw my bag back over my shoulders.

"Thank you." The man stood as well, and extended a grateful hand to me.

I shook it, and then looked him as sternly as I could right in the eyes. "I'm not kidding. Please, for her sake," and I nodded toward his girl, "Leave now." I didn't wait to see if he would nod or not, and I certainly didn't wait to see if they would really leave. I didn't want to think any more about it. I didn't want them on my conscience.

Back on the street I headed for the complex, listening for footsteps in case the pair might try to follow me. They didn't, and everything was silent until I got back. I spotted the familiar airplane, leaned up against the side of a tall office building. It was chance that the plane had crashed that way. It had split in half, the broken end near the ground and the nose smashed into the side of the building. The other plane, the one that this had collided with, it landed a few blocks away, with parts from both scattered all over the place.

Martin was the handyman of the group, and he welded off a small portion of the plane near the ground, just enough for someone to squeeze through with equipment. Then he knocked out the windows in the cockpit, dropped a rope ladder down the aisles from the top to the bottom, from the building to the ground. This was our entrance to the complex, since Biters weren't smart enough to figure it out. All the other doors and windows on the first floor were boarded off, except one, which was only locked, but the inside was heavily booby-trapped, so if any Biters got through alive, we'd hear them coming. This entrance was booby-trapped too, but not like the other, and it was easy to get through once you knew where to go. It had taken us a long time to secure this entire building, but it was ours, along with the rooftops of ten other buildings, connected by custom Martin-built plank-bridges.

I crawled under the space at the base of the plane, and then climbed at a slant up the ladder. When I reached the top, I strolled down the long hallway, sticking to the walls of the office cubicles to avoid the five or six tear gas grenades hidden underneath the carpet. At the end of the hallway, even though I couldn't see it, I stepped habitually over the

tripwire, which was connected to the five-arrowed, mounted crossbow aimed straight down the hall. Then I veered left down another row of cubicles, at the end of which was the stairwell. I avoided another tripwire, which would have swung three heavy balls with metal spikes sticking out every direction on top of my head.

As I reached the stairwell, I eyed the mine just to the side of the door. Blaze, the guy who'd set up all these traps, he called it a Claymore, or when I asked him more specifically, a M18A1. They put it there in case Biters overran us some day. It was supposed to blow out the whole floor, kill a whole bunch of them. It wasn't attached to a tripwire, or to some pressure plate beneath the floor. The detonator was hanging on the wall a few feet up the stairs. All I cared about was that the thing scared the shit out of me.

I pulled the door handle up instead of pushing it down, because that was the final booby-trap and I wasn't looking to set off the grenade taped just under the inside handle, and then I continued up the stairs. When Blaze first decided he wanted to set up all those traps, I thought it was downright excessive. Now, even though we hadn't had a single Biter intruder in the two years we'd been here, it was nice knowing we were so well protected.

This building had a total of twelve stories, but we really only used the top four floors. So I trudged up flight after flight, all the way to the top. When we first got here, going up so many flights was an inconvenience, now it was easy as ambling down the street. The ninth floor were the barracks, where each of us had our own cot. I never slept there though. I'd secured a roof of my own so I wouldn't have to be around the others all the time. The tenth floor was our leader's floor, the eleventh was the lounging area where we spent most of our waking hours, and the twelfth was the weapons store.

I finally reached the eleventh floor, and before I opened the door I took a deep breath, preparing to don the mask I always wore around the others, the façade that blended me in as well as possible, just enough that they accepted me to the point they wouldn't kill me. Then I turned the handle and walked in. Through the dim light of the battery-powered lantern, I

spotted Martin playing what looked like an intense game of poker with Decker and Halsten at the center of the room. Quinn looked up from an old magazine she was reading on the couch at the far end, and then went back to it like she hadn't even seen me. Farah, who gave me an acknowledging smile, was sitting at a table near the couch cleaning weapons. Two were missing, Blaze and our leader, Leon, who must be out somewhere scavenging too.

None of the guys seemed to notice me when I walked in, but when I stood near the table and dropped my heavy backpack onto the floor with a thud, they all looked up from the game.

"What do you got there?" Martin asked, craning his neck even though he couldn't see inside the still-zipped bag.

Decker's eyes went from the guys to me, and he glared, throwing his cards down like he was pissed I'd interrupted the game. The others always seemed wary of me, but Decker despised me. He could tell I didn't belong, that deep down I wasn't like them. That, and I didn't put up with his misogynistic bullshit. Lately I could tell his opinion of me was spreading, especially to Blaze, who'd started to avoid even talking to me.

I ignored Decker's spite and undid the zipper of the backpack, dumping the contents onto the floor. I could tell everyone's mouths started to water when they saw the canned goods, even Decker's. A normal meal for us was rice or beans and some fruit from one of the few trees we'd managed to get growing out by the river, and maybe an occasional fish when someone got the urge to sit out there all night. Anything canned was a rare treat. Martin was the first to stand, but he didn't pick up the food.

"Echo, you shouldn't have," he swooned playfully. "You brought me a new screwdriver."

I laughed and shrugged like it was no big deal. The others made a small commotion about the food and then went back to what they were doing. After I'd put the goods away in the boxes that lined one wall of the room, I made my way to the table to watch the poker game. They were playing for cigarettes and alcohol, the only two things of luxury we had around

for cigarettes and alcohol, the only two things of luxury we had around here, and it took me a moment of standing there with my arms crossed over my chest, studying the game, to figure out who was winning. It was Decker – he'd always been the best bluffer.

After about fifteen minutes of me standing there, with Decker occasionally glancing up to leer at me, he finally spoke. "Where'd you get all that stuff?" Every time he said something to me it was sarcastic and bitter. Most the time it made me want to knock his teeth out. Sometimes it scared me.

"Residential neighborhood a few blocks away," I told him without making eye contact. I didn't have to see him to know the look he had on his face.

He didn't say anything, just played his next hand, grinning like a fiend when he won the pot. A second later Quinn came over, as she must have heard him acknowledge me, and she sat right in his lap, giving him a possessive kiss so deep it made me sick. Then she looked right at me as if to emphasize her point, and I refrained from rolling my eyes. I couldn't look away from her though, because her left cheek was swollen and bruised. It had happened before, but it wasn't usually on her face, and it made me glare at Decker. He'd followed my gaze, but when I gave him that hard look, he just smirked.

"What's the matter Echo?" he asked teasingly, looking me up and down. "Jealous you aren't getting any of this?" Then he held his arms out, motioning to himself.

I chuckled, gaining my usually corrosive tone for whenever I dealt with him. It was my only defense against their disgusting behavior. "Not really." Then I made a deliberate nod toward Quinn. "Black and blue aren't really my colors."

Decker didn't just make those comments because he was an asshole. He hated me so much that he knew if he showed that kind of interest it would make Quinn hate me too. It was his way of getting some control over me. Taking away a potential companion, a friend. Isolating me more than I already was. He'd been working at it for years. But I didn't care for Quinn's companionship, she was exactly the kind of girl I would never be.

"I think it would suit you." He glowered as he made an obvious threat.

None of the guys picked physical fights with the girls, except for Quinn's obvious abuse, because they acted fragile. I was practically one of the guys, but the only reason Decker or any of the others didn't pick fights with me was because in most situations I'd win. I was smaller, more agile, and intuitive. Also, before the outbreak our leader, Leon, took up MMA fighting as a hobby, and he'd taught me how to take care of myself. That was probably another reason Decker didn't like me. He made the mistake of picking a fight years ago, and he'd never go through the embarrassment again.

When I just shrugged off his comment he motioned for me to sit at the last empty seat next to him. "Want in on this game?"

But I was suspicious of his motives. "It's not worth my cigarettes."

"I've got a different wager for you," he said, leaning back in his chair with Quinn still in his lap. "I win, I get you in the barracks tonight. And you make it worthwhile." At that, Quinn gave an angry scoff and stormed away.

Martin snorted with laughter – it was all fun and games to him. He didn't understand what Decker was trying to do. My first thought was absolutely not, especially because I knew Decker would win, but then I glanced across the table at Halsten, who nodded at me. Halsten was the one person around here I even remotely liked. He was no angel, but he wasn't quite as bad as the rest, and he didn't have anything against me.

When Halsten nodded, I nodded too. *Nolite te bastardes corborundorum.* I wouldn't let Decker grind me down. "Fine, but I want every last cigarette you've got, and your portion of breakfast in the morning."

"Deal." He grinned evilly as I took a seat, and began to shuffle the cards.

Halsten stood so Decker wouldn't deal him in, and he made his way to stand between my seat and Decker's, where he'd have a good view of the game. Then he leaned over and placed one hand on the back of my chair, where he could easily signal to me by tapping me on the back. It

wasn't the first time Halsten and I had cheated together, but Decker was the only dumbass that hadn't caught on to it yet.

Just to give the impression that I was completely at ease with the wager, and so Decker couldn't see my eyes, I reached up and pulled the cowboy hat off Halsten's head, setting it back down onto my own. Decker started dealing the cards, leaving Martin out of it so it was just he and I, and I reached for the box of poker chips under the table so I'd have something physical to wager with.

Decker had dealt for Texas Hold 'Em, and the first two cards I got weren't looking good so far. Then he flipped over the first three community cards, and things were a little better. I had a pair of nines, so I tossed one chip into the pot. Decker silently matched my bet with a cigarette, and flipped over the next card. It didn't help me at all, but Decker threw in another cig. That's when Halsten tapped me once on the back, the signal to fold.

"I fold," I said, tossing Decker my cards.

"What?" He was already aggravated, knowing he could've won more cigarettes that round. But I was already behind, and I wanted anything but to lose.

Decker dealt again, and I was instantly happy with my hand. A pair of kings, and with the first three cards he flipped over, though they didn't help, I added to the pot. Decker saw my bet, and then flipped the next card. Another king. Before I wagered again, I hesitated, waiting for Halsten to communicate. I was pretty sure I would get this round, but I wanted to make damn certain. There were two light taps on my back, telling me to wager, so I put in two chips. Decker raised it to four, but he was bluffing, and there were another two taps on my back, so I matched it. We both threw in one more with the flip of the fifth card, and I'd won the round.

I grinned, ready for the next. I won that hand too, and I could tell Decker was already getting furious. He was swearing up a storm, and when I folded the fourth hand, and then won the fifth, his swearing grew louder. That's when Quinn came back over, and she glared at me with a

vengeance.

"She's cheating, you idiot!" she yelled at Decker, pointing at me.

"What?" He looked confused, and then mad that Quinn was shouting at him.

"They're cheating!" she repeated.

Decker looked from me to Halsten before he grew visibly enraged. "You son-of-a-bitch!"

He stood, flipping the table over and on top of Martin, who'd been innocently watching the game from his seat. Then he swung at Halsten, catching him in the jaw and sending him straight to the floor. Luckily, he didn't stop to attack me. He jumped on top of Halsten and the two started brawling, rolling across the floor in a ball of swinging fists and fury. I stood close by, waiting patiently for the perfect moment to jump in and come to Halsten's aid.

It came when Decker had him pinned, and I threw myself onto Decker's back, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms tight around his neck, choking him. He tried to throw his fist back, hoping it would hit me, but I sank down so he missed. He tried to grab at me, but he wasn't in the position to get a good enough hold. Eventually we fell backward off of Halsten, and even though I tried not to let it show, it was hard to breath under Decker's massive weight of gigantic muscle. I loosened my grip a little on his neck so he wouldn't pass out, but any time he tried to get out of it I tightened again. I wasn't letting him go until he calmed down, no matter how crushed I felt.

Before that could happen Blaze came bursting through the door, closely followed by Leon. "Hey guys, guess what!" he shouted excitedly, but he didn't wait for a response. "We spotted a little fire. There're some people out there. Let's get some supplies!"

I lost my grip on Decker as my heart sank. The father and daughter, they hadn't left, and now they'd see just what I was warning them about. I lay there on the ground after Decker rolled away and pushed himself up.

Then I continued to lay there as they all cheered, grabbing the finished weapons Farah had been cleaning and filing out to the stairwell. I didn't want to go out there just to see the man and girl killed. Damn them! I told them to leave. I told them they were in danger. Even though I didn't want to, I stood, lagging far behind the others. Maybe I could find them first, and cover for them while they got away. I rushed down, but by the time I got to the alley where I knew the travelers had been, there was quiet commotion with only two of my group remaining, and they were coming back toward me.

"What happened?" I whispered at seeing Farah lead a wounded Martin toward me.

"The bastard had a hatchet," Martin said, holding his arm and wincing as blood oozed through his fingers. "Managed to get me before him and some girl made a run for it."

"Which way?" I asked, and they pointed before shuttling past me.

I took off the direction they said, hoping to catch the travelers hiding out without my group on their trail. I ran the street as fast as I could, telling myself to stay calm and silent, because there were still Biters out here. I knew I was on the right track when I saw Decker coming toward me alone, a familiar backpack in his hands. The sight of that backpack made me want to puke.

"They hardly had anything. Some honey though!" Decker grinned, showing me that precious bottle. Then he pulled a can out of the bag. The can I'd given them. "Hey, this is just like the one you brought." He said it softly, like he was just mumbling to himself, but after a moment he looked up at me suspiciously.

I changed the subject before he had too much time to think about it. "Did they get them?"

He shook his head and nodded the way he'd come. "They dropped the bag and ran." Then he continued back toward the complex with the backpack.

I hurried on until I saw Leon and Halsten. They were walking towards me, Halsten holding a machete in his hand while Leon shined a flashlight down the alleys they passed by. When I reached them my eyes scanned the machete, looking for any sign of fresh blood on the blade.

"Where're the others?" I asked, getting shushed by Leon because in my panic I'd spoken too loudly.

"They went after the girl," Halsten said, putting his machete back in the sheath around his waist. "We managed to separate them, the guy is around here somewhere."

"I'll help you look," I told them, continuing past, hoping I would find the man before they did.

"Take Halsten with you," Leon called after me.

I ignored him, jogging off alone before Halsten reached me. I pulled out my own flashlight and turned a corner, hoping to get lucky. I moved the beam down every alley I passed, searching for any sign of the travelers. It took five minutes until as I passed an alley there was the shrill squeak of a shoe against the cement. During my search panic had faded to frustration, but that sound made me angry. I stormed down the alley, heading straight for the source of the noise.

It was the man, and it was obvious he didn't expect me to come at him so quickly. Horror riddled his face as I reached him, and he raised the hatchet, preparing to defend himself. Only, when he recognized it was me, he hesitated. It was long enough for me to grab the collar of his shirt, and, furious, I threw him back against the wall. What if it hadn't been me walking by? It's like he was trying to get killed.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I whispered angrily, grabbing the hatchet out of his hand and tossing it away. "I told you to leave."

"We hadn't eaten in days," he stammered, trying to peel my grip from his shirt. "Please, you have to find my daughter."

"They already went after her," I told him. Either they'd already found her

and she was dead, or she was on the run, and he would have to wait before going to search for her. "Damn you. Why didn't you just leave?" I repeated to myself, loosening my hold on him as a sad disappointment sunk into my gut.

"My daughter," he said again. "You can't let them hurt her. Please, you have t–"

"Don't put this on me," I growled, pushing him against the wall again. "I warned you."

This time he retaliated, shoving me away from him. "I'm going to find her."

I grabbed his sleeve and yanked him back as he made for the street. "If you leave this alley now they'll kill you. Then you'll never find her."

"Then what do you want me to do?" he begged furiously, tugging his arm from my grasp.

"Wait here for an hour," I said, knowing my group wouldn't be searching for too long. Then I picked up the hatchet I'd thrown and handed it back to him. "Don't leave this alley until then."

"If you see her," he started after nodding, "Promise you won't let them hurt her."

"I promise I'll do what I can," I agreed, and then headed toward the street. I'd left right on time, because the second I got out of the alley I could see Leon and Halsten coming my way a couple streets down. "I searched the whole block, didn't find him," I said when I reached them, and they instantly turned to head back toward the complex with me.

The walk to the complex was a blur, I wanted to hurry and get back, to see if the others had found the girl or not. Was it my fault? I'd given them the food. The food they'd made a fire to heat. To make the fire that Blaze and Leon had seen. No. I told them to leave. This wasn't my fault. I just hoped the father wasn't the only one who'd gotten away.

When we reached the lounging area back at the complex nobody else was there except for Halsten, who'd walked in with me while Leon had gone to his own room. I was hoping that was a good sign, meaning they were still out and having a hard time finding the girl. I'd hardly righted the table Decker turned over and sat down when there was a muffled scream, barely audible because it was coming from a couple floors below, but I'd heard it.

"The hell was that?" I asked Halsten.

When he shrugged, I shot up. The girl. I bolted out the door and down the stairwell to the barracks. Decker was there, and Martin, and Blaze, and Quinn – she always joined in with whatever the guys were doing. Always cheered them on. And the girl. They'd found her. Her hands were bound, but they were letting her run around. Letting her dodge as they teasingly tried to catch her. They were toying with her, but I knew how it would end. When I burst in she spotted me and stopped running. Her teary eyes met mine and she whimpered, passing me a pleading look.

It was like a knife in the heart, that look. I'd helped her and her father, and now she saw a friend in me. But I was no friend, and that recognition in her eyes was dangerous for the both of us. There was nothing I could do. If I stood up for her and tried to save her, they'd undoubtedly mess with and then kill me too. I knew it because Decker hated me, and he had the pull to make it happen. But they were going to kill her anyway, and I made a promise. So I took my gun out of my waistband, and her eyes widened when she saw it. Before she could scream again, or any of the others could catch on and stop me, I set the sights on her, and I pulled the trigger. At least they couldn't torture her first. This was merciful. Damn them.

"Echo, what the fuck!" Decker yelled furiously as the girl collapsed to floor, completely lifeless.

I didn't even look at him as I put the gun back in my waist and turned to leave.

"Bitch, I'm talking to you!" I heard him shout after me, the end of his exclamation muffled by the closing of the door behind me.

exclamation muffled by the closing of the door behind me.

I sprinted all the way up the stairs to the roof, then across one bridge, and then another, until I finally reached my own private roof. I darted into my tent, grabbing my pillow off my bed and shoving it against my face so nobody would hear me. And I screamed. Her dad pleading with me. Her frightened, tear-filled eyes. I kept screaming and yelling until my lungs were sore, and then just kept on going until I had no energy left. Ten minutes later I was fallen on my cot, panting heavily, my throat raw.

I heard some footsteps crunching over the gravelly surface of the roof, and a few moments later Leon appeared at the opening of my tent. He stood there for a minute, watching me or giving me some time to compose myself, I couldn't be sure.

Then he sighed, like he was disappointed. "I heard about what you did."

"What, did Decker go tattletale?" I asked sarcastically, slight rage forming in my chest at the patronizing tone of his voice.

"Echo, you know how the others feel about you. You can't just do shit like that," he said, crouching down and playing with the zipper of my tent. "You got to let the guys have their fun." My mouth set in a hard line. Leon had no idea how bad I wanted to hit him right now. When I didn't say anything, he continued, "They got to get it somewhere, and if it's not strangers…"

"Excuse me?" I practically spat at him, my voice dripping with disdain. I knew exactly what he was getting at, exactly what he was doing. "If you're going to threaten me, at least have the goddamn balls to do it proper."

"You watch your mouth," he sneered, coming at me from a different position now. Trying to maintain authority.

I didn't care if he was mad. He didn't have the guts to lay a hand on me. "You'd let them do that? To your *cousin*?" I played that card, hoping it meant something to him, even though I knew better. It didn't mean anything anymore. "To your own flesh and blood? Without any

consequences, no punishment?" Then I thought about the other girl in our group, who I knew had a subtle relationship with Leon. "You'd let them do that to Farah?" He just looked at me, his silence more of an answer than if he'd said anything at all. "Get the fuck off my roof." I gave him a glare so fierce he turned away without saying a thing. Once he was gone I grabbed the single bridge that connected my roof to all the others, pulling it away so nobody else could come to talk to me, to threaten me. Then I collapsed back onto my cot.

My cousin, Leon, had been the leader since the beginning. He was the biggest, the strongest. But he was coward. The only reason he maintained his position was because he could devastate anyone who tried to take it from him by force. I knew how his mind worked though, and I could see it on his face. He was afraid of upsetting the masses. Afraid the group would mutiny and kill him, and I hated him for that. Hated him for being so weak.

I wanted to leave so badly. I wanted to leave the complex and never see any of these disgusting people ever again. But I was a coward too. I wasn't afraid of being alone, and I wasn't afraid of the dark. I was afraid of not having a place to call home. Scared of being caught out on the road day after day. Most of all I was afraid of ending up like those travelers, ending up in the clutches of some other ruthless killers. I was scared of all the evils I'd seen and done.

As I buried myself under the blankets on my cot, the tears started streaming down my face. My sense of grief and despair and hopelessness was overwhelming. All I could see were the girl's eyes, the fear in them when I pulled out my gun. Damn them. I hated this place, these people, and the things they did and said and stood for. I hated Leon. I hated the Biters. I fucking hated Decker. But more than anything, I hated myself.

God Left The Ground

14

Boy With A Coin by Iron and Wine

God Left The Ground

Dugan

Your entire life doesn't flash before your eyes when you think you're about to die. Whoever said that had lied. Maybe the first couple times it did, but not any more. Now I wasn't picturing the dark blue bicycle with the playing cards in the spokes that I'd gotten for my fifth birthday. I couldn't feel the yellow cap and gown I'd worn the day I graduated college. My wife's face wouldn't be the last thing I'd ever see, nor would my daughter's. I couldn't picture my daughter's joyous tears the Christmas we'd bought her a puppy. Or the sad ones when we told her that we were leaving. Not the things we'd left behind in evacuation. Not the widespread panic the weeks of the outbreak. Or the days they died. The days everyone died.

All I could see was the opening of a long, silver barrel at the end of the cocked and ready revolver. It glittered in the moonlight. The pointed edges of the gun shimmered their reflections at the shaking of the unsteady hand around the grip. I wouldn't even get to see a light at the end of my tunnel. Instead, I was staring straight into the tunnel. The dark, endless cave which at any slight whim would put an end to my long and lonely fight.

"You so much as breathe, I'll put a bullet in your skull," said the man holding the gun. His voice is deep, and threatening, but not out of malice. It's caution. I've heard the tone before.

Survival. That's what I was thinking about. How could I get out of this alive? I could throw my hands up and surrender. Maybe the other guy's just as scared as I am. He'd either show a little sympathy or decide I was

too dangerous and kill me. Should I draw my own weapon and hope against all odds he's too slow? No. He might be slow, but his finger was already on the trigger. Smack the gun away and go straight for his throat. That seemed like my best bet.

Then I hear my father's words in my head. I'm eight years old again, a large black index finger pointed at me instead of a gun, being scolded because I stood up for myself on the playground. *I don't care who started it. Your mother and I work too hard for you to get kicked out of private school. You want your education to go to waste?* It didn't matter how much I protested, how many times I came home with a busted lip. Violence was never the answer. My mother, dark brown eyes full of affectionate tears: *You turn the other cheek. Kill 'em with kindness. All a bully ever wants is a friend.*

Is a human life worth the risk to me? I spared a glance around the barrel to the man holding the gun. He was old, white hair reflecting the pale glow of the moon, peppery whiskers twitching around the hard set of his mouth. Dull, almost colorless eyes watched me attentively, deep set and tired-looking in the heavy bags beneath them. He was thin too. Scrawny and frail under his long-sleeved denim shirt, the jeans held around his hips only by a leather belt, tightened to the last notch. I could defeat him.

Funny how, at the end of the world, that's when people erupted in violence. I remember the days of the outbreak, all the people struggling to flee the cities, trampling each other in the rush. Then weeks, months, years after, killing each other over an apple, over a box of ammo. Now, when there was hardly anybody left, when we should be uniting to survive, that's when we kill the easiest.

It's worth the risk. He's old, but he's *alive*. He's a companion, and, like me, a survivor.

"Please," I begged quietly, my tone placating. "I just need a place to stay for the day."

"Not here," he growled.

In the dark I could see his eyes dart to the hunting rifle hanging at my

side. His hands were still shaking, and I knew he was reluctant to shoot me. Though, I couldn't tell if it was his morals, or just the fear of the shot ringing out in the dark, alerting the world to our whereabouts. I gambled that he didn't want to kill me, and holding one hand out unthreateningly, I used the other to slowly reach for my rifle. I wrapped my fingers around the barrel, nowhere near the trigger so he wouldn't think anything of it, and I lifted it above my head, removing the strap from my shoulder. Then I moved to set it down on a switchboard beside me, and what he didn't realize is that I'd be in a better position now to equip it than I was before. Just in case.

As I set the rifle down, one end of it landed on a lever, and under the weight of it the lever shifted. It slid forward, the rifle moving abruptly like it was going to fall to the floor. Out of instinct I made a reach to catch it, and at the same time the man's other hand flew to his weapon, joining his other and steadying the gun to get a shot off. I stopped mid-reach, throwing my hands palm-out in the air and letting the rifle clatter to floor so as not to get shot.

The old man stood there for a minute, both hands aiming the revolver at me, waiting for me to make another fast move. When I didn't, he began to relax, and he dropped one hand to his side.

"Easy." Once more I made a calm reach for the rifle. "Easy," I repeated softly, lifting the weapon to the switchboard and more carefully putting it down. I already knew though that if he hadn't shot me yet, the chances were he never would.

"I told you, you can't stay here," the man said shakily.

I glanced toward the large windows of the air traffic control tower. The very edge of the horizon was already graying, and soon the sky would brighten. I'd spotted the tower from miles away, and wasted precious time traveling here on the hopes that it was empty and secure. I couldn't leave now. That was a death sentence.

"Please, the sun's coming up," I told him, pointing out the window. "I don't have time to go anywhere else."

Daytime was when *they* came out. The infected. Savage, delirious, bloodthirsty remnants of what we used to be. They were like starving, rabid animals, human only in appearance, though even that was hardly true anymore. The Ferals, that's what I called them ever since I'd seen a warning painted on the outside of a building. Diurnal, just like humans had always been, which forced the rest of us to travel, scavenge, and survive at night. Daytime was hunting time, and out there, I was as good as dead.

"I have my own supplies," I added when the man just continued to stare at me, tossing a thumb to the backpack on my shoulders. "I'm not here to rob you. I don't need anything except for somewhere to hide."

That seemed to reach him a little, and he craned his neck to get a better look at my bag. "Give me the rifle," he instructed, motioning to the panel at my side.

I shook my head, tensing and ready to grab it should he try anything. "With all due respect, you're not touching my weapon. I'll leave it where it is until I'm ready to leave."

He scowled at me, thick white eyebrows furrowing sternly. I stayed silent while he considered it and looked me over, while he measured the amount of trustworthiness in my story, in my face. After a minute his thumb went to the hammer of his revolver, and he released the tension in it and lowered the gun.

"You stay over here," he said, taking a step backward.

"That's fair," I agreed, and as he took another step I lowered myself to the ground.

Taking a seat on the floor, I pulled the bag off my shoulders so I could lean my back against the solid panel my rifle was sitting on. The man kept his eyes on me, walking in reverse until he reached the opposite end of the small tower. There, he took a seat on a worn sleeping bag arranged neatly on the carpet, setting his revolver down next to him. He kicked one foot out and brought the other up to set his elbow on, which he rested his head against so he could watch me comfortably

he rested his head against so he could watch me comfortably.

I'd come across other survivors in my travels. Most of them were just trying to get by on what little they had, sometimes asking if I had anything to trade, or avoiding me completely. Others were the types you could tell were trouble. Some of them came right out and tried to take your supplies. Hell, I'd even been shot at a few times. Usually though, they just looked at you a certain way. Watching how you move, scanning your body for hidden weapons, glimpsing your wares for anything loot-worthy. Waiting for you to let your guard down so they could strike.

I'd even met some people like this old man. Ones who'd likely been victims of those trouble makers, and who were highly reluctant to let it happen again. The evidence was in the man's face, in the unsure twitch of the grim line of his mouth. It was in the frightened widening of his eyes and the upward curve of his brow. And it was in the tentative leer of his watchful glare.

I sat there for a few minutes under that wary gaze before the tension of the silence started to get to me. The corner of my mouth turned up into a small, fleeting smile as I reached into my backpack. At the movement, the man's eyes narrowed, squinting at me through the hazy light of dawn as his hand reached for his gun. He was suspicious, but I wouldn't act afraid, wouldn't draw my hand away and give him more reason to be.

When I pulled the deck of cards out of my bag I held it up to show him, and his shoulders sunk with a visible sigh of relief. My deck was tired, the waxy film worn off by years of use and the edges blackened by the enduring grime on my hands. What else was there to do during the wait but play cards? I'd never been the stationary, introspective type to be comfortable sitting still all day.

That had to be one of the worst things about the outbreak. You couldn't just get out and enjoy a pastime any more. Oh, how I missed a decent game of baseball. The tremendous roar of the crowd when there was a homerun. The harmonic echo of the thunderous blow every time a bat cracked against the ball. Even the aggravating fan I always got sat in front of, cheering for my favorite team's opponent. I missed his yelling and taunting.

I shuffled and dealt for a game of solitaire, but with the man sitting there, it was only minutes before my concentration failed. It had been so long since I'd seen more of a person than a fleeting shadow in the night. Than a silhouette acknowledging I wasn't a Feral by lowering its weapon and turning away. In the presence of this man, I was itching for conversation, for an engaging voice rather than a threatening one. But each time I spared a glance upward, he was still watching me with a vigilant stare.

It had been some time since I'd eaten, and at the very thought of food my stomach rumbled longingly. So I slid the deck of cards back in the box, and traded it in the backpack for one of my few remaining cans of food. As I set the large tin down in front of me and reached into a side pocket for my can opener, I could see the old man lean forward with interest. I watched him curiously while I gripped the edge of the can between the steel teeth of the opener. His long mustache was twitching characteristically again, but it wasn't displeasure anymore – it was marvel.

That was the first time I took inventory of what possessions he had lying about. The sleeping bag, the gun, a gallon jug half-full of water, and a few emptied containers that used to have food were the only things I picked out easily. There were no visible rations to be found, and now the scrawny look of the man held meaning. He was starving, licking his lips at the very notion of nourishment.

The old man had been peering intently at my hands as I removed the sawed-off lid, and just to let him know I was watching in case he got the idea he could rob me, I cleared my throat at him. The noise made him flinch, and he instantly leaned back onto his bedding, trying his hardest to act like he wasn't interested. As hungry as he was, he wasn't a thief, and I'll be damned it made me feel bad for him.

"There's enough here for two," I said calmly, holding back a chuckle when his eyes lit up. "I'm feeling a little thirsty, maybe we could share." I nodded toward his jug of water. My own small bottle had only a couple sips left.

He considered it as he eyed the carton, then he grabbed it and stood. He

He considered it as he eyed the carton, then he grabbed it and stood. He started over toward me, but stopped after a step, turning back to grab his gun. With that in hand he strode over, plopping down beside me and setting the drink between us.

"Green beans," I told him, and I pulled a mushy vegetable out of the can, cringing while I swallowed it whole. "Never much cared for them. Our daughter wasn't the only one my wife had to threaten with no dessert." His mouth twitched with an amused smile as he cautiously reached for a serving. When he still didn't say anything I stuck out my hand. "Dugan."

The old man looked from my outstretched hand to my face, and then took it in his own. "Chuck." We shook, and he pushed the water farther toward me when he saw me look at it. "Doo-gin," he repeated my name deliberately. "That a first name, or a last?"

I grinned, hugely grateful for the discourse. "Well, first," I answered, and added shyly, "But my last name is Douglas."

Chuck let out a whooping laugh, so surprisingly mirthful in the quiet sunrise that it startled me. "So, Dugan Douglas," and he snickered again, "Where you from?"

"California." I noticed he looked like a completely different person when he smiled. Because of his mustache it was hard to tell Chuck even had teeth, or most of his teeth anyway. Still, his disjointed grin was endearing, in a homely kind of way.

"What brings you to Arizona?" he asked, and finally he grew comfortable enough to take his left hand off the revolver.

"I've been wandering place to place since the outbreak, scavenging until there's nothing left." Six years by my count. "Figured I might as well head east. See how many people are left after all this time."

I shrugged, unable to find words capable of explaining exactly what drove the change in conduct. I'd been surviving on finding a safe place and staying there as long as possible. For all I new, it was the *only* way to survive. I just couldn't do it anymore. Couldn't go on much longer doing

the same godforsaken, lonely thing day after day. Searching, that's what I was doing. Searching for a new reason to live. I needed something to give my life meaning again.

It was silent for a few moments, and in the light of the rising sun I could see that Chuck's pale eyes were a bright, experienced green. Those green orbs studied me thoughtfully, and then he nodded, like even though I hadn't fully explained, he understood.

"What about you?" I asked after a few more seconds.

"I'm from a town nearby," he answered.

I had popped another green bean into my mouth, and swallowed it with difficultly. The texture of the squishy vegetables got less palatable with every bite, and not to mention that they were completely cold and flavorless. "Just you?"

Chuck's eyes turned down sadly. "My wife died about five years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"She was sick before the outbreak. We both knew it would happen." He shook his head. "You said you had a wife and daughter?"

I took a deep breath, forcing back the wave of emotion the question brought. It wasn't thinking or talking about them that got to me. It was thinking about it in the past tense. I 'had' a wife and daughter, but now they were gone. "Lost them both to the infection," I told him.

He nodded in acknowledgement, and then lowered his head sympathetically. "How old was she?"

I thought he meant my daughter, but not being entirely sure I answered for both. "My wife was thirty-six, daughter was nine."

"So young," he said sadly, and we both fell silent. After a minute he leaned over to look into the can of green beans. We'd cleaned out every last bit of vegetable in it, but he picked it up anyway. "You mind?" he

asked, motioning to the liquid in the can.

My face twisted with disgust at the thought of drinking the fluid, but I guess that's just how hungry he'd been. So I laughed and waved it off. "Not if you can stand it."

He took a few gulps, and when he pulled it from his lips he wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and shuddered. "What I wouldn't give for filet mignon."

"Or a nice, juicy lobster tail," I added, closing my eyes to fantasize about the delicious foods we used to take for granted.

"Amen," he raised the tin can to toast, and then chugged the rest of its contents. "Maybe you should go back to California. Get yourself a boat."

"Never been much of a seaman," I admitted. "Before the outbreak I was VP for an insurance company. Had an office way up in the building on the side that faced the ocean. Just looking at it made me sick."

His whiskers twitched with laughter. "Used to be a pretty boy, huh?"

I smirked and gave a sort of half nod. "Patsy is what my wife used to call it." She always did love pulling me out of my comfort zone. "She was the adventurous one."

"You seem to be doing alright for yourself," Chuck said reassuringly.

I smiled gratefully and took a sip from the gallon of water. "What about you? What did you do before the outbreak?"

"Teacher," he answered. "Fifth grade."

"Phew," I scoffed. "I hated elementary school."

Chuck stretched his legs out so the bottom half of them were exposed to the sunlight filtering through the tower windows, and then he leaned back comfortably on his hands. "Why's that?"

"I was the only black kid at a prestigious private school." *You're better*

than them, my mom used to say. *Show them that by not fighting.* "I was a fat chump too, so I didn't fit in very well. Doog the boob."

Chuck let out of huff of breath in poorly contained laughter, so I snickered to let him know he could laugh without offending me. "It always did amaze me how ruthless kids could be," he mused nostalgically. He seemed to think about something then, because he fell quiet, staring down at his toes soberly. "Sometimes I wonder if the kids didn't have it right." He looked up again, and I was raising an eyebrow at him curiously. "They were always so brutal. If they smelled weakness in each other, they'd just pick at it and pick at it. It was survival of the fittest on the playground, you know?" I nodded. "But when hell broke loose with the outbreak, the weak were the first to fall."

Something about that struck me like a blow to the head. I wanted to accuse him of being an asshole, to tell him he was wrong. It seemed like a verbal affront to the dead, like they were gone just because they weren't strong enough to survive. But I didn't feel powerful. I didn't feel special or even remotely worthy of being one of the few left alive. Some of the meek lasted longer than the mighty.

Chuck could be right though. The feeble lasted only because of the strong. I couldn't protect my wife and daughter forever, no matter how hard I tried. That could only go on so long before the world ground us down, and when we perished, so did they.

I stood so Chuck wouldn't see my mixed reaction to his reflection, and I leaned my elbows on one of the many panels to look out the large windows. This was a small general aviation airport in relatively the middle of nowhere Arizona. Across the airstrip, which the tower overlooked, there were four big hangars. Adjacent to the tower was a two-story office building, and behind us the parking lot. I'd spotted the place from a town a few miles down the road yesterday, and decided to travel here at nightfall. I had this strangely hopeful notion there'd be a pilot left, who could fly me to some secret place where all the survivors were hiding.

From the control room of the fifteen-story tower, I could see Ferals stirring below. They usually stayed in groups, like families, and it looked

like there was a clan of them filtering out of an air hangar. It didn't matter how far you were when you looked at them – they were ugly. Food must be getting scarce for them too, because of the eight I could see from this distance, six looked emaciated, and the other two were close.

Most of them were naked, the clothes they'd worn when they'd become infected had become so worn they fell away. The ones who had any garments left usually wore a single article, thinned and frayed and dirtied to an almost unrecognizable state. The same went for their skin. They didn't bathe, they hunted in the daylight without a scrap of clothing, and they slept on the hard ground and fought each other like animals.

"What have you heard?" I asked Chuck as I moved to a window on the other side of the tower, so I could look out over the parking lot. "About what caused the infection."

"Lots of different things," he said, moving back to his bedding and sprawling out on his sleeping bag. "I try not to think too much about it, don't see how it would help."

There were a couple different vehicles in the parking lot, undisturbed in whatever chaos the airport had seen, just like the few planes parked on the runway. "I heard it was a parasite. Like those ones that get into your head and control your brain."

"Sounds plausible I guess," Chuck shrugged and then folded his hands behind his head.

Before I could say anything else a speckle of movement from below caught my eye. It wasn't the usual undulating and flat-footed gait of the Ferals. It was a fluid stride, hasty from behind the cover of one vehicle and disappearing behind the next. My eyes focused when the figure darted from behind a car once more, and followed as it moved to the wall near the entrance of the office building.

"There's a girl down there!" My voice came out a little too excited, and I tapped the glass as I pointed down below.

"What?" Chuck asked in shock, scrambling up from his bed to come over

to where I was standing.

The girl had crouched at the side of the building, and she lifted herself a little to peek in one of the windows. She must have come from the town I'd been in the day before, and thought she might find supplies here before continuing on. She looked young too. Hard to tell her exact age from where I was up in the tower, but she was definitely in her teens.

"Oh, she don't want to go in there," Chuck said, leaning over the panels to get a better view. "There's creatures in there."

I watched the girl creep a few paces closer to the door of the building. "Hey!" I shouted, slamming my palms against the glass in hopes that she would hear me.

"Are you crazy?" Chuck's hands flew across my mouth, and he angrily wrestled me away from the window. "They'll hear you. They can climb stairs you idiot."

I pushed him off of me and returned to the window, but the girl had already disappeared into the building. Without another thought I grabbed my rifle off the panel and rummaged through my backpack for the extra clip. I started for the door, but when there were no footsteps behind me, I turned back.

"Come on." I motioned for Chuck to follow. Chivalry wasn't that far gone, was it?

"I'm too old for this." He shook his head vigorously. "She's probably already dead. If you go in there, you're dead too."

"Let me borrow your gun then," I said, moving forward to grab his revolver, which was still on the floor near my backpack. From my hampered view, it didn't look like the girl had a weapon on her.

"Hell no." Chuck stepped in front of me, putting his hands against my shoulders to stop me from advancing.

"I'll bring it back," I told him impatiently, but I stopped trying to sidestep

him. The last thing I needed was for him to try and shoot me.

He scowled at me. "Not if you're dead."

I sighed, trying to think of a solution. It would be a lot easier to help that girl if she wasn't completely defenseless when I got in there. I pointed to my backpack. "There're ten cans of food in there. If I don't make it out, they're all yours. Deal?"

He considered my offer for a minute, and I tried not to fidget impatiently. The more time I wasted, the more danger that girl could be in. Then he reached down for my backpack and opened it to count the cans inside. "Fine," he grumbled as he set it down, and picked up the revolver to hand it to me.

The second I had his gun in my hands I sprinted out the door. I took the stairs practically a flight at a time, and had to stop myself from bursting out the double-doors to the outside. Instead, I pushed one open just enough to peek through, and when there was nothing immediately visible I poked my head out. I snuck out and crept to the edge, where there was a gap between the tower and the office building. To make sure there were no Ferals around the corner I peered down it, then shuffled across to the building.

The door to the building was ajar when I reached it, so I pressed my ear to the opening and listened intently. It was eerily quiet inside. With my hunting rifle gripped in both hands, I pushed the door all the way open with the barrel, leading the way in with my weapon. There was a split second of panic when the door closed behind me. The inside of the building was dark, hardly any light coming through the tinted windows, and I was nearly blind for the minute it took my eyes to adjust. After the panic subsided I waited patiently, crouched near the entrance until I could see again.

The small reception area had chairs lining the wall to my right, with a large counter and desk directly ahead of me. There was a stairwell on the far right wall, an open door on my left, and another to the right of the counter. I decided to check the bottom floor first, and if the girl weren't down here, then I'd check the upper floor. Luckily for me, the building

wasn't excessively large, so I wouldn't have too many places to search through.

I glided silently toward the door on my left, which led to a medium sized room with a tall, long counter that blocked off a good portion of the opposite side. It was sectioned off into different stations, with rope creating places for lines in front of each station, like something I used to see at the DMV. I listened carefully for the sound of any Ferals in the room.

"Hello?" I called softly, just loud enough that if the girl were here she'd be able to hear me.

There was no answer, so I continued forward, checking behind the counter just in case. I moved to the right side of the room, where there was an entryway to another portion of the building. It appeared from the way the building and these two rooms were set up that I was already wrapping around to the other entrance I'd seen from the lobby. The next closed door on the far side of this second room was probably the last on this floor.

The second area was about the same size as the first, with ten office desks in it, lined in two columns of five. I inched forward, careful not to make any loud noises as I checked under every desk in the first column.

"Hello?" I called again, simply peering down the second column and making my way slowly toward the door.

As I neared it, there was the slap of bare feet against a tiled surface, coming from the next room and getting closer. The handle of the door jiggled, and right as it opened I dove under one of the desks and out of sight. The patter continued lazily past me, and I risked peeking out to see if I could continue the direction I'd been headed. Just before the door closed I caught sight of Ferals, at least three, in what looked like a lunch or break room.

Shit. I couldn't go forward, but now there was a Feral in the room with me, potentially blocking my only other way out. I took a deep breath,

mustering the courage to stick my head out just enough to see the Feral's position. It was walking slowly toward the exit, back turned to me, and I took advantage of it and darted silently across to a desk further from the lunchroom. The Feral was nearing the exit, but there wouldn't be anywhere to hide from it in the DMV area.

I lifted my hand above my head, feeling blindly around on the desk for something to use. I grabbed the first thing I touched, a thick, fancy pen, and I chucked it toward the lunchroom. It clattered against the wall, and at the sound the Feral turned, letting out a crude, wild growl. Then the human creature sprinted past me and toward the source of the noise, and I shot toward the door without making a sound. I didn't stop at the DMV area, but came to an abrupt halt when I got to the entrance of the lobby.

There was a Feral in the lobby too, and before it could see me I ducked back behind the wall of the DMV room. This was a bad idea. Chuck might have been right. And now I could hear the footsteps from the first Feral, the one I'd distracted, picking back up and headed my direction. I had to act fast, and I had to take a risk. A gunshot would let every other Feral in the building know I was here, but I didn't have any other choice.

I left my hiding spot and lifted my rifle toward the Feral in the lobby. It caught sight of my movement, head whipping in my direction. When it saw me its face twisted with rage, and it exposed every one of its rotten, jagged teeth to let out a furious and blood-curdling scream. I got my shot off right as it started to charge me, and as the body collapsed to the floor with a thud I took off toward the stairwell at full speed before the others could make it to the lobby.

I'd meant to exit the building, and I mentally yelled profanity after profanity the whole way up the stairs. But I couldn't leave without either helping the girl or knowing she was dead. My first thought was to hide, and wait to see if any of the Ferals would come up the stairs. So I rushed through the first small door at the top of the stairs, with a sign on it reading 'janitorial'. I was moving so fast I hardly had the door closed behind me when I caught a glimpse of the face in the dark, her face, and having expected the closet to be empty I raised my rifle in panic. She ducked, cowering down in the corner of the closet and covering her head

defensively.

"Jesus," I breathed, willing myself to calm down when I realized it was only her. I lowered my weapon, peering at her hands to see if she had any of her own that I needed to worry about.

When no shots rang out, she glanced up to look at me. I had to squint to see in the black space, but I could tell her face was completely lacking in color, her light skin drained to a pale white with fear. Then a flashlight clicked on, and I was blinded by the beam she shone in my direction.

"Turn it off," I whispered in the lowest voice I could. "They'll see the light."

She did as I said, but didn't say anything once everything went dark again. I began to wonder if she was terrified of me, or if she was plotting some way to kill me and escape. Then she spoke. "Was that you? That gunshot?"

"I saw you come into the building," I answered, doing everything I could to make my voice as friendly as possible. "I thought you might need help."

She exhaled almost optimistically, still crouched on the ground and, I assumed, looking up at me. "One of them followed me up here, but I don't know where it went." That was probably the one I'd shot in the lobby.

She sounded young, younger than my first guess when I'd seen her from up in the tower. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen," she said softly.

So young. She was just a kid. The same age my daughter would be. "Are you by yourself?"

She was quiet for a few moments, and then there was a soft sniffle. "My group got attacked a few days ago. I'm the only one left."

It pained me to hear she was in such sad shape, but I was glad I hadn't fled the building before finding her. "I'm Dugan."

fled the building before finding her." I'm Dugan."

"Kara."

"Do you want my help getting out of here, Kara?" I asked, and heard her murmur 'yes' through another reserved whimper. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

In the dark I could see her stand, and her silhouette wiped the tears from her eyes. "Sort of."

"Give me your hand," I instructed gently, and when she held out her hand I put the grip of the revolver in it. "Just aim and pull the trigger. You've only got six bullets in there, use them sparingly."

"Okay."

"You saw the control tower right next to this building?" Again she answered the affirmative. "When we get out of here, run to that tower with or without me, there's another guy waiting at the top."

I barely saw her nod, and then I pushed open the closet door. I couldn't see any Ferals roaming the upstairs halls, luckily none of them followed me up. Once out of the janitorial closet I lead the way silently down the stairs, step by cautious step. When we reached a low enough point that I could see into the lobby, it was about as bad as I could have expected. There were five Ferals total in the area, feeding voraciously on the one I'd shot on my way up the stairs.

I felt around my pockets, but all my supplies were in my backpack in the tower. "Can I have your flashlight?" I whispered to Kara, so quiet it was barely audible even to me.

She understood though, and unclipped it from the pocket of her jeans. I took another step forward with the flashlight in hand, taking a deep breath to steady my aim. Then I swung once. Twice. On three I tossed the flashlight across the lobby and through the open door to the DMV room. It rattled loudly when it hit the floor, and every Feral shot up, tearing through the open door before the tool even stopped rolling.

"Go!" I pushed Kara ahead of me, rushing her down the final stairs and toward the exit of the building.

Three of the Ferals had launched themselves at the flashlight, and were now clawing and biting at each other for it. The other two had stopped in the doorway, and when I reached the bottom of the stairs the butt of my gun clipped the metal railing, causing it to make a loud ding. The two Ferals turned, and at sight of us one of them roared savagely.

"Run!" I shouted at Kara, who immediately started sprinting for the door.

I took off after her, getting off my first shot before the Ferals took a step. The one I hit collapsed to the floor, and the other had thrown itself into the air with such speed that it was going to intercept me at the door. I turned on my heels as I reached the exit, and at the same time I threw my back against the closing door I brought the butt of my gun back, sending it as hard as I could at the Feral's head. I managed to catch it in the chin, but it still hit me at full force, sending us both tumbling to the ground outside the building.

The loathsome creature landed on top of me, and in its blind rage I'm not even sure it felt the pain of my blow. It let out another roar, pressing down on me and snapping its jaws, trying to catch any part of me it could in its teeth. I had the length of my gun against its neck, using every bit of strength in my body to keep it away from me. Then a gunshot sounded, and the creature stopped struggling against me, collapsing as deadweight against my chest.

I was tired from fighting it, and eternally grateful when Kara rushed back, helping to push the lifeless Feral off of me. I scrambled up just as another Feral came crashing through the glass of the front door, and Kara got off another shot before I even raised my rifle. I didn't wait to see when the remaining two would burst through, and Kara and I both took off toward the tower in a flash. As we reached the entrance to a tower, I heard one come out of the building, and knowing it would follow us up I turned, getting off the final deadly shot before we both disappeared into the tower stairwell.

My adrenaline was pumping wildly, and I couldn't help but laugh, even if it

My adrenaline was pumping wildly, and I couldn't help but laugh, even if it was mildly inappropriate. "You 'sort of' know how to use a gun!" I teased as we sprinted up the stairs.

She grinned at me proudly, gripping the railing in both hands and using it to propel herself forward. "It was your lucky day I guess."

When we burst through the door at the top of the tower Chuck turned from the window, a terrified look in his eyes. "I heard the shots! Did they follow you in here?"

I stopped near the entrance, hands on my knees and panting for air now that I could finally take the time for a breath. "No," I wheezed. "They didn't follow us."

He sighed with relief, glancing between Kara and I. "My gun?"

I motioned for the revolver in Kara's hands. "That's his."

She handed it over without protest, and then leaned back against a panel tiredly, still regaining her own breath. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't mention it," I told her, playing it off with a wave of my hand. I still couldn't breathe. Maybe I was getting too old for this too.

"What were you doing in there?" Chuck asked her, opening the cylinder to count his bullets.

"I was looking for supplies," Kara said, glancing down sadly. "I lost everything when my group got attacked."

I strode over to where I'd left my backpack, and gulped down some of the water from Chuck's gallon. "Where are you headed now?"

Kara shrugged. "A few months ago we met a traveler. He said he heard rumors of a camp full of people somewhere in New York, in the woods. I was going to see if I could find it, but I can't even protect myself."

A camp full of people? In New York? New York was east, the direction I was planning on heading anyway. It sounded like the kind of place I

might like to be, if it was real – a place relatively safe, and possibly with better tasting food than canned green beans. So what if it was just a rumor? It would give me something to hope for, and I definitely couldn't let Kara, a fifteen-year-old girl without a single weapon, try and get there on her own.

"I'll take you there," I said without hesitation. Then, worried I might sound a little too eager, added, "I was heading east anyway." When Kara nodded, I couldn't keep from letting on the first real grin I'd had in a long time.

For now, she was giving me something to live for.

Can't Go Home Again

The House That Built Me by Miranda Lambert

Can't Go Home Again

Genevieve

The sounds of a waking camp filtered through the canvas walls of my tent, and I stayed under the warm blankets on my cot to enjoy the soothing buzz. The distant pop of a blazing campfire, an echoing shout or laugh carried easily through the crisp and open air, the sturdy thwack of an axe against a tree trunk as men collected wood for the fires. Eventually the lure of the tiny civilization pulled me out of bed, and after tugging on my boots I made my way through the cloth door, stopping for a moment to take a deep breath of the forest morning. I happily went on Cap's assigned missions because it's what we needed to keep this oasis going, but there was nothing I loved more than being back at camp. Back at home.

The chill of daybreak caused a slight shiver to go up my spine, but I cherished the feeling rather than going back in the tent for my sweater. It reminded me I was alive, something I was pleased to be constantly aware of. I stood outside the entrance of my tent for another few moments, debating what my first course of action for the morning would be. Breakfast instantly came to mind, and with my stomach not letting me focus on much else at the thought, I went back inside to grab my eating utensils. With those in hand I walked the few paces toward McMahan's tent to see if he was up yet or not.

"Knock, knock," I said, pushing aside the flapped opening and chuckling at the sight. He was sprawled out on his cot, nearly too big for the thing, with three of his four limbs hanging over the edges. He had his mouth open too, snoring softly with each inhaled breath. "Blake, rise and shine."

He brought one hand to his face to rub his eyes with his fingers, and then ran it through his hair as he sat up. He stayed with his elbows on his

knees, head down tiredly for a few seconds before looking up at me through half-closed eyes. "Why?" he whined, falling back into his blankets.

"I'll eat without you," I threatened through a laugh, knowing if I didn't get him to go eat with me he'd complain about it later. Still he just lay there, unwilling to wake. "Get your ass up," I teased, pulling back the flap to let in a flow of sunlight. "That's an order."

A smile cracked his haggard face, and he sat up once more. "Pulling rank on me?"

"Yeah," I said, dropping the door-fold. "Put some clothes on, I'm starving." He looked over at me and gave a jaunty glare, so I added with a toothy grin, "Please."

After he made sure I could see him roll his eyes, he got off his cot and pulled his camouflaged military pants on over his boxers. Then he threw on his faded black t-shirt, grabbed his dishes, and followed me out. We strolled through the camp, smiling and waving at the people we passed along the way. I knew Blake well enough to let him get some coffee before I tried having too much of a conversation with him.

"Genevieve!" a little voice sounded behind us, and I turned just in time to catch the seven-year-old girl who jumped into my arms.

I picked her up, and after waving to her attentive mother to signal that I'd watch her, we continued toward the food. "Good morning, Shirley," I greeted the child, chuckling at her enthusiasm. When I called her Shirley she tilted her head down to give me a scolding glare. Her real name was Madison, but with her big blue eyes and curly blonde hair, I could never resist teasing her. "Oh, are you Madison?" I asked playfully.

"Yes," she answered, purposefully sounding exasperated. Then her eyes lit up, and she pointed to her leg. "Look what I got!"

I leaned over to glance down at her knee, and spotted one of the Mickey Mouse bandages I'd brought back from our last run. "Very cool," I said happily. "What happened?" We reached the serving area for breakfast,

so while she answered I set her down and handed my bowl to Aminah, the woman who was dishing out the meal.

"I fell because Tyler was chasing me again," she said, taking my hand and swinging it back and forth.

I took my full bowl back and moved down the line. "Tyler was chasing you?" I asked, pretending to be shocked. Then, because she still had my hand, I gave her my cup of coffee to carry for me. "I think he likes you."

"Ew! Boys have cooties!" Madison shrieked, causing both Blake and I to snort with laughter.

I patted her on the head while we all sat at one of the tables around the eating area. "Good girl." I watched Blake for a few moments, and the second he took his first sip of coffee I asked, "What are you going to do today?" He shrugged, taking a bite of the flat biscuits we were served this morning, but before he could answer two other men sat down beside us.

"Morning, ma'am," said Garcia, giving a casual salute.

"Genevieve." Kellan's lips turned up in his usual coy smile as he greeted me, and I tried not to roll my eyes.

I gave them both a friendly nod hello, and then looked back at Blake so he could answer my question. "I was thinking of helping the guys do maintenance on the vehicles," he informed me. "What about you?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. Tasks weren't necessarily assigned around camp, but it was generally accepted that everyone did some form of work most days. Being accustomed to adrenaline filled missions, it was tough for me to settle into a comparatively idle task during the day. I got too restless working in the garden – I called it that because it was too small for me to consider it a farm – and nobody would catch me dead doing some other house chore like preparing the meals.

"I'm going on an herb run later," Kellan cut in. "I set up some traps yesterday too, if you'd like to join me."

I glanced over at him, knowing the motive behind his invitation, and then I looked at the seven-year-old beside me. "What do boys have, Madison?"

"Cooties!" she answered enthusiastically.

I gave Kellan a smug smile, and even though Madison's answer had been enough of a response for me, I added, "Have fun picking daisies though."

Blake snorted amusedly, and then nudged Kellan with his elbow as he said mockingly, "Make sure you bring me one of those little flower bracelets."

"Oh, I want a necklace!" Madison exclaimed, propping her head up in her hands to blink innocently at Kellan, and causing all of us to burst into laughter.

After we finished eating I returned Madison to her mother, and Blake and I parted ways to get things done. Determined to take a bath, I grabbed some things from my tent and hurried to the river at the edge of camp. Bathing was definitely my favorite thing about getting back from a mission, and it wasn't just the prospect of being clean that was attractive to me. A lot of the people around camp carried buckets of water back to their sites so they could heat it up before washing themselves. But there was something soothing and therapeutic about floating in the cold water of the river, about the sound of it lapping the muddy banks, about the way the canopy of trees overhead let in scattered rays of light. Before the outbreak, I'd never been much of an outdoorsy girl, but this stronghold of a forest had grown on me.

At the shore of the creek I unlaced my boots, then proceeded to carefully set my jeans, sweater, and towel on top of them so they wouldn't get dirty. Before going in I re-belted my hunting knife to my bare thigh, because even though the area was pretty safe, I'd seen the occasional bear wander by, and I felt more secure with it readily available. With my soap, washcloth, and toothbrush in hand, I ran full speed into the soft current so the chilled fluid wouldn't leave me time for changing my mind, and dove under when it was deep enough. Once under the cover of the water I removed my shirt and undergarments, rubbing my bar of soap

water. I removed my shirt and undergarments, rubbing my bar of soap into each to get them fresh. When those were done I rung them out and hung them over a low-hanging branch to dry.

It was nice being able to wash up, and I scrubbed my body, hair and teeth until I felt like the filth of being in a Feral-infested city was gone downstream. After I was done bathing I set my stuff on the shore and went back in to float on the surface of the water, watching the dancing of the leaves and pine needles overhead. I was able to enjoy the tranquility for nearly half an hour before a voice carried to me from the bank.

"Well, look who it is," Kellan called.

I sunk back into the river, and by the time I looked over at him he was halfway undressed. "Well, well," I said apathetically, dunking my head under the water to let it run over my face. When I came back up he was on his way in, carrying his small netted-bag of toiletries with him. "Are you following me?" I asked, passing him a suspicious glare.

He chuckled, stopping when he got to his waist and shivering. "I didn't know you were here," he told me, his tone sincere. "I figure you'd have come the second we got back from Boston."

"I did," I confirmed, making my way to my clothes to see if they were dried yet. Now that Kellan was here my sense of peace was gone. It was nothing entirely against him, seeing as I was in a communal bathing spot, but I didn't want him getting any ideas.

He jumped under the water, breaking the surface again an arm's length away. "Then there you have it," he said. "It's fate."

"Right," I said sarcastically, and couldn't help but chuckle. At my amusement, that flirty smile creased his lips, and he moved closer like the proximity would be too tempting for me, and I'd finally give in. Instead, I pulled my knife out of its sheath and set the tip flat against his chest. Because no matter how good looking he was, it wasn't enough.

"Is that a knife in your hand," he started, an entertained grin on his face even though he took the hint and backed up a couple steps, "Or are you just happy to see me?"

just happy to see me?

"It's a knife," I said, indifferently despite the fact that I wanted to laugh at his sheepish expression.

Then I grabbed my clothes off the branch, and when I started toward the riverbank I put the knife back. I knew Kellan was staring after me as I reached my stuff, so before turning around and allowing him to see my front, I glanced over my shoulder, "You mind?"

He turned his back to me without protest, and I hurriedly dried myself and pulled my clothes back on before he could swing around again. I was in the process of ringing out my hair when he did, and he made an exaggerated pouting face at me, disappointed at my constant denial.

"I know you find me attractive," he sang teasingly, taking some water into his mouth and spitting it towards me playfully.

I flipped my hair over and buffed at it with my towel, singing back, "I know you're way over confident."

"Hard to get," he said through a laugh. "I've played this game before."

I rolled my eyes as I picked up my belongings and started back toward the camp. "It's not going to happen, Kellan," I called without looking back at him.

"Oh, hey! Cap was looking for you!" he yelled after me, and I waved a hand to let him know I'd heard.

After I dropped my stuff off, I strolled through the camp toward the large hoop tent that was designated for meetings. Cap was in there with Doctor April, and I stood at the entrance, waiting patiently for them to spot me.

"Yes, but I'm a physician, Ben, not a neurophysiologist," April was saying, and she adjusted the glasses in front of her dark blue eyes. "I don't know what I'm doing, and I can't find a cure if I don't learn." She was holding one of the books we'd brought back from our last mission, and she dropped it on the table in front of Cap as if to emphasize her point.

"I can't let you go with the soldiers," Captain Greely said, scratching his rugged gray beard and nonchalantly looking up at her from his seat.

"I think you can," April countered, and crossed her arms over her chest defiantly.

"You're fifty-eight years old," Cap told her in exasperation, "Could you keep up with them if they were being chased?"

April let out a whiny breath to let him know she found that offensive. "I survived just fine before coming here."

I was holding back laughter at this point – Cap and April were always arguing like an old married couple, even though they both insisted there was no romantic interest between them. Just so I wouldn't feel like I was eavesdropping, I cleared my throat at them. Cap waved me in, and after giving me a greeting smile, April continued the argument as though I weren't even there.

"You're so set on finding this cure, but I don't possess the skills or the knowledge to do it. If you won't let me go with them, then you need to send out more troops to find someone who does." April fell into the chair behind her, running her hands stressfully through her shoulder-length, graying brown hair.

Cap took off his dark green baseball cap and threw it onto the table, his brown eyes narrowing in annoyance. "Protecting this camp is priority, you know that. And I can't force my men to go on solitary searches for another doctor who may not even be out there."

"Genevieve," April started, turning toward me as if I could help her. "What do you think?"

I took in a thoughtful breath, pretending for her sake like I was considering it, even though I already knew where I stood. Captain Greely wasn't the only one who wanted to find a cure for the infection, but our main concern was making sure we had the supplies and manpower to keep everyone at this camp safe. There was one soldier who'd volunteered to scour the country for someone who might be able to

develop a cure. He'd been gone for over a year, and checked in every day at noon via the ham radio he'd been sent with, but so far, he hadn't had luck.

"I agree with Cap," I told her eventually. During missions I complained about him not letting us take April along, but that was always just my frustration talking. Deep down I knew it wasn't the best decision. "You're too valuable, we need you here."

She gave a dejected sigh, stood, and with shoulders slumped started toward the door. "I'll try to think of another solution."

"Women," Cap complained when she was out of earshot. He knew me so well that he could tell by the look on my face I was going to make a comment about them being in love, so he scowled at me before I could. "Don't."

I chuckled and threw my hands up in defeat. "I heard you needed me?"

"Yeah," he started, leaning forward in his seat interestedly. "Finding any gasoline that isn't rotten is getting damn near impossible. You guys are having to go farther and farther to just *maybe* get some." I nodded knowingly. I *hated* gas errands. "Those vehicles will run on pretty much anything, but we need something better if we're going to keep using generators."

"A new power source?" I asked, taking a seat across from him and kicking my feet up on the table.

"Get your feet down," he said before answering, shooing my boots away. "We've got a guy that used to be some kind of electrical engineer, says if we get him the right stuff, he could set up some workable solar panels that convert power for the generators."

"You want First Platoon to go?" I predicted. We'd only been at this forest camp for almost a year and a half, and before that the only thing we used gasoline for were the trucks. Since we'd found somewhere permanent we'd set up areas that relied on power, like the medical cabin.

He nodded and put his hat back on. "I know you guys just got back, but it should be an easy run."

"It's fine," I told him. "We'll leave first thing tomorrow. Where we going?"

He looked somewhat hesitant as he pulled out a map and unfolded it across the table. "Rochester."

I just stared at him, trying to compose the flood of emotion before speaking again. Rochester, New York. The city I was born and raised in, the city I'd met Cap in, and the city I'd lost my family in. That's why he was hesitant, because he knew I wouldn't be fond of going back there. I was sure Rochester wasn't the only place that was a decent drive from our camp in the Catskills and that would have solar panels, but I was also sure that Cap sent a squad back there every six months, and the only reason he'd refrained from sending us until now was because of me.

"Rochester," I repeated, trying not to let my voice betray my feelings. "What's there aside from solar panels?" I already knew the answer, but if he said it like he was asking me a favor then I'd be less reluctant to go. For him I'd do anything.

"Hopefully my wife," he admittedly sadly, and glanced down as though he knew it was foolish to keep hoping after all these years. "I thought you could stop by our old house. See if she's showed up at all, maybe left a note or something."

I nodded and glanced toward the map, noticing that the spot had already been boxed in blue ink, the house number written off to the side. I wouldn't need the map to find it though, I'd lived right next door. "And where are we getting the solar panels from?"

"There used to be a company on the other side of the river." He pointed to a spot on the map, and then circled the location of the building. "Solcorp. The shiny place with all the solar panels leaned up on the roof."

"Oh, yeah. You could spot the thing from clear across town on our side of the river," I chuckled in remembrance.

He nodded. "Getting the panels back to the vehicles will probably be the biggest challenge."

"We'll manage," I said coolly, waving it off. "I'll strap some onto Blake's back. That goon could probably carry a couple."

Cap laughed in amusement, falling silent shortly after to watch me thoughtfully. "Are you sure you're okay with going?" he asked when I folded up the map to take it with me. "I can send Second, or even Home Squad." When my platoon was back at camp, Second usually went on easy supply or recovery runs nearby, but they weren't as accustomed to big city missions as we were, and solar panels seemed delicate. Home Squad, the Captain's personal group, acted as a sort of police for our little settlement, and even though everyone here was pretty peaceful, their duties were too important to send them away.

"I'll go," I assured him decidedly. I hadn't been back to Rochester since we left a year after the outbreak. Surely it had been long enough now that I could handle it. "Anything else you need?"

As he answered he pulled a few pieces of paper out of his pocket and handed them to me. It was a list of the things we needed, along with descriptions and a couple hand-drawn pictures. "There's a cabin detail today. You were probably looking for something to do," he said studiously, knowing how I was about finding work.

When we first set up our camp we'd been so preoccupied with finding sustainable food sources that we were wildly unprepared for winter. Lean-to shelters just didn't cut it for those who didn't have tents. We'd only lost three people to the cold, but that was three too many, and so ever since we'd been stocking up on wood and building cabins, first for the families with children and the elderly, and then for everyone else. Even with practically three hundred inhabitants at the settlement it was slow going. Most of them were already set in their daily routines and tasks, and pulling too many from those tasks would put us behind in some other important operation like food.

"Perfect," I smiled gratefully at Cap's suggestion. "Thanks."

My first stop after leaving Cap was the motor pool – a nearby field where we parked all the vehicles – to find McMahan. After informing him that we'd be leaving the next day, I sent him to tell Powers, so they could pass the word down to the rest of my soldiers. Then I went to find the cabin detail.

###

I was sitting in the command seat of our Stryker, carefully watching the screen in front of me. We were rolling down the shoulder of a freeway in the vehicle, on our way to Rochester, and with the next sign we passed I checked the map. Then I used the Stryker's computer to adjust the machine gun and camera mounted on the outside, checking to make sure the three other vehicles were still behind us. We always took three Strykers, that way we could sit comfortably and still be able to bring extra fuel. And this time we'd brought one of the Humvees to load the solar panels in. Even though these military vehicles didn't get the best miles per gallon, we dealt with it because there was no way Ferals could get inside if we fell under attack. We were sitting in the safety of a heavily armored cabin, with a computer-controlled machine gun at our disposal.

Once I'd checked our location on the map, I clicked on the microphone to the headset I was wearing so I could talk to the drivers of the three vehicles. "All units," I said into the headset. "Estimated fifteen minutes until arrival. Over."

"Roger," I heard repeated four times.

Before this I'd been engaging in conversation with the rest of the guys in the cabin, but now that we were nearing our destination and the sun had gone down I switched the camera to thermal imaging, scanning our surroundings for Ferals. We always parked on the outskirts of cities and walked in. While the vehicles could handle an attack with ease, their diesel engines were loud, and we couldn't exit the cabin to get our missions done if we got swarmed.

Eventually we reached the edge of the city. "All units," I spoke again. "Cease travel and hold for instruction."

I felt the Stryker come to a stop, and after making sure the others had as well, I did a complete search of the area for heat signatures. I'd only swiveled the camera to straight ahead when I caught some red. There were four different bodies, moving around in that Feral-specific way, and far enough ahead that they hadn't heard us pull up. It was for times like these that the second vehicle didn't have an automated machine gun. Bravo Squad's leader was posted up in the gunner seat, silenced sniper rifle complete with a thermal scope at the ready.

"Alpha to Bravo command," I said, keeping an eye on the Ferals. "Powers come in. Over."

"Awaiting orders ma'am," his voice came back through the speakers. "Over."

"I got four Ferals at one o'clock, approximately five hundred meters. That's four targets at one o'clock. Five hundred meters. Relay when you have visual. Over."

"Roger that," Powers responded, and I waited patiently until I heard his voice again. "Alpha command, I have visual. Requesting permission to engage. Over."

"Affirmative," I confirmed, still watching the screen intently. I could even feel a couple of my soldiers looking over my shoulder at it. "Commence fire."

"Commencing fire," he said, and everything went silent for a minute. I could tell even before I heard his voice again that he'd killed the first Feral, because one of the red figures dropped, and I heard the sound of the gun in my headset. "Tango one, eliminated." One of the first things I'd learned when I started doing all this soldier stuff was that silenced weapons were still pretty loud, and I have to admit I was a little shocked by it. The only reason we even used them at all was because in the quiet world we lived in they worked enough that the sound didn't carry to *every* Feral in the city, and it made the location of the sound harder to pinpoint. "That's tango two," Powers said as another figure on the screen collapsed.

One of the two remaining Ferals bent to investigate the lifeless figures. The other jumped onto the top of a car, and even though I couldn't hear it, it reared up like it was letting out a roar, and then slammed its fists onto the roof. Powers didn't tell me when he fired on the next Feral, because it wasn't necessary and he probably knew I was watching, but moments later the one on the ground dropped dead. With the next shot, the creature on top of the car fell off and scrambled up, and I heard Powers mumble 'shit'. The Feral knew the general direction of where the gunshots were coming from, because it started sprinting toward the vehicles with such a furious howl I could hear it echoing in Powers' mic. He fired again and must have missed the kill, as I could see the Feral stumble, continuing toward us when it picked itself back up. I was starting to grow nervous that the humanly beast might live long enough and in such volume that it would attract others. Fortunately, Powers' next shot accomplished its goal.

"All targets annihilated," his voice rang through my headset. "Over."

"Roger that. All units, standby." I swiveled my camera around for a good five minutes, just to make sure that no other Ferals had heard the commotion and were coming our way. When I was satisfied I gave the okay. "Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta, cleared for exit."

I got out of the vehicle with the rest of my guys, and we started our usual silent and cautious walk into the city. It was slow going for a bit since the sun hadn't gone down long ago. While most of the Ferals had already turned in, there was the occasional one that hadn't settled yet still staggering around. We ducked behind vehicles and building corners every time there was even a slight noise, avoiding being seen so this mission would be as easy as possible. The Captain's house was going to be the first stop, and fortunately it was on our way to the Solcorp building on the opposite side of the river so we didn't have to double back.

Our destination was toward the center of the city, but after traveling for a while it got easier to pick up our pace, and we were entering my old neighborhood before I knew it. Even in the dark, under the pale glow of the moon and the blue tint of our flashlights, and even after so many years, everything about this place was familiar. The old bus stop I used to

meet my friends at so we could ride together to school, the little park at the corner of our street where I played as a kid, and then the houses themselves. Cap's was right next door to mine, and I led my soldiers up the walkway and to the front door.

Cap had told me where to find a spare key, and I lifted the small flowerpot just outside the door, underneath which was that shiny piece of metal. Once I had the key in my hand, I clicked my flashlight off and on three times in a row, signaling to my soldiers to get into formation. They'd go inside in groups of four, each group clearing a room of the house as quickly and quietly as possible. It was always best when we never found Ferals in a home, but it was better to form up every time so we were ready when we went into a place that did. There were only a few soldiers with silenced weapons, and they were the ones responsible for firing if we found any inside. I'd go in last, that way I could secure the door behind us.

When my soldiers were all ready, I waved the first group up to the door. The one in front raised his pistol, prepared to shoot if any Ferals came running out at us, and I took it as my cue to stick the key into the lock. I turned it, and when the door was freed I pushed it slowly open. Each and every one of us was holding our breath, waiting for some deafening scream or snarl. When the door swung completely open and none came, I waved the first group through, then the second, and so on until all my soldiers were in Cap's house.

My job was to go inside and close the door behind us so that nobody, Ferals or otherwise, could surprise us from behind. But just as I was about to follow them in, I glanced sideways at my own house. My soldiers had already been briefed on what they were looking for at Cap's, and so far I hadn't heard any gunshots from inside. For some reason, I had the sudden and irresistible desire to go home. To see what it was like after all these years. Before I could convince myself it was entirely irrational, I'd closed the door on my soldiers and started across Cap's lawn. I stood at the front steps of my own old home, staring at the wooden porch rails and the red window trim.

The front door was hanging half open, seemingly broken from its frame

by force, probably raided by scavengers. I knew going in there was one of the worst ideas I'd ever had, but something about it had put me in a trance. The house had a ghostly hold over me, and I was going in there whether I wanted to or not. I was so hypnotized by the familiarity of the place that I hardly had the mind to pull my knife out of its sheath. Gripping it in my hand I crept up the steps, using my hand with the flashlight in it to push the door all the way open.

The blue tint of my light cast an eerie glow on the hardwood floor, and my boots crunched over shattered glass as I made my way in. There was always a large vase inside the door, which had been broken into a million pieces and scattered all along the entranceway. With my eyes I followed the stairs on my immediate left, up to the second floor where the balcony overlooked the living room in front of me. That was where the allure was coming from, my old bedroom, the place I'd always felt the most comfortable, but I was going to save that for last.

I continued forward, turning right when I reached the living room to head into the connected kitchen. Still holding the knife in my hand, I delicately dragged my fingertips along the granite countertop. Traced the outline of the toaster I used to make waffles with every morning. Ran them over the dusty cookbook under the kitchen window, the one my dad never touched because he couldn't cook but kept because it used to be my mother's. Pressed my forehead against the Giants' flag pinned to the wall for good luck, even though there hadn't been a football game in years.

The refrigerator door was wide open, as were a few of the cupboards, and there were a couple empty food boxes and containers tossed on the floor. The living room was as equally torn apart. The television had been knocked off the stand and lay broken on the floor. The couch was bumped around and crooked compared to how we'd always had it. Even the small bookshelf had fallen, and books littered the space in front of the couch. It was obvious that someone had been here, had maybe searched the place for supplies, and I didn't like it. Didn't like that someone had been in my house and left it such a mess.

I knew I didn't have time to clean the place up, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway, but I righted the bookshelf and pushed the couch back to where it should be. Then I started for the stairs. The second room at

to where it should be. Then I started for the stairs. The second room at the top was mine, and after giving a stealthy peek inside to make sure it was clear, I stepped in. My bed was still made, laundry basket in the corner half empty while the other dirty clothes were strewn about the floor. Above the desk in the room hung a corkboard, where I pinned photographs and other paper keepsakes, like the tickets to a concert I'd gone to with a friend in high school.

As I looked over the old pictures, my eyes fell on one of my family. It had always been my favorite because it was from before my mother died, so she was in it. I was just a little kid back then. Right next to the photo I'd tacked an old note from her. It was short, 'You are smart and beautiful. Love you. Mom,' slipped into my lunch bag so I'd see it during the day at elementary school. She was always doing nice things like that for my little brother and I. Pulling the picture and the note off the corkboard, I put them in my pocket while I walked backward toward the bed.

Sitting down didn't have the effect I thought it would. I thought it would be comforting. Thought maybe I'd get flashbacks from the old days, lying around and giggling with friends or sneaking a boyfriend out the window. But it seemed that once I sat, glancing around the empty room at all the things that were a part of someone I used to be, the allure started to fade. The room grew stifling. I didn't belong here anymore. It were as though *I* was the intruder.

I pushed off the bed and went back out into the hallway. Before going downstairs I took a few steps farther down to a waist-high ledge above the towel cabinets, where there were more picture frames set on top of it. I gripped my flashlight between my teeth and set my knife down on the small counter so that I could pick up a frame and look at it more closely. There was a layer of dust on the glass, which I wiped off against my hip. I couldn't help but smile at the photo of my dad and brother messing around in the public pool down the road. I'd lost them both to Ferals. I put my fingertips to my lips and pressed them against the picture, and then I set the frame back down.

That's when I saw it. Out of the corner of my eye. A silhouette standing in the doorway on my right. I almost thought it was an uninfected, the way it

was just poised there, staring at me. But it had that disease ridden, raspy breathing, and now that I noticed the thing I could smell it. This whole place reeked of Ferals. I'd just been too preoccupied and in too much of an emotional daze to notice it. Every muscle in my body froze. I couldn't even breathe. The only reason I could see why the thing hadn't lunged at me yet was because I was so still. But I knew it wouldn't wait forever. I started reaching forward for the knife I'd set down, so slow and subtly that *I* couldn't even be sure I was moving. My heart was pounding wildly now, and I wouldn't doubt the Feral could hear it. It wasn't until I got so terrified my hand started shaking that the fiend seemed to really notice me.

Then it let out a deafening scream and rushed toward me with its arms extended, ready to grab me and so swift it covered the distance between us in two bloodthirsty strides. I'd grabbed my knife the second it howled, and as it reached me I thrust my hand out, skillfully stabbing it in the chest. It let out a yowl of pain, snapping its jaws at me while it continued forward, so hungry it didn't seem to care it was further impaling itself on my weapon. I risked setting a hand on its shoulder so I could pull my knife out and stab at it again, and this time it dropped. I used my boot to kick the creature off my blade, and as I did two more figures appeared in the doorway. I didn't have time to think, only to react, and when the first one lunged at me I threw myself over the balcony, knowing the couch was just below to break my fall.

My back barely landed on the cushions with the edges of my rifle digging into me, but I let out a pained cry as my left calf bruised against the hard back of the couch. Before I could even recover a Feral came crashing down, missing the couch and landing with a hard thud on the floor behind it. I didn't wait for it to get up. I ignored the pain and propelled myself over the back of the couch, leading with my knife and plunging it into the first bit of Feral I could. I got it in the ribs, and it reacted with such strength it threw me backwards. It rolled in agony, clutching at the knife stuck in its midsection, and while it was distracted I used the opportunity to pull my rifle around. I got the shot off, and the second I rolled onto my stomach to push myself up, the second Feral from upstairs leapt down and landed on my back.

I reared up before the thing had a chance to dig its teeth into me, and I turned onto my back as it scrambled to its feet. I stuck my boots in the air when it charged, catching it in the stomach and using all my strength to catapult it away from me. I reached my arm up, keeping an eye on the Feral while I blindly felt around for my knife. I gripped the handle and pulled it out of the dead creature just as the Feral threw itself at me again, and in a bit of luck it landed right on the tip of my blade. I grunted as I tried to push the deadweight off of me, but once it had been discarded beside me I lay there for a moment, instinct telling me it wasn't yet safe to move. I'm glad I didn't, because a moment later I heard more wheezing, followed by the slapping of feet coming in from the backyard. I couldn't tell exactly how many there were, and I wasn't going to risk moving and being seen to look up and count, but it sounded like three different pairs of footsteps on the hardwood floor.

Fuck! How could I be so stupid? I went frigid, trying my best to control my panicked breathing so the Ferals wouldn't notice me, and I played dead. Then one of the creatures knelt down to investigate the bodies. Its croaky breaths were coming from above my head, and every couple seconds I could hear it inhale sharply, sniffing for a more suitable meal than its dead and dirty companion. Through squinting eyes I could see it crawl over to me, and then its face hovered directly above mine. I could feel its warm breath on my skin, and the rotten smell emanating from every inch of it was so horrid I wanted to gag. It lowered its head, sniffing me so thoroughly it's nose brushed against my cheek. I was going to be this Feral's meal. I just knew it. And as if to convince me I could no longer play dead, I swear I saw the thing lick its hungry lips as it widened its jaw, preparing to take a chunk out of my flesh.

Without wasting another second I pitched my arm up as hard as I could, driving my knife straight through the creature's skull. Before the beast even collapsed the other two roared, coming at me with such fury I knew I was finally finished. Then I heard two loud bangs, and thank God for Blake McMahan, because the Ferals dropped to the ground. Even though it was over, I stayed on the floor to recover from the frenzied adrenaline rush, finally breathing heavily to get the oxygen I so desperately needed.

"Are you hurt?" Blake asked frantically, running toward me, still pointing

his pistol around and searching for any more Ferals. "Genevieve, are you hurt?" I shook my head, too terrifyingly weak to even speak just yet. "Come on, we can't stay here," he said hurriedly, not waiting for me to get up as he lifted me off the ground.

Knowing he was right, and that if there were any other Ferals in the area they would've heard the gunshots and been on their way, I followed him out of the house. We sprinted across the lawn and back into Cap's home, where he flung the door closed behind us and flicked the deadbolt into place. I could see all my soldiers looking at us, worried and curious, but Blake led me into a bathroom where he shut us in.

"Are you crazy?" he whispered, angry but quiet enough that my soldiers wouldn't hear his panicked barrage of remarks. "You almost got yourself killed. What the hell were you doing over there? If I didn't go looking for you when I did-" He huffed, practically stomping his feet like he was about to throw a tantrum and taking deep breaths to calm himself. "What were you thinking?"

I felt terrible for scaring him so badly. We'd all lost enough without me going and doing stupid shit like that, and I know he'd be devastated if something ever happened to me. Unable to answer, feeling an overwhelming sense of shame and gratitude, I pulled the picture out of my pocket and handed it to him. He stared at it in confusion, and it took him a minute to recognize the young girl in the photo as me. Then he glanced up, all anger on his face melting away.

"Did you used to live there?" he asked sympathetically.

"Since I was born," I told him, and took the picture when he handed it back to me. I sighed, blinking away a few tears, trying to keep myself composed even though I was massively embarrassed I'd been so moronic. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"I mean, Jesus, pipsqueak. You scared the shit out of me." Blake chuckled a little and pulled me into a hug. When he released me a few seconds later he slapped me roughly on the arm. "You took out three on your own though. I'm actually impressed."

"Four," I corrected with a laugh, glad he wasn't going to stay upset with me. "There was one upstairs too."

"You little badass," he grinned proudly, adding a glare. "But seriously, next time you want to do some Feral wrestling, don't go by yourself."

"Promise," I agreed, and when I followed him out of the bathroom I addressed my soldiers. "Everyone keep your lights off. We need to sit tight for a while."

We waited in Cap's old house for three hours, watching carefully out the windows for any Ferals. Some wandered through the neighborhood, attracted by the noise. By the time we left I was frustrated at myself for having caused such a commotion and wasted half of our night. Fortunately, my guys didn't seem to mind being able to relax and nap in the comfort of a house for a while. Eventually, when it had been almost forty-five minutes since any Ferals strode by, we started for Solcorp. I'd had my fill of action for the night, and was thankful that the walk there was entirely Feral-free, as was the trek up the building's stairs and to the roof. The three hours we'd lost made it impossible to keep this a one-night trip, so once on the roof we camped out, preparing to take the solar panels down the next day.

Tyger! Tyger!

The Tyger (poem) by William Blake

Tyger! Tyger!

Echo

Waking with a yawn, I stretched my arms and legs out the ends of my unzipped sleeping bag, pulling them back in when the cold caused me to shiver. Usually I didn't wake up until afternoon, since we were all practically nocturnal now, but the horizon was a pale orange, and the crisp air still had the chill of dawn. Then I heard the crunch of gravel coming from somewhere outside my tent, a soft footstep on my roof. Every once in a while the group would get too hungry to wait for breakfast, and usually Halsten came to get me before someone else could eat my portion. There was another quiet step. Sometimes he thought it was fun to scare me out of sleep.

I pushed the covers off of me and stood, stumbling tiredly out of my tent as I let Halsten know I heard him. "If you try to scare me again, I swear to G–"

I stopped in my tracks, and before I could get out another syllable or try to run a Biter lunged at me. It hit me so hard it knocked both of us down, and I skidded across the rocky surface a few feet with the creature on top of me. I threw my hands against its shoulders, pushing it back while it struggled against me furiously, snapping its teeth, spittle dripping at the mouthwatering sight of my flesh. It was so unexpected that in my waking state I panicked, focusing only on trying to keep my skin away from its jaws.

Now I was awake, my heart wildly pumping adrenaline through my veins. My knife and gun were still in the tent, and I didn't even have shoes on yet. All I had to defend myself were my fists. I was lucky this thing was only a female, and was small enough that I could keep it off of me. I took one hand from the Biter's shoulders just long enough to throw my fist into

its ribs. I hit the thing as hard as I could, but other than letting out an angry snarl, it didn't seem to notice, too intent on trying to eat me. I hit it again, but the more I pissed it off the closer its face seemed to get to mine.

It was clawing at me savagely, and with the next swipe of its hand its nails made a gash against the upper part of my chest, exposed by the low cut of my tank top. I let out a pained yelp, and this time grabbed the Biter by the neck. At the same time I used all the strength I could get out of one arm I twisted my body, throwing the menacing thing off of me. I scrambled up, diving into my tent while the Biter stood with an aggravated roar. I fumbled around for my gun, and when I grabbed it I flopped onto my back, getting two shots off right as the Biter lunged at me again.

It dropped, sliding to a halt across the surface of the roof. I didn't wait to catch my breath. I always pulled my bridge away at night, so worried the Biter had somehow gotten through the roof access door I darted out, making to run for the door and slam it closed before any more could come up. But the door to the building beneath me was shut tight, just like it always was. That's when I heard laughing coming from the next building over.

Decker was buckled over, clenching his stomach because he was laughing so hard. Quinn was patting his back with a grin on her face while Blaze had his hands over his mouth. They'd grabbed a bridge from another roof and set that thing loose on me. Decker was behind the whole idea, I just knew it.

Gun still in hand, I stormed to the bridge. "Did you put that thing on my roof!" I shouted, raising my weapon, intent on shooting Decker in his goddamn face. He was laughing too hard to answer. "Decker!"

When I got across I cocked the hammer of my gun, but right as I squeezed the trigger Blaze grabbed my arm, knocking my aim off and wrestling the pistol from my hands. Decker's eyes went wide at the sound of the loud bang, like he didn't think I'd really try to shoot him.

"I'll fucking kill you!" I yelled irately, letting go of my pistol and shoving

"I'll fucking kill you!" I yelled fiercely, letting go of my pistol and shoving Blaze away from me.

I threw myself at Decker, catching him in the stomach with my shoulder and taking him to the ground. I punched him twice in the face before he even registered we'd fallen, blood already trickling out of his busted nose. But he was much larger than me, and he threw me off of him easily enough that I rolled a few feet. I was so furious that I wasn't thinking clearly, and when we both shot up I rushed him again.

He was ready for it this time, and he braced himself against the blow. It hurt my shoulder more than it hurt him, as he barely even flinched. Instead he brought his fist back, sending it hard into my stomach. When I buckled over he stepped back, jabbing my cheek his left hand and then throwing another hit with his right that caught me in the mouth. I was in pain, but I was driven by the desire to see him dead. I kicked my leg up, the clutched toes of my bare foot getting him in the groin.

Decker hollered sharply, hands shooting to between his legs. I punched him once in the side of head, but when I threw my fist to do it again he caught my arm, gripping it roughly in his hand. He whipped me to the side and off balance, and then shoved me face first to the ground. I felt his knee dig into my back as the entirety of his weight landed on top of me, and then his fingers tangled in my hair, pushing my face harder into the rough pebbles on the roof.

"I'm still going to shoot you," I threatened bitterly, wincing when he pressed me harder into the ground.

"Then I should kill you right now." He reached his free hand under me and wrapped it around my neck, preparing to strangle me.

I spat out the blood from my busted lip, glaring at him out the corner of my eye. "Do it."

"What the hell's going on up here?" Leon asked, standing at the edge of the bridge to the main rooftop.

I heard my gun clatter to the floor as Blaze dropped it, and him and Quinn both started toward Leon as though they had nothing to do with the

both started toward Leon as though they had nothing to do with the trouble. They passed him and headed back toward the complex building, but Decker was still scowling down at me.

"Decker, let her up," Leon ordered when Decker made no move to get off me.

Decker leaned down by my ear so Leon couldn't hear him, and whispered, "I know what you did for those travelers, and I bet they weren't the only ones. Don't let me catch you alone." Then he defiantly shoved my face down one more time before angrily passing Leon and heading into the building.

I took my time getting up. Now that the adrenaline and anger were wearing off, the pain was getting more substantial. Then I picked up my gun where Blaze had dropped it, shoved it into the back of my pants, and made my way into my tent just to grab my sneakers. I pulled them on, not bothering to tie them, and when I came back out of my tent Leon had been making his way to me. I wanted to stay on my roof by myself until I was completely done fuming, but I took Decker's threat seriously, and I wouldn't put it past him to come back once Leon was gone.

"Fuck off." I shoved past Leon, not wanting to hear what he had to say and severely resenting the disappointed look on his face.

I made my way to the common area, glaring at everyone inside. Decker was sitting at the table with Blaze and Martin, and when he saw me walk in he set his gun on the surface – a subtle warning not to try anything. The only person I acknowledged civilly was Farah, who was opening cans of food and dumping the contents into a pot, which she'd take up to a fire on the roof to heat. I grabbed a bottle of water, a random towel, and a bar of soap from the boxes around the room, and then stomped over to the couch while passing another glare at Decker.

My shoulder was scraped from being tackled by the Biter, my lip was busted, and my right cheek already swelling. I didn't even want to think about the scratch near my collarbone. Scratches from Biters were only fatal sometimes, if their saliva got into it while the wound was fresh, but who knows if they put their hands in their mouths? Not to mention how

dirty they were. I could only imagine the kinds of infections I could get.

I dampened the towel and wiped the blood off my lip. Then did the same with the scrape on the back of my shoulder. When it came to the scratches, I re-dampened the towel and rubbed some soap into it, scouring my wound thoroughly enough that it started bleeding again. It stung so badly there were tears in my eyes, and I refused to turn even slightly so Decker wouldn't see it.

I could feel him staring at me, even though I couldn't see him. He was going to kill me. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but when the perfect opportunity came, he wouldn't hesitate. I just had to make sure I avoided him, never went anywhere by myself. I might have to start sleeping in the barracks, because even if he was there, at least the others were too. My only other option was to kill him first, but that might just hurt me more than it would help.

Once my wounds were as clean as I could get them I continued to sit there, holding the coolness of the damp rag to my swollen cheek. It provided little comfort against the throbbing. What I wouldn't give for some ice. Farah left with the pot of food, and knowing breakfast would be soon the others got up to follow her. I was about to go too, afraid of being alone even for a little while, but luckily Halsten came in as they left, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You should've seen that poker game last night," he started, plopping down next to me on the couch and adjusting the cowboy hat on his head. "Martin wa–" He stopped short when he saw my face, and his jaw dropped. "The hell happened to you?"

I set my mouth in a thin, angry line, nodding toward the door where the others had left. "Decker thought it would be funny to put a Biter on my roof this morning. Didn't go my way when I tried to kick his ass for it."

"Shit, Echo, I'm sorry," he said, tensing his mouth to one side apologetically. "If I was awake I never would've let him do that."

I shrugged to let him know it wasn't his fault. "He's going to kill me, the second he gets a chance." When I said that Halsten's eyes met mine

second he gets a chance." When I said that Halsten's eyes met mine, and he looked worried. "I just don't know what I can do about it. I'd kill him if the others wouldn't gang up on me for it. I know they don't like me much."

"I like you," he told me reassuringly, and I gave him a grateful smile. "Just stay around me. He can't kill both of us without any repercussions."

I nodded in agreement, thankful for the offer. Halsten fit in so well with everyone else that they'd never think about hurting him, except for his fights with Decker. But all the guys fought with each other occasionally. After a minute of silence Halsten reached up, carefully grabbing the wet towel I was holding against my cheek and pulling it away so he could see. I gave it to him and dropped my arm, letting him study the puffy bruise. Once he got a good look at it he put the towel back on, holding it there himself while his eyes scanned the rest of my face. I didn't think much of it, even if it was out of character, until he started leaning forward, lips aiming for mine.

I pulled back, trying not to giggle at the absurdity of the idea. "What are you doing?" Halsten had never shown that kind of interest in me all the years we'd been here, and I'd never looked at any of the guys that way. Part of me wondered if he knew it would be absurd, and he was doing it to cheer me up.

"What? We weren't having a moment?" He seemed a little embarrassed, but he chuckled teasingly. "I thought we were having a moment."

"No," I said as seriously as I could, shaking my head. But I couldn't help it, I snorted with laughter. "Where did that even come from?"

"Sorry, I guess it's been too long since I got any," he shrugged. "Getting kind of desperate."

"Asshole," I laughed, throwing the bloody towel at him. "You're so not my type, but if you were, I might be offended." I stood, ready to go up and see if breakfast was done, and Halsten followed my lead.

"*You* might be offended?" he sneered playfully. "I'm the one who just got

denied."

We headed for the stairwell, me talking at him over my shoulder. "If you're that desperate, I'm sure Quinn would be happy to provide."

He made a deliberate gagging sound. "You should feel good about yourself, because I wouldn't touch Decker's leftovers if I hadn't had sex in twenty years."

"Twenty years, huh?" I asked mockingly. "Is that it?"

"Shut up," he smirked, giving my unwounded shoulder a good-natured shove. "What is your type anyway? Martin's Latin mystique, Blaze's scrawny sex appeal?" He paused for a thoughtful moment, and then added jokingly, "Quinn or Farah?"

I stopped at the door to the roof and turned so he could see me roll my eyes, then I pushed it open and strode outside without giving a response. Farah was just serving dishes of food as Halsten and I arrived. It was oddly silent as we ate, and every few seconds I could see everyone's eyes dart from me to Decker. My temper had cooled enough that I wasn't decided on shooting him anymore, but it appeared they weren't so sure. Tension was thick. It wasn't just that everyone seemed a little more untrusting than usual. It was a peaked hatred between Decker and I, like that hot, suffocating dampness and weight before a summer thunderstorm. I just had to make sure I was ready when the clouds rolled in.

"Hey, hey, hey," Martin started excitedly. He'd been sitting in his lawn chair scanning the city's rooftops with his binoculars ever since he'd finished eating. "We got trespassers." I sat still while everyone else strode over, squinting to see what Martin did. "Looks like they're catching some shut eye."

"How many?" Leon asked from behind Martin's chair, shoving a bite of food into his mouth.

"Looks about," Martin paused, moving his sights to check adjacent roofs in the distance. "Twenty or so. Some kind of soldiers I think." He stared

into his binoculars for a few moments more before looking up at Leon. "Seems they're all sleeping though. We could take the bridges, go in all stealth-like."

"Let me see," Leon said, motioning for the binoculars. He stared quietly for a minute before handing them back, looking like he was thinking.

"I got an idea," Blaze said, sounding eager as always to go steal something. "We could go in from three different sides of the roof if we take all the bridges."

"That's good," Halsten agreed, shading his eyes with his hands and squinting to try and see across the rooftops. "Then we could make a fast getaway if any of them wake up."

"Okay," Leon said, turning and ready to head over.

I stood, prepared to go get some more supplies, and followed everybody to grab our backpacks. I didn't mind so much that we were about to steal from soldiers who outnumbered us by more than double. I actually preferred it this way. It kept petty crime from turning to murder, and petty crime was something I'd mastered.

All of us grabbed a bridge, and we started our silent cross toward the far away roof. It was over two blocks, but eventually we got to a building right next to the group, and from there we split up. I followed Martin and Halsten to the left of the soldiers, Decker, Quinn and Blaze went to the right, and Leon and Farah crossed from the middle. It wasn't until it was my turn to cross the bridge that my heartbeat started to pick up.

Even from halfway across I could see the weapons the soldiers were carrying. A few of them were even wearing clothing I recognized from long ago as military. To call our targets intimidating would be an understatement, but from the looks of it they had more than enough supplies, which melted all guilt I might've had and made this thrilling. Before stepping off the bridge and onto the soldiers' roof, I double-checked to make sure none of them were awake. Not a one was, and a few were even snoring.

Once I touched down, I took delicate steps toward the first sleeping man who wasn't using his supply pack as a pillow. While I reached for his bag, I kept my eyes on the automatic rifle he was hugging to his chest. The last thing I wanted was to make friends with the bullets in that rifle, so I undid the zipper painfully slowly, terrified of making even the slightest sound. Once it was open I pulled out certain things I thought we needed and carefully put them into my own backpack. I was shocked when I pulled out a nearly empty bag with just two pieces of fresh beef jerky in it. It had been so long since I'd seen any type of fresh meat other than fish that I wanted to scarf it down right then and there.

I made it to a couple more soldiers before we'd nearly cleaned them out. I was in the process of emptying the last bag, along with Farah and Decker at a couple other soldiers, while everyone else had already crossed their bridges and was waiting for us. When I finished, I eased the zipper of my backpack closed, and stood to make my way to the bridge. As I took my first step forward, I felt something connect with my lifted foot and pull back. Thrown off balance I tumbled to the ground with a loud thud, and everything in my pack seemed to clank together, adding to the noise.

I was panicking before I even hit the ground, but I turned my head just in time to see Decker's evil grin, and his foot drawing away from where mine had been as he started his hasty retreat to his own bridge. The bastard tripped me, and the noise I'd made had woken the soldier next to me. He stared for a second as he tried to focus his tired eyes, then they shot wide, and he took in a deep breath.

"Raiders!" he shouted. Before he could yell again I kicked him in the face, and he sputtered in pain as I scrambled up.

It was no use though, all the other soldiers had heard him, and if they weren't already standing they were on their way. I was closer to Leon and Farah's bridge, so I started for it, only to find that they'd already pulled it away so the soldiers couldn't follow. I sprinted toward my own bridge, where Halsten was waving at me to hurry. There was the pounding of boots on the bridge close behind me, and I knew there was at least one soldier following close behind.

[illegible]

We'd left a second plank connected to another roof, and I ran toward it as fast as I could while Martin and Halsten were already across. But the sound of boots was getting closer, and before I was even halfway a soldier had caught up. He shouldered me so hard I went flying sideways, and he continued forward to try and catch up with Martin and Halsten. He didn't make it. They'd already pulled it away and left me here. When I finally stopped rolling across the paved rooftop I darted up, frantically searching for some other escape route. The only thing that caught my attention was the automatic rifle pointed at me.

"Get down!" a second soldier, the one who had the gun pointed at me, yelled.

I did what he said without protest, and dropped to my knees, throwing my hands up in surrender. *Shit*. There had to be some way out of this. I glanced past him to see where everyone else was, but they were all gone. As I did, I thought I saw a familiar face in one of the soldiers. A face from before the outbreak. In my panic I was drawing a blank. What was her name?

"Shoot her," the soldier who'd knocked me down came up beside the other one. "We don't take raiders, you know that."

I'd always known it. Goddammit what was her name?

"Shoot her," he ordered again.

Still the other man hesitated. He looked former military, especially in the camouflage pants he was wearing. He had to be. Why else wouldn't he shoot someone who was surrendering? When he still made no move to kill me, the other soldier reached for and raised his own weapon.

"Wait!" I shouted desperately before he could fire. "Wait, I know Genevieve!"

That was it. That was her name. And the two soldiers knew whom I meant, because they looked at each other curiously. The one who hesitated shrugged, and so the other one turned to yell across the rooftops.

"Hey," he hollered with his hands cupped around his mouth. "Hey, LT!"

From another roof she looked our way, and the soldier waved her over. Now I just hoped she'd remember who I was and spare me. The group had secured another bridge, which she used to cross from her roof, and then she strode over another one to us. I felt so nervous I could hurl.

"This one says she knows you," the man said when she was within earshot.

She looked at me, and glancing from her, to the enormous knife strapped to her thigh, to the rifle in her hands, I gave a nervous smile. Genevieve recognized me all right, but she didn't give the reaction I was hoping for. Her eyebrows furrowed angrily, and her mouth set in a hard scowl as she continued toward me. Just as I worried she might shoot me herself, she raised her weapon, and the last thing I saw was the butt of her gun coming straight for my head.

"*Ladies, stop throwing paint everywhere," my teacher warned the two nine-year-old girls near me.*

They stopped giggling instantly and looked up, guiltily dipping the brushes back into the paint cans so they could continue working on the banner. One of them, the one with curly red hair, glanced my way, and I gave a shy smile. It was only a week after school started, and I was still the new kid. Her eyes lingered on me for a second before she looked away without smiling back. I was too quiet and awkward to have made any friends yet. The other girl, with black hair and brown eyes, her desk was right next to mine, but she was too busy talking to all her other friends to have even noticed me yet.

I peeked up toward our desks, just in time to see one of the boys in our class with his hand in the girl's pencil box. He pulled it out, gripping something bright and shiny, and stuck the item into his pocket as he lumbered away. My eyes shot down guiltily, and I busily finished the word 'carnival' in blue paint. I wanted to tell on him, but you were never supposed to tattletale. My sisters picked on me all the time for it. So I kept my mouth shut.

After we finished the banner we all washed our hands. When I returned to my desk, the girl was digging pencils and pens and glue sticks out of her box. She was looking for whatever that boy took. Was it tattling if you told someone other than the teacher? I tapped her timidly on the shoulder.

"*What?" she asked shortly, turning toward me with angry tears in her eyes.*

I was almost too afraid to speak. I was always too shy for my own good. "What are you looking for?"

She resumed her furious searching in the pencil box. "My bracelet. I took it off because I didn't want to get it dirty."

I glanced around to make sure nobody was listening, that way they wouldn't be able to hold the tattling against me, and leaned closer to her ear. "That boy took it," I whispered, and when she looked up I pointed at him for a brief second.

She wiped a tear from her eye, and without looking at me again stormed over to him. "Where is it?" she asked him.

I didn't hear what he said, but then she pushed him, and I fell into my desk nervously, unable to watch. I wasn't trying to start a fight. A few moments later she sat down at her own desk, bracelet in place around her wrist. It was a fancy piece of jewelry, gold with a couple diamonds in the top. I don't know if they were real or not.

"*Thanks," she said, and when I lifted my head she was grinning at me. Then she leaned forward to catch a glimpse of my nametag. She always remembered my name after that, and when I went home that night I told my parents I made a new friend.*

I was conscious again, and couldn't have been out for long because I was being dragged across a rooftop. There was something over my eyes keeping me from being able to see. Not that I could keep my eyes open long anyway. I felt tired, and was grateful when whoever it was stopped dragging me and left me lying down.

"What are you going to do with her?" a male voice asked.

I was so tired. I wanted to go back to sleep. But I was fighting the urge so I would hear what they'd do with me.

"I don't know," Genevieve told him, and I let myself drift off.

"*What's up?" A girl in my freshman English class plopped down on the floor next to me, leaning her back against the lockers behind us and pulling a piece of paper out of her binder. I shrugged sheepishly, too nervous to answer because she was popular, and rarely ever talked to me. "Can I see your homework?"*

My cheeks colored instantly. I wanted to give her the answers, maybe then I'd fit in better and she'd have a conversation with me so I could have more friends. But I was too much of a wimp. I felt guilty even using the Internet to get my homework done.

"*It wasn't supposed to be group work," I said quietly, a mouse-like squeak, and she leaned forward halfway through like she couldn't hear me.*

"*Oh, come on," she urged, passing a coy smile to her friend, who was standing in front of us. "It's not like it's a test or anything."*

I refused to look up at her companion because my cheeks were still flaming with shame. "But if our answers are too similar, then he'll know," I protested weakly.

She sighed like she was getting impatient, knowing the bell was going to ring in a few minutes. "I'll change it enough so he can't tell," and she held out her hand for my homework.

"*I'm pretty sure she said 'no'," Genevieve interrupted before I could give in, just like I always did.*

The girl beside me scowled up at Genevieve, and then cast me a bitter side-glance. "It's just homework, she doesn't have to be a bitch about it."

Genevieve glared, and I felt so out of place now I wanted to run away until class would start. "Why didn't you finish it yourself? You weren't at practice yesterday either."

"*I had stuff to do," the girl retorted defensively. "It's none of your business."*

"*Coach is kicking you off the soccer team," Genevieve told her nonchalantly, and when I glanced up at her she winked. "If you could get off Sammy's dick long enough to get your grades up, you might be able to stay on."*

The girl's jaw dropped, and I couldn't help that I snorted with laughter. Then she gave an angry screech and got up to storm to the other end of the hall with her friend. Genevieve took the now-empty seat beside me, chuckling to herself as she pulled a notebook out of her backpack.

"*Thank you," I said bashfully, giving a nervous smile.*

"*Never liked her much anyway," Genevieve shrugged. "Can I see your homework?" My cheeks tinted red again, and when she saw my reaction she laughed, holding up her own homework for me to see. She had that gold bracelet around her wrist, just like she always did. "Don't worry, I did mine. I'm just curious what the class genius put down." I grinned and handed her the paper in my lap.*

I'd woken up on a few occasions, but I felt exhausted every time. Now I felt like I was truly done drifting off, and the pain succeeded in completely waking me up. I groaned as I tried to lift a hand to the side of my forehead, where the pain was coming from, but my hands were cuffed around something behind my back. That's when I started to panic again. I still had that blindfold over my eyes, and thought the soldiers had just left me bound somewhere and I was Biter-bait. In my panic I pulled fiercely at the metal handcuffs around my wrists. A moment later I remembered the bobby pin halves in my bracelet, and was about to pull them out and break free.

Before I could though, there were footsteps coming toward me. "Calm down," said the deep, raspy male voice. "You're safe for now."

down," said the deep, raspy male voice. "You're safe for now."

He pulled off the duct tape someone had put over my eyes, and I squinted, temporarily blinded by the brightness of the world around me. It wasn't just the bright lights, shining from each corner of the large tent we were in, that hurt. My head was pounding, an agonizing pressure on all sides of my skull and an aching throb in my ears. It was too painful to hold up, so I dropped my head and groaned again.

"You can get Doc April now," he said to somebody somewhere in the room, and they left out the entrance of the tent. Then he spoke more quietly to someone else. "You got her pretty good, Gen. Might have to wait before we start interrogating her."

"Cap, they took McMahan," Genevieve whispered sharply. "We should've left already."

"Put her in a chair for when the Doc comes," the man instructed to a third person nearby, and then addressed Genevieve. "Well, next time you want to take a prisoner, don't almost put them in a coma."

A young male soldier knelt down beside me, and after undoing one side of the cuffs he hoisted me off the ground. The second I was on my feet I shoved him away from me and reached for my waistband. They were going to 'interrogate' me, for all I knew, that meant torture. That's what it meant where I was from. But my gun wasn't there. I shouldn't have expected it to be. Plus I was woozy and weak, and after standing on my own for a few moments I fell to my knees. The soldier lifted me off the ground again, and when I didn't push him away he set me carefully into a chair.

He redid the cuffs behind my back, and after I dropped my head once more a couple people strode through the opening of the tent. I was fighting the urge to go back to sleep once again. Is this what a concussion felt like? I'd never had one before.

"Jesus," said a bitter, unfamiliar female voice. A moment later she sounded closer, and I could hear that she was leaning over by my face. "You should've let me come in sooner."

"Nothing you could do for her anyway," said Cap.

Something touched underneath my nose, and when the wretched smell of ammonia drifted into my nostrils I flinched back, disgusted. I opened my eyes, irritated that someone put that smell there, and locked glances with Doc April.

"Try to stay awake for me, okay?" she said, more pleasantly than she'd spoken before. After examining my face she turned her head to glare at Cap. "I could've at least stitched her forehead." She pulled out a penlight to shine in my eyes, smiling amicably at me. "I apologize for their lack of hospitality."

"She's a prisoner, April," Genevieve cut in. "Not a guest."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to beat her up so bad," April countered, eyeing my busted lip, then added sarcastically, "What ever happened to codes of conduct?"

April wasn't necessarily a friend, but she was the only one I liked right now. She was older, in her fifties probably, with graying brown hair and glasses that hid her dark blue eyes. Everything about her looked soft. She had good bedside manner.

"I only got her in the forehead," Genevieve told her.

The doctor leaned back to study my cuts and bruises while she pulled out some gauze pads and soaked them in rubbing alcohol. "You poor thing," she said sympathetically, and began to wipe off the blood, which had run from my forehead down to my neck.

I risked my first glance up at Genevieve. She was staring at me hard, face completely void of emotion except for the hint of rage in her eyes. She wasn't standing up for me now. Those days seemed gone. I just wished I could tell if she was mad my group had taken one of her soldiers, or if she just genuinely resented me because of my affiliations.

"What happened here?" April asked, pointing to the scratches across my chest.

My eyes darted from her to Genevieve to the older man as I hesitated. My group wouldn't shoot unless I was undoubtedly infected, but who knows if these people took those kinds of chances. "Biter," I whispered honestly.

"Feral?" Her hand immediately shot to my forehead, and then she felt both my cheeks. "When did it happen?"

Cap took a cautious step forward, and frightened that they might really kill me I answered quickly, "This morning. I think. What day is it?" April sighed, and Cap appeared visibly relieved. Genevieve seemed indifferent.

"No fever," the Doc said to herself, and scrubbed painfully at the wound with rubbing alcohol. "I'd like to give you some antibiotics though, couldn't hurt."

"She'll get no such thing," Cap said gruffly, crossing his arms over his chest. "She'll go back to her people and take care of herself."

April didn't argue, and instead cast me an apologetic smile. I didn't care though. I was somewhat relieved that they were planning on sending me back rather than killing me, probably a trade for their guy. Not that I'd be better off back home. Decker would still kill me if I went back. The Doc finished tending the rest of my wounds in silence, and despite Cap's protest she gave me some painkillers for my head. Then she was gone. Left me alone with Cap and Genevieve and one other soldier, all of who looked like they wouldn't mind adding a couple wounds to my already beat up body.

Cap scooted a chair in front of my own and took a seat, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "What's your name?" he asked. At least they hadn't yet resorted to violence. I'd cooperate anyway.

"Echo."

"That's not her name," Genevieve started bitterly. "It's H–"

"My name," I interrupted before she could finish, leaning over to glare at her. Her attitude was starting to piss me off. "Is Echo." She just rolled her eyes.

"Okay, Echo," Cap agreed indifferently. What did he care anyway? "Here's the situation we're in. Your fellow raiders took one of our men, and we'd like him back. Would he still be alive?" I nodded, knowing Leon would question him for information. He'd be alive, but I couldn't guarantee his condition. "Good, then if you'd kindly take Genevieve's platoon, we'd be more than happy to return you safe and sound."

That was the first time I realized I was in a position of power. They cared about their man, and they wanted him back. I was no better off at home than I was here. If I went home, I was dead for sure. If I didn't cooperate with these guys, then I *might* be dead. But I had bargaining power.

"We've got a misunderstanding about what I can do for you," I told him calmly, and he raised his eyebrows for explanation. "They don't care about me. The only thing they'll trade your man for is supplies."

"What kind of supplies?" Cap asked. The more he spoke to me, the less afraid of him I got. He was a rough-weathered man, but considering the position I was in, he hadn't been entirely unkind to me. I was more afraid of Genevieve than I was of him.

I took a minute to think about his question. There wasn't exactly any protocol for this, seeing as it was the first time any of us had been taken prisoner rather than killed on site. I could imagine the kinds of things the group would want though. "Food is a must, at least two weeks rations for eight people. Medical supplies. Ammo."

"You're not getting ammunition," he answered instantly, and I knew he wouldn't budge on that. I hadn't expected him to give 'raiders' ammo anyway; I'd just thrown it in to try. "Five days rations."

"Two weeks," I countered.

"One week," Cap raised his offer.

But I wouldn't walk into the complex with anything less than I'd said originally. I didn't think Leon would accept it. "Two."

"A week and a half is my final offer," Cap said, leaning back in his seat to watch me.

I shrugged like I couldn't care less. "I guess you don't want your guy back."

Genevieve scoffed angrily, and Cap studied me thoughtfully for a minute. "Fine," he said eventually, "Two weeks." Then he began to stand. Even though he tried to bargain, he agreed quite easily. The fact that he'd give up supplies without much hesitation made me think these guys were well off.

"One more thing," I blurted before he was completely out of his seat, and he sat back down. Now I faltered. I had bargaining power, but how much? "Let me stay. They'd be happy with just the supplies. Let me stay here."

Cap sighed, but he didn't answer right away and I knew he was thinking about it, even if it was only for the sake of my cooperation. Genevieve knew too, because she stepped forward indignantly. "Cap, no," she protested.

"I swear I won't cause trouble," I told him pleadingly. Now that I'd said it, I'd do anything not to have to go back to the complex. "I'll be one of your soldiers. I'll do whatever you want."

"Cap," Genevieve said again. I was too nervous to glare at her.

The man stood, folded his arms across his chest, and paced behind the chair. I was scared he'd say 'no'. "They were planning on killing me anyway," I told him, practically begging for him not to send me back, hoping if I poured my heart out it would help. "I don't belong there."

"Captain Greely," Genevieve stepped forward, and this time I did shoot her a fierce look. I didn't know what her problem was, but I wouldn't go back just because of her.

"You want to get McMahan back?" Cap asked her, and then pointed at me. "She's the only one who knows where the raiders are hiding."

"And the building's booby trapped," I added, thinking it would help my chances. "You'd never make it in on your own."

Cap held his hands out and glanced at Genevieve, as if to say 'there you have it.' "Get some rest, Gen," he said. "Stackhouse and Barns are fueling the vehicles and dishing rations so you can leave tomorrow afternoon." Genevieve growled irritably and started for the entrance of the tent, grabbing the handcuff key from the other soldier without looking back. Cap looked at me and nodded toward her, letting me know that I should follow, and I grinned that my terms had been met. "Don't let her out of your sight," he called after Genevieve as I left the tent to follow her.

I was a few feet behind her, almost jogging to catch up despite the pounding in my head, and I could hear her grumbling angrily. "This is bullshit." Then she glanced back at me and scowled.

There was just enough light from the different tents and campfires around that I didn't trip too much over the uneven ground, but I couldn't tell exactly where I was. Except for those various lights, the world around us was dark. I stopped walking to look around. We were outside, I knew that because there were stars, and I could hear the consistent hum of insects in the night. And the air was fresh. God was it fresh. I'd never realized just how bad the city reeked until I took a conscious whiff of the air around me. It was like breathing for the first time.

The forest, we were in the goddamn forest. I almost laughed at the realization. Even though I couldn't see too far because of the trees, it looked like there were a lot of campfires and tents. Could there be more than just the soldiers? I wished I could tell what kind of place this was, what kind of place I'd be staying at now, but I'd almost lost Genevieve in the dark, so I hurried forward to keep up with her.

"Bullshit," she was still mumbling when I reached her. "'Just one easy run,' he said. 'All we need is solar panels.' Now I'm stuck with a fucking raider."

"We prefer renegade," I told her tauntingly. I shouldn't have been, but I was starting to take offense at her hostility toward me.

I flinched when she turned on her heels, pointing a furious finger at me. I was sure there were people around because I could hear soft conversations, but Genevieve obviously had some authority, and my hands were still cuffed. If she attacked me I wouldn't be able to defend myself, and I wasn't sure she wouldn't.

"You think you're funny?" she growled. Then she shoved one of my shoulders, turning me around.

"I don't know why you're so mad," I said, and glanced back over my shoulder when she undid one of my cuffs. "I'll get your boyfriend back."

"He's not my–" she started and stopped, huffing like she couldn't be more irritated, and then she pushed me into a tent I hadn't noticed in the dark. At her push there were large white dots in my vision, and I stopped at the entrance to let the sudden wooziness subside. I was going to have to take it easy. "Move," she ordered when I continued to stand there, blocking the way in.

"Jesus, fine." I stepped to the side, careful not to walk on anything because I couldn't see and wasn't sure where anything was inside this shelter. "What's your problem?"

Genevieve clicked on a lighter, which she used to light a small lantern in the tent. There was a cot on the left side and a large trunk full of stuff at the head of that. Aside from those and the lantern there wasn't much else in here.

"My problem is that your asshole buddies have my best friend," Genevieve said, and when she put her hand on my shoulder to shove me again I pulled away and glowered at her. She glared, but refrained from using force and pointed to where she wanted me to go. "And you conned the Captain into letting you stay here."

I strode to the corner where she'd pointed, and when I got there she reached behind me and weaved the cuffs around one of the support

poles of the tent. For hating me so bad, she didn't mind being touchy. As she reached around me she got close, her bright, furious brown eyes hardly three inches from mine. Then she cuffed my free hand back in so I was locked to the pole.

"I didn't con anybody," I said defensively, watching as she strode to the cot and sat down at the edge.

She didn't say anything at first, just pulled the backpack off her shoulders and took my knife and gun out of it. She set my weapons in the large trunk on the floor, and then went to work untying her boots. "You aren't getting any sleep tomorrow night, so rest up," she said after she'd kicked off her boots.

I glanced around, searching for some kind of bedding, and then down at the hard floor. "You want me to sleep right here?" She just looked at me, and stood to make her way to the lantern. "Can you at least take the cuffs off so I can get comfortable?"

"So you can murder me in my sleep?" she asked bitterly. "No."

"I'm not that kind of raider," I told her, lowering my head in shame because, even though I had no intention of hurting her, it wasn't entirely true.

"You're not fooling anyone," she said, and then she blew out the light.

In the dark I could hear her slide into her cot, and I stood there for a few moments before I lowered myself to the ground. "Could I at least get a blanket or something?"

"No," she answered shortly. "And if you keep me awake I'll kick your ass."

At first I thought she was just being a bitch, and I waited for her to pass me a blanket or at least a pillow. But none came, and before long I could hear her breathing deep and slow, already asleep. With a sigh I stretched my legs out, lying down on the hard ground and resting my head on my restrained arms. It must have been the concussion that let me fall asleep easily, because I was so uncomfortable I don't know how I did.

The chills woke me up early in the morning. It was still dark outside, just a little gray from the sky made it possible to see in the tent. My entire body was sore from sleeping on the ground, and my head was pounding with a migraine. I sat up, leaning back until my spine cracked. Genevieve was practically snoring she was so deep in sleep, and she had her back turned to me. I chewed the inside of my cheek thoughtfully, knowing the idea that was materializing in the back of my mind and trying to force it away.

If I picked the cuffs and slipped out of the tent I knew it would piss Genevieve off, but there wasn't a spot of my aching muscles that didn't feel pain. Who knew how long she'd sleep for? I needed to stretch my legs, maybe find some food, and the Doc so I could get more painkillers for my head. Before I could stop myself I'd pulled a piece of bobby pin out of my bracelet, and picking the handcuffs was so easy I might as well have had the key. I was about to leave the tent, but stopped at the entrance.

Genevieve had my weapons. I couldn't take the gun. That much was certain. Nobody here trusted me, and if I had a gun they might shoot me before I could explain. But my knife, that little old pocket knife with the glow in the dark handle, it was sentimental, and I wasn't sure if she'd ever give it back. So I opened up the trunk she'd thrown my weapons into, silently pulled out my knife and stuck it into a pocket of my cargo pants.

When I stepped out of the tent I took a minute to look around. It was so much bigger than I imagined. Through thin breaks between the trees I could see tents in every direction. There had to be over a hundred. Though the camp was still relatively quiet, there were people stirring, walking around and getting to business. I inhaled a deep breath of fresh, cold morning air. It was as clean and crisp as the night before, but now I smelled food, and my feet immediately started in the direction of the smell.

I crossed my arms over my chest to try and warm myself. Even for summer the mornings were chilly, and my sweater was back at the complex. As I walked toward the pleasant aroma I passed other people's

campsites. The ones who were awake smiled at me, completely unaware of who I was or why I was here. One campsite I strode past was a family, sleeping on the ground near a fire in their sleeping bags, and they had a child. A little kid, probably only seven years old. It had been so long since I'd seen a child. Everyone looked well rested, at ease, and well fed. This place was a refuge, and it was such a beautiful sight it almost brought tears to my eyes.

Coming up on my right I could see a small cabin. It stood out from everything else because there was an enormous red cross painted on the side. I wasn't sure what the rules were concerning medical needs, or if there was even anyone inside, but I headed toward it. When I reached the entrance I pulled open the door and peeked my head in. I scanned the inside, in which there were large metal containers, more cots, a couple steel tables, and even a blocked off area surrounded by clean plastic sheets. I didn't see anyone moving around, so I was about to close the door and continue toward the food, but there was a movement coming from right under my nose, just to the side of the door.

The doctor from last night had been sleeping on a cot by the door, and she jumped when her eyes focused on me. "Oh dear," she chuckled as she sat up. "You scared me."

"Sorry." She didn't seem irritated that I'd woken her, so I went all the way in and closed the door behind me.

April reached under her cot, a moment later coming up with her glasses in hand. When she put them on she looked at me again, and now seeing who I was she appeared shocked. "Oh, it's you." Once the shock wore off, she seemed to panic a little. She glanced around nervously and her movements got skittish, though she tried not to show it. "What can I do for you?" She knew I was a raider, and without anyone else around she clearly wasn't as confident as she had been the night before.

"I was just wondering if you had any more painkillers for my head," I told her, speaking as calmly as I could, since I obviously made her uncomfortable.

"Sure," she said, and with anxious energy she got out of bed and made

"Sure," she said, and with anxious energy she got out of bed and made her way to a large box-like machine.

She flicked on a temperamental switch a couple times impatiently, until the lights in the cabin flickered on. It was a generator, and the fact that they had electricity made me smile with joy. Then April went to one of the large containers, pulling on a sweater while she walked. Even when she reached into the bin she kept one eye on me, like she was worried I'd attack her, so I kept my distance and leaned my back against the wall near the door. After she grabbed the pills she picked up a water bottle and carried both to me.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked as she handed me the medicine and water.

She almost flinched when I reached out for them. "My head still hurts," I answered, and she nodded knowingly, taking a timid step back. "You don't need to be afraid of me." I swallowed down the pills and then held the bottle of water out for her to take. "I won't hurt you."

April rapidly glanced away like she didn't know how to respond. "Since you're here I'll look at your wounds." She avoided my comment, waving me to one of the steel tables and patting the surface. I hopped up onto it, sitting quietly while she removed the gauze she'd taped to my forehead. "Some of us have had experiences of our own, or at least heard stories," she said eventually, moving to the scratches on my chest. "Are they true?"

I knew what she was talking about. Stories about raiders. I hated that I was something to be feared, that I was the boogeyman in these people's somewhat comfortable lives. I didn't want April or anyone else to be scared of me, but I didn't want her thinking others weren't dangerous. "Yes," I nodded. She looked down uneasily, eyes widening when she glimpsed the tattoo on my wrist, as if that made it even more real. "But I'm not dangerous."

She turned without saying anything and grabbed a small tube of ointment from another container. She squeezed some onto her finger, carefully rubbing it into the scratches on my chest.

"Your Captain said I could stay," I started when I didn't think she'd continue the conversation. It had occurred to me that they could always kill me once they had their soldier back, so then I added quietly, "I don't know if he was serious or not."

"Ben's an honest man," April told me, gently taping more gauze over the scratches. "Fair too." I just nodded, watching her stride to the same bin from which she'd grabbed the painkillers. She pulled out a few pills from another bottle, and when she got back to me she handed me one. I studied it curiously, not sure if she could be entirely trusted either, but she reassured me instantly. "Antibiotics, since he said you could stay." I smiled gratefully and swallowed it down, and then she handed me the others. "For later. One a day. You should eat shortly."

I hopped off the table and shoved the pills into one of my pockets. "Where could I get a bite?"

April pointed in the direction I'd been heading before coming into the cabin. "Just keep going that way. There are some makeshift tables near a big campfire."

"Thank you," I said, genuinely appreciative, and after she nodded I headed out the door.

I continued in the direction April had pointed me, and before long I found the area she was talking about. There were several narrow tables with stumps for seats surrounding a large campfire. There was another table set up nearest the fire, from which it looked like a few people were handing out the meal. There were men, women and a few children sitting at the tables, eating what looked like a stew out of all kinds of different dishes. I strode up to the serving table, and leaned over a large pot to see what was inside.

"Hungry?" asked the woman standing behind it. She was a young Middle Eastern woman, late twenties maybe, with light brown eyes and dark brown hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. When I nodded she held out her hand. "Do you have your bowl?"

"Oh, no," I said unsurely, and she raised a curious eyebrow at me while I

"Oh, no," I said unsurely, and she raised a curious eyebrow at me while I tried to think of an excuse. "Um, I'm new." And so she wouldn't see it I put my tattooed arm behind my back.

The woman grinned excitedly, this time sticking out her hand for me to shake. "I'm Aminah."

I hesitated before pulling my arm from behind my back and taking her hand in mine. "Echo." It looked like she noticed the mark, but she must not have known what it was.

"That's an interesting name," she mused, and then she picked up a bowl, a spoon and a cup on the table next to her. "You can use mine for now. I already ate." I hesitated in reaching for her things, put off by the overwhelming friendliness and trust, which she mistook for not wanting to share her stuff. "Don't worry, I cleaned them."

I chuckled and took the items from her, holding out the bowl so she could fill it with stew. "Thanks," I said, taking a whiff of the delightful grub in my bowl. There were real, actual vegetables in it, carrots and potatoes and corn. There was even meat, though I could only see a piece or two.

"You're welcome," Aminah smiled amicably, and nodded toward the other side of the table. "Rick over there has coffee."

Coffee? For a minute, until Rick poured coffee into my cup and I tasted the splendidly bitter fluid, I thought I might really be in a coma and dreaming. I sat down at a table with my heavenly breakfast. There was a group of three young men sitting nearby, and when they noticed me they all scowled and got up to leave. I guess some people knew who I was. One of them had a massive bruise on his face, and he sort of looked like the one I'd kicked on the roof. I ignored it though, too blissfully happy about having real food to care. I was about halfway through my bowl when a man sat down beside me.

"Where's Genevieve?" he asked.

Shit. "Sleeping," I answered as calmly as I could so I wouldn't sound suspicious. The man's voice was familiar. It was the one who'd spoken to

Genevieve on the roof, the first time I woke up after she hit me. I glanced up to look at him. He was tall, with medium-length black hair that curled at the tips around his perfectly chiseled face. His bright green eyes stared right back at me, looking hostile and skeptical. I already didn't like him. He reminded me of Decker.

Not to mention he was sitting a little too close, like he was trying to intimidate me. "Does she know you're out here?"

"Yeah." I shoved another spoonful of the soup into my mouth and washed it down with coffee before showing him my wrists. "See, no handcuffs."

"Mhm," he mumbled, staring hard at me for another few seconds before he stood up and lumbered away.

Almost immediately after he left I had new guests. Four teenagers sat down across from me – three guys and one girl, each leaning forward enthusiastically.

"Is it true?" one of the boys asked me, and at his question the others leaned forward even more.

I furrowed my eyebrows. "What?"

"Are you the raider?" another one whispered.

"Yeah, she is, look," the third one said, and in a bold show he reached forward and grabbed my arm, pulling it forward so they could look at my tattoo. I let them look for a second before I cleared my throat, and they all jumped back, startled, which made me laugh. When I started laughing they all looked at me unsurely before giving their own nervous chuckles.

"Are you going to murder us all?" the second boy asked. I shook my head and took another bite of food.

"What's the name of your gang?" the girl said.

"We don't have one."

Then the bold one spoke up again. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

I resisted the urge to glare so I wouldn't scare them, but they saw me as something mysterious, and perhaps non-threatening. The flaw of this sheltered camp so far – some of these people didn't know about dangers other than Ferals. "You guys ask a lot of questions."

"We've never seen a real live raider before," said the first boy.

"I have." The third one gave a proud grin.

"You better hope I'm the only one you ever see," I grumbled.

The girl opened her mouth like she was about to say something, but then each of their eyes went to the side, and they followed something toward me. I was about to turn and see what they were watching, but right as I shifted someone grabbed me by the shoulders. I was pulled out of my seat only to be thrown to the ground, and before I could even react Genevieve was sitting over my hips, hands pinning my wrists to the ground above my head so I couldn't hit her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" she yelled angrily, fingers tightening around my wrists.

My head was spinning from being slammed on the ground, but my temper had flared. I was sick of being pushed around, especially because she'd already injured me to the point of stitches. Since she was about the same size, maybe even a few pounds lighter than me, I bucked my hips and at the same time shoved one arm up. It shifted her weight just enough that I could roll us over, but I didn't get a chance to pin her once I gained the upper hand. Her fist caught me in the jaw, close enough to where Decker had hit me that the pain was almost unbearable.

"Goddammit!" I shouted, leaning back so I could wind up, and I sent my own fist at her face.

In this position, size wasn't an advantage for either of us, and she knocked me off of her as easily as I had. I landed on my back next to her, and as she scrambled over I threw my arm out, hitting her in the face

once more. The impact caused her to stumble, so I used the opportunity to push up and get my arms around her neck from behind. I rolled onto my back once more, pulling her along so she was on top of me. But with one arm around her neck I put my other hand on her jaw, a lethal position that named me victor. The second I had her in that lock I heard the cocking of a gun, and the soldier who'd sat down next to me, and probably went to get Genevieve, had a pistol pointed at me.

"Go ahead then," Genevieve said over her shoulder at me, challenging me to finish her. I could feel her breathing heavily against my own heaving chest. "You'll be dead before you can stand."

I loosened my grip, hurt that she thought I'd really do it. I'd always been fond of her, even now when she was being a complete bitch. "I don't want to kill you," I told her, completely releasing her from the hold.

She rolled off of me and pushed herself up, feeling around in my pockets and grabbing the knife before taking a step back. I took a few seconds to catch my breath, and then stood. I was going to make a comment about her not needing to be such an asshole, but I'd stood too quickly, and my head couldn't handle it. My vision went white, and then I blacked out.

I woke up back in the medical cabin, lying on one of the cots, handcuffs back on. Groaning I sat up, and it took a minute before I could see again. Genevieve was sitting on a steel table, April tending to the wounds on her face. At least I'd got her a couple times. There was a small laceration over her right eyebrow, and her jaw looked swollen, that made me feel a little better.

Genevieve noticed me waken, and she passed a hard look my direction. "Carrying you places is starting to be a pain in the ass."

"Maybe if you didn't keep fucking hitting me in the head I wouldn't keep passing out," I said fiercely. April finished with Genevieve and made her way to me, starting to clean my re-busted lip.

"Maybe if you weren't a degenerate piece of shit I wouldn't keep hitting you in the head," Genevieve countered, jumping off the table.

"Excuse me?" My jaw dropped, and I pushed April's hand away as I stood. "You don't know what I've been through. I've survived the best way I knew how."

"Raping and stealing and murdering," she scoffed. "But I'm glad you've been living comfortable."

"Yeah, you know what, I sold my soul because I was *scared*!" I shouted, my frustration growing because I couldn't figure out why she was treating me like this. We'd never been close, but she knew me better than that. "Let's say for one second you even have a clue what the hell you're talking about, I'm sure you've done things you regret."

"Yes! Bringing you here instead of shooting you on the roof!" she yelled, and it was like a blow to the stomach, a blow that only fueled my fury.

"Seriously, Genevieve, what's your problem?" I asked, and like I always did, I hid my pain with sarcasm. "Raider steal your lunch money?"

Her face got visibly red, and she practically roared at me, "You killed my dad and brother!"

"What?" My anger hitched, fading to instant confusion. "I didn't–" But I was so bewildered I couldn't even finish a sentence.

"The elementary school," she said, no longer yelling, but still looking at me with venomous resentment. "Two weeks after the outbreak." I wasn't sure at first and had to think about it, but then my stomach knotted up, because I'd been there. "We had a group posted there. At night a bunch of us went out for supplies, and left the few kids at the school with two women. There was a guard at the gate. Any of this ringing a bell?"

It sounded so familiar that I had to sit down. That was one of the first runs I'd ever made with Leon's group. There'd been fifteen of us back then. "You remember what happened to the guard?" Genevieve asked. They shot him, my first real taste of unnecessary violence. "We weren't the only ones who heard the gunshot. Ferals heard it too. My dad rushed in trying to save anyone he could, but he didn't make it out either."

My throat was dry, so my voice came out hoarse. "How do you know I was there?"

"Don't try to tell me you weren't there!" she answered scathingly. "I was with the Captain. I saw you with his night vision binoculars."

I blinked quickly so she wouldn't see the tears stinging my eyes. What could I say? We didn't know there were kids in the building, but that didn't make it okay. At least now I knew why she hated me, why history didn't mean anything to her.

"Oh God," was all I could manage in a croaked whisper as I put my hands to my head. It didn't help, and I had to lie back on the cot so I wouldn't throw up. Anytime I killed someone, that was the end of it. There were no loved ones to confront me, no one to apologize to. No consequences other than my own guilt if I thought about it too hard. Most of the time it almost didn't feel real. But this was *too* real. My actions had had an affect on someone else. Someone I used to care about. I would finally answer for everything I'd done.

"That's what I thought," Genevieve said, almost emotionlessly, and after she headed for the door she slammed it shut behind her.

I stayed there on the cot until later that day. I couldn't drift off to nap, I couldn't think about eating again, and I couldn't even hear it when people came in or if April said anything to me. I wasn't even sure Genevieve would ever want to see me again, until she came in to get me. She stood over the cot, staring down at me, but I was so out of it I didn't even see her.

"Get up," she ordered harshly, refraining from touching my head and instead slapping the top of my shoe to get my attention. "We're going to get McMahan now."

I eased myself off the cot and followed her out. We walked to the edge of the camp, where there were a good amount of military vehicles parked in a clearing. "Can I have my weapons?" I asked her.

"No."

"Half of them wouldn't mind seeing me dead," I told her as she leaned against the side of a vehicle. There were no other people around, as we must be waiting for them. "I can't get your friend without a way to defend myself."

"I'll give you the knife when we get there," she said, and after studying me for a few seconds she huffed in a sarcastic laugh. "You must be some kind of awful if half your own group wants to kill you." I just dropped my head in shame. She was wrong, but I couldn't defend myself. She wouldn't understand or believe that I didn't fit in because I wasn't despicable. To her I was. I killed her family.

The soldiers started to arrive after that, and I rode next to Genevieve in the back of a large vehicle, still cuffed. Halfway through I started to feel nauseous, and I did my best to zone out for the rest of the ride. They parked the vehicle outside the city where Ferals wouldn't hear it, and I trekked in with just Genevieve. It seemed she was the leader of the whole group, because even though it looked like her soldiers didn't like it, she instructed them to wait, saying a large group wasn't as easy to keep hidden in one place than just she would be.

"What kind of name is Echo?" she whispered after a few blocks. She'd taken my handcuffs off and given me the knife back. Her voice was still scornful and bitter, mocking and hating me with every chance she got.

"When I first got with the group I was so scared of them I repeated everything they said," I told her in a complacent whisper. She didn't respond, maybe she hadn't been looking for an answer in the first place, and a block later I spoke again. "This is far away enough that they won't see you if any of them are out."

She nodded, glancing around to remember where she was. The plan was that she would wait outside the building for me to bring McMahan down. Then I was supposed to wait an hour so it wouldn't be suspicious, and meet her here at this block. Part of me didn't think she'd really wait for me, and I'd be stuck here in the city. Or she would kill me before we left the city and tell the others something happened. But that was a chance

I'd have to take.

Soon we were at the plane-entrance to the building. "Wait here," I told her, pointing to the closest alley and taking the duffle bag of supplies from her that I was supposed to trade. "Don't come in, it's booby trapped. I'll bring him down."

She didn't look like she was entirely fond of letting me get away with the supplies, but she knew she had to trust me. I wouldn't have led her here if the plan was to kill my group – as much as I hated them, they'd kept me alive the past six years – and if I brought her in alone they'd probably kill her. I climbed up the plane, bypassed the grenades and trip wires, and made my way up the stairs. I avoided the barracks and the common area and went straight for Leon's room, hoping he was there. I pushed open the door, sighing with relief that he was on his bed.

"How in the hell did you get away?" he asked in shock, grinning when I walked in. "They patched you up too!"

I held out the large pack and showed it to him, not wanting to waste any time. "They want to trade. Is he still alive?"

Leon nodded, taking the bag from me with a pleased smile. "We've been trying to get him to tell where they're camped."

"We wouldn't want to go there," I told him. "There's too many of them."

"You know where they're at?" he asked me.

"No," I said, even though it was only half true. Then I lied again. "There's a big group of them waiting outside, to take their guy and leave."

"Alright," he said, and waved for me to follow.

He led me to the supply floor, where the captive had been hog tied and left on the hard ground. McMahan had been beaten quite a bit, but other than that he looked okay, maybe in need of a little food and water. I pulled the knife out of my pocket, and at the sight of it his eyes went wide. He didn't know I was here to help him.

"Genevieve is outside waiting for you," I whispered so Leon wouldn't hear from where he was standing at the door. "I'm going to take you to her. Okay?"

McMahan seemed a little surprised at first, but because I had used Genevieve's name it looked like he believed me. When he nodded I cut the ropes around his hands and feet, and he stood, stretching out his sore limbs and rubbing out the skin where the ropes had been chaffing. I was glad nobody else was around to talk to me as I led McMahan to the stairs; they must've all been up on the roof or in the common area, and fortunately Leon didn't feel the need to follow. Since he had the pack full of supplies he was satisfied.

"They didn't hurt you too bad, did they?" I asked McMahan as we started down the stairs. He didn't seem to hate me yet, and if Genevieve didn't leave me here, maybe he could be a friend.

It clearly confused him that I was being nice, because I obviously affiliated with the enemy, but he decided to answer. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

I just nodded in acknowledgement and carefully directed him around the traps on the way to the building's exit. When we got outside he spotted Genevieve immediately, and she pulled him into a tight hug.

"Hey pipsqueak," he greeted her, returning the embrace. Then he turned back to me. "Thanks."

I smiled at him and looked at Genevieve. "You remember where to go?" She nodded, leading McMahan away without saying anything to me.

She was going to leave without me, I was almost positive. Part of me wondered if it was even worth it to try and find her at the meeting spot. I went back into the building, and was greeted happily by Halsten, Farah and Martin. The others were less enthusiastic, while Decker seemed downright furious. I tried not to call attention to myself, and sat quietly for as long as I could while I watched the guys play a poker game. I took one last long look at Halsten, the only one I would even remotely miss, and when he realized I was watching him he smiled at me. I smiled back and

When he realized I was watching him he smiled at me. I smiled back and then got up to make my way to the roof.

At my tent I hastily shoved my belongings into my backpack. There wasn't much, and I couldn't take my sleeping bag because it would be too bulky and obvious. Really all I grabbed was my clothes and my flashlight, along with everything that was always in my backpack, like my can opener, my cigarettes, and some spare batteries. I all but ran out the building, and it took everything in me to take my time getting to the meeting place without making too much noise. Eventually I got there, and I stood on the corner, glancing every direction, looking for Genevieve and McMahan.

"That bitch," I mumbled to myself when they were nowhere to be found, but it wasn't frustration, it was disappointment. I was alone.

My heart fluttered excitedly when I heard a footstep behind me, thinking maybe she didn't leave, but when I turned it fell. "Who's a bitch?" Decker asked, smiling like a fiend.

"No one," I answered, and when he took a step forward I took a step back. "I was talking to myself."

"Uh huh," he mumbled, taking another step toward me. I eased back. "You know what your problem is, Echo?" Again he inched forward, and me back. This time I reached carefully into my pocket, pulling out my knife and opening it behind my back. "You're disloyal. Like with those travelers, for example." This time, when he came forward, I took two steps back, because his strides were longer than mine and he was getting closer. "Leon takes you in out of the kindness of his heart, your own cousin, and what do you do? You give people *our* food, maybe even point them in the right direction so we'd never see them." Now he strode discontinuously toward me, step, pause, step, pause. "Makes me wonder how many slipped under our noses because of you. How many nights we went hungry because you're a weak traitor."

"I'll leave, Decker," I told him, my voice nearly quavering because he was only a few feet in front of me now, and I could see by the look in his eye he was going to kill me. "You'll never have to see me again."

"You're right, I'll never have to see you again," he agreed, taking another step closer so he was within arms reach. He was so much bigger than me, and I was still unstable because of my concussion. I was dead already, and I knew it.

I didn't wait for him to attack me. I whipped my hand with the knife around, and thrust the blade toward him. He twisted swiftly so that I only managed to knick him in the side, and before I recovered from my move he shoved me backward. I would've been fine, but I was too close to the curb, and when my foot slipped off the edge of it I dropped my weapon and fell backward into the street. The impact made me severely dizzy, but I didn't want to die. I shot up, only, the second I took a step my balance was so off I stumbled back down.

Decker had already reached me by the time I turned onto my back, and I began to kick my legs, trying desperately to get him and keep him away from me. His hands clamped down around my ankles, and he moved my legs out of the way so he could sit over me. At least he was just going to kill me, and his hands wrapped around my throat. I still tried to fight. I threw my fists and bucked my hips, but he weighed at least twice what I did, and his arms were too long for me to be able to reach him with a hit. No matter how much I struggled it was no use, and as black spots started to blur my vision, I gave up.

The moment after I resigned, Decker's eyes shot wide. "Well, fuck," he mumbled, loosening his grip on my neck and trying to reach behind him. I didn't understand it. Did he change his mind?

I coughed, trying to rid the burning in my lungs the second Decker let go, but I couldn't scramble away from him because he was still sitting on me. A moment later Genevieve appeared over his shoulder, and she plunged that massive knife into his chest before pushing him sideways off of me. My panicked eyes darted from her over to where McMahan was standing a few feet away.

"I heard what you called me," Genevieve said, watching me struggle to get up as she wiped the blade of her weapon off on Decker's shirt.

"I thought you were going to leave me," I admitted, massaging the pain

"I thought you were going to leave me," I admitted, massaging the pain out of my neck. I needed to stop getting the shit beat out of me. I was tired. "Or kill me," I added a second later.

She didn't try to put my mind at ease about that. Instead, she glanced down at Decker. "Lucky for you, he seemed like the bigger asshole." She watched me for a minute with a somewhat curious look in her eye, like she was in deep thought, and then she turned in the direction of the vehicles.

McMahan followed after her, giving a timid smile as he passed, looking unsure of how to regard me. No doubt in the hour and a half it took me to get to this block Genevieve had told him all the reasons why she hated my guts. Even though she hated me, she'd just saved my life a second time, the first being not killing me on the roof, whether she wanted to or not. But I didn't just owe her for saving my life. Genevieve *rescued* me. From living in a Biter infested city. From being stuck in a complex with 'raiders'. She rescued me from myself. No matter how much she despised me, and whether or not she was going to make it easy or hard on me, I was going to find a way to make it up to her.

Zombies Ate My Neighbors

Zombies At My Neighbors by Schoolboy

Zombies Ate My Neighbors

Dugan

I cracked one eye to the bright morning light pouring through my bedroom window, and then tossed an arm over my face in an attempt to block it out. It was too bright for me to open my eyes again and check the time on the alarm clock, but it felt too early for a weekend morning. Sleep was coming on again, easily, until I felt a hand land on my bare chest. A delicate finger traced a crooked line to my ribs, and then poked one time playfully. With a throaty chuckle, I bent my torso away from the finger and grabbed my wife's hand, bringing it to my lips so I could plant a soft kiss on it.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said groggily, turning onto my side to face her and keeping her hand close to my chest, partly out of affection, partly to keep her from tickling me again. Through my sleep-blurred vision I could see her full lips turn into a cheerful smile, and her big brown eyes disappeared behind a slow, flirtatious blink.

"Morning," she repeated. Sleeping in and cuddling under the blankets on the weekend was something I always loved to prolong, and when her smile gained a playful tilt I could tell she was going to tease me by getting out of bed. The moment she turned onto her back to roll over I snatched her up, pulling her on top of me and wrapping my arms around her waist so she couldn't escape. She let out a lighthearted shriek, but instead of trying to squirm away she wedged her arms beneath me.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked teasingly, lifting a hand to gently twist one of her frazzled curls around my finger. Especially today, I wanted to lie in bed as long as possible. Work didn't always end on Friday for me, and when, like today, I had to go in on a weekend, I tried to put it off as long as possible.

"To get ready for the day," she answered, setting her chin on my chest and looking up at me through her long eyelashes. "Chrissie's got an early game this morning."

"Oh," I said slowly, trying not to look as guilty as I felt. Our eight-year-old daughter had just started in a new softball league, and not only had I promised to go, but I'd also promised to be assistant coach.

"Dugan," Patricia started scoldingly, reading my expression and pushing herself up to let me see the discontent on her face. "Don't tell me you forgot."

"Uh," I breathed, unwilling to lie. "We've got a major corporation coming in for a presentation at ten."

"You specifically promised," she said, pushing herself up even further. Right now she was disappointed. Next she'd get up completely, and that was how I'd know if she were officially mad.

I definitely didn't want that. "I know."

"Do you know how hurt Christina will be if you back out?" she asked matter of factly, shifting away even more, and then asked desperately, "Isn't there someone else who can go for you?"

"I know, baby." I tenderly put my finger to her lips in a polite attempt to shush her. "I'm thinking." She was still frowning at me, so I wracked my brain trying to think of a solution. She was right though. It was one thing to have her unsatisfied, it was another to disappoint my daughter. "I'll call Jim and have him cover for me."

Trish's lips instantly turned up into another smile. "Thank you."

"Of course." I shrugged like it was no big deal, and then in an attempt to forget about the small morsel of stress it did put on me, asked teasingly, "Who's the man?"

"You're the man," Patricia laughed, rolling her eyes and relaxing onto me again.

I squeezed her happily and raised a suggestive eyebrow. "How about some sugar for the man?"

It was obvious she was struggling to hold back another laugh as she pecked me on the lips and propelled off the bed. "How about some breakfast?"

"That works too," I agreed, kicking off the blankets and watching as my wife strolled out of our bedroom.

The second she left I grabbed my cell phone off the nightstand to call Jim. Thankfully he didn't mind covering me, and I didn't have to stress about it any longer. After another minute I managed to pull myself out of bed, and put on some sweatpants and a t-shirt before following after Trish. When I reached the hall I could see my daughter's bedroom door cracked, a small eye peeking out from the other side. She must've heard Trish walk by, and the second she saw me she threw open the door.

"Daddy!" she yelled happily, running toward me and jumping up once she reached me.

"There's my girl," I chuckled, immediately catching her and throwing her over my shoulder to carry her to the kitchen. Then I pulled her back into my arms and laid her across them so I could use her small body to do bicep curls. "You're getting too big!" When I jerked my arms and pretended to drop her she squealed, laughing halfway through and sounding exactly like her mother did.

By the time we reached the kitchen Trish had pulled out the things she needed to start making breakfast, so I set Christina down in a chair at the kitchen table and strode over to the automatic coffee maker, which had already made just enough for Trish and I. I poured Patricia a cup and mixed in the amount of cream and sugar she liked. After I carried it over and set it down next to her I wrapped my arms around her waist to watch her finish cutting an apple and an orange. I only got to hold her for a few seconds before Christina called for me again.

"Daddy!" she hollered, pointing a blue crayon at me.

"Yes?" I asked, pecking my wife on the cheek and turning to my daughter. I heard Trish mumble 'wait' before I walked away, and she handed me the plate of apple and orange slices to carry with me.

"You're coming to my softball game, right?" Chrissie asked as I sat down with the fruit, immediately using her coloring book to ignore the health food.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," I told her, picking up an apple slice and putting it in front of her mouth. She pursed her lips against the fruit, but I just wiggled it around until she giggled and gave in, taking a deliberately big bite. Trying to set a good example I munched on my own piece of orange, and when Chrissie saw me she reached for another slice. As I picked up a crayon to start coloring with her, Trish reached over my shoulder and set my cup of coffee down, because I'd forgotten it on the counter. "I love you," I said gratefully.

Before Trish could say anything in return Chrissie shouted, "What about me?"

I laughed, reaching across the table and pinching her wonderfully youthful cheeks. "Of course I love you too."

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I glanced up from double-checking the supplies in my backpack to take a look at Kara. Especially in the dim light of the single lantern at the center of the room, it was obvious the lack of daytime activities had left her pale skin a fragile-looking white – a direct contrast to her long, chestnut hair and dark hazel eyes. She was tiny too; crucially formative years spent with the malnutrition that resulted from the outbreak left her so. Petite was an understatement. At hardly five foot she couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. Her blue jeans fit snug, and so did her high top sneakers, but she was practically swimming in the black pullover sweater she was wearing, adding to the illusion of her daintiness.

"You ready?" I asked her, and when she nodded my eyes wandered to Chuck. We'd stayed here the last couple days with him to make sure we were well rested for the long journey ahead. He'd been sitting on his

were well rested for the long journey ahead. He'd been sitting on his sleeping bag on the floor, silently watching me for the past five minutes. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he almost looked sad we were leaving. Couldn't say I blamed him. I'd spent years by myself. After having a little companionship, solitude was a depressingly lonesome prospect. "It's not too late to come with us," I told him.

Slowly, his gaze left mine. He didn't say anything, but the downward turn of his mouth told me all I needed to know. It almost made me hesitant to leave. At first glance the tower seemed like the perfect spot to stay. The view went on for miles, there was only one way for intruders to get in, and the Ferals hadn't realized yet that there was a meal up here. The problem was meals for us. I could see why Chuck was nearly starving. The closest town was miles away and scavenging was an odyssey in and of itself. I couldn't imagine he expected to live too much longer up here. He looked done.

I glanced over at Kara again. The last few days she hadn't said much of anything. The only time she really spoke was when we asked her a direct question. At first I thought she might be mourning the people she'd lost. But she never frowned. Never shed a tear like when I found her in the closet. She just stared, sometimes around the tower, sometimes out the windows, her mouth set in a consistently straight line. Most of me thought the emotional apathy stemmed from her nerves being shot. She'd lost everyone she knew, and almost died herself. The kid probably just needed a rest. That was another reason I'd wanted to stay with Chuck for a couple days, to give her some time to recover. But deep down there was a darker fear. I could only imagine the kind of things a world like this would do to the mind of a child. I'd caught it in her eyes. I had no idea what kind of place she'd come from.

Ready to leave, I threw the backpack over my shoulders and took the grip of my hunting rifle in my left hand. "Chuck," I started, striding over and extending my other hand to him. "Thank you for everything. You've been an outstanding host."

He shook with me, forcing a parting smile. "You guys be careful out there."

I gave a genuinely grateful grin, and then turned for the exit of the tower, nodding for Kara to follow. I didn't look back, letting her close the door behind us as I tiptoed down the stairs. From the windows of the tower and what I could make out in the night, there weren't any Ferals roaming about, but we could never really be sure. When we got to the bottom I waited another minute for my eyes to completely adjust to the dark, and then pushed open the door to the outside, cautiously poking my head out. There were no Ferals in sight, so I strode out, now holding my rifle at the ready.

Kara was so practiced with silence I didn't even hear her close this door, and I glanced back over my shoulder just to make sure she had. We made a straight line for the openness of the highway, sacrificing cover for the ability to see in every direction. The teen walked at my side, but everything about her was silent. She walked with a ghostly lightness, her breathing was soft, and she still hadn't said a thing. It was almost lonelier than if I were by myself, and I could only stand it for the first twenty minutes of our travel along the highway.

"We have to get water," I finally said in a murmur, still keeping my eyes and ears peeled for trouble on either side of us. "And we need to find you a weapon."

Kara turned to check behind us, answering as she swiveled back around. "My group had weapons. I don't know if there are still Banshees around, but it's not too far into town." I knew what she was offering, but when in my thoughtfulness I didn't say anything, she added, "I can take you there."

Assessing the situation, I saw two immediate risks to her offer. First, there could very well be Ferals around, but I could handle those. What I wasn't sure of yet was how much I could trust Kara. As far as I knew her group could still be alive, and this could be some elaborate ploy to lure suckers like me into a trap. If there was one thing I'd learned over the years, it was that *everyone* was suspect, even meek-looking fifteen-year-old girls. However, weapons were crucial. Another gun would be nice, and I'd been searching for a suitable knife for a while now since the handle of my last one broke. To me, it was worth the risk.

"Okay," I agreed after considering it.

For another twenty minutes I tried to think of something else to say, but I couldn't think much over the new fear hovering in my mind. Now that I considered it more closely, the likelihood that I was following Kara into a trap was growing. Why didn't she have a single weapon? She clearly knew how to use one, seeing as she'd saved my skin and shot the Feral when I brought her out of the building. If she were my kid, I'd give her a weapon without hesitating. And she'd agreed to come with me so easily. Even if she did have nobody left, I was a middle-aged man who'd offered rather enthusiastically to escort her east, shouldn't that have been suspicious to her? Or at least intimidating?

We were only a mile or two from town now, but when Kara veered toward the side of the road I stopped. She strode to a broken street sign, where the top of the metal pole had been snapped off to a point, and about two feet below that it was bent in half. She glanced around to make sure the area was safe, and then knelt under the bent pole, wrapping her hands around it and giving it a hard tug. Then she used all her leg strength to try and force it upward, pulling it down again a moment later. I probably should have gone over and helped her, but I was too puzzled by what she was trying to do.

Eventually she bent it back and forth so many times that the two-foot piece split apart from the rest. Carrying it with her, she made her way back to me, thrusting the pole into the empty space in front of her to demonstrate. "In the meantime," she said, running her finger over the pointed tip of it, "Until we find a better weapon for me."

I couldn't help but give an approving smile at her resourcefulness. "That's really smart." I just hoped that resourcefulness wasn't going to bite me in the ass.

She looked a little shy at my praise, and shrugged bashfully before continuing toward town with her weapon in her hands. The city was pretty small, and the highway seemed to cut straight through the middle of it. Entering from the highway we started off in what was probably considered downtown, though the stores that lined both sides of the

street were only mom and pop shops in caliber, and there wasn't a big name brand in sight. I read each of the signs above every store as we tread lightly through the shadows against the walls. Eventually I spotted one called Gilbert's Grocery, and I cupped my hands over my face and the dusty window to get a look inside.

I'd barely focused through the layer of grime on the glass before Kara practically tackled me to the ground. "Not in there," she whispered in a frantically quiet voice. "Banshees." As if to confirm it, there was a clatter from somewhere inside, followed by a series of angry growls.

It had slipped my mind that she probably knew this town inside out, and even though it was tough for me to trust her when I was already having doubts, I nodded that I wouldn't attempt to go in there. "Where can we get food?" I asked.

She carefully straightened up just enough to peek in the window of the building, and then waved for me to follow her. She waited until we were a good hundred feet away from the grocery store to supply an answer. "If we go get the weapons first, I know where we can find some. But there's Banshees in there."

"How'd you guys get food before?" I tried to keep the growing suspicion out of my hushed voice as I trailed her along the sidewalk.

"We'd just ran out," she said, ducking behind the first car on our way across a dark intersection. "We were planning on leaving, but the Banshees got to us before we could."

The way Kara talked about it, it was as if she had no emotional attachment to her group. I wasn't sure exactly what any of her group members' relations were to her, whether or not they were family. But even after knowing Chuck only a few days I would've been a little choked up if something happened to him, and I was a grown man. I couldn't help but wonder if she seemed so callous because they weren't really dead. I didn't have enough food to be deserving of all this trouble, but my rifle was well worth an ambush.

In my distrusting fear, I continued to interrogate her. "How'd you get out?

When you guys got attacked."

She glanced back at me, and in the dark I could see her unhappy eyes look me up and down. "We'd planned an escape route through the attic of the house. I was the only one who made it. I hid under a tarp on the roof until nighttime, and then climbed a ladder down." The next street we turned down was a row of one-story houses. Kara pointed toward the row on our right side. "It's the third one. We can go back up to the roof and through the attic, but there might still be Banshees inside."

"We'll take care of them," I whispered in assurance. At this point, I didn't know if I'd prefer an ambush or Ferals when we reached the inside. But I guess it wasn't really up to me.

Kara and I snuck up to the back of the third house. I tried to peek in the windows on the way, trying to prepare myself and see if there were Ferals or humans inside, but everything was boarded up. At the back we made sure our surroundings were clear before turning toward the ladder that was leaned up against the side. Kara went up before I did, and I followed her to the roof, where a tarp covered a small skylight that opened up to the attic. After Kara dropped down into the attic I pulled out my flashlight, then I leaned my head into the opening and shined my beam around, checking for an immediate ambush before I followed in and was trapped.

There was nobody in sight except for Kara, so I climbed in and closed the skylight behind me. I'd have preferred it if Kara and I switched weapons. In case there really were Ferals in the house below us, it would be better if I had the silent weapon and dispatched as many as I could without her having to put herself in danger. Since I was half-preparing for an ambush, however, there was no way I was giving her my rifle and rendering myself defenseless if they had guns. I had to crouch so I wouldn't hit my head on the roof, but I stayed back while Kara inched toward the shut up stairs that would lead to the rest of the house.

"Go ahead," I said quietly, as she looked back at me when I didn't follow her over. "You can open it." She stared at me for a few seconds, looking unsure. She probably thought I was a coward, making the fifteen-year-old

girl open it before I even approached, but her maybe thinking I was a coward was better than me maybe ending up dead because she was bait.

Kara carefully pushed down on the folded up stairs, releasing each one from her grip in succession so it wouldn't open too quickly and make noise. The second she finished opening it, through the beam of my light, I could see her cringe. As a less stale air soon filtered into the attic from the rest of the house, I realized why she had. Though the new air wasn't as stale, there was a stench in it that made my eyes water and my breath catch. It smelled like filthy Ferals. It smelled like decay. It smelled like blood. I didn't doubt Kara's story anymore, and I felt so horrible now for not trusting her that I almost didn't want her leaving the attic. I didn't want her to go down into that house and see what had been done to her companions.

She looked over at me again once the stairs were lowered, and assuming that I still wanted her to go ahead of me she began to stretch a foot for the first step. "Wait," I said hurriedly, before she reached it, and I waddled awkwardly in my crouched position to where she was. "Trade with me." I handed her my rifle and took her makeshift spear, and then I scooted to the opposite side of the opening as her. "Don't shoot it unless you have to."

I waited for her to nod in understanding before leaning over and sticking my head out of the ceiling. Using my flashlight and trying to ignore the smell, I searched the immediate area for Ferals. The attic opened on the end of a narrow hallway. On either side of me were doors, the open one on the right was a bedroom, and I assumed the same of the closed one on my left. There was what looked like a bathroom further down the hall on the left side, and right after that a living room. Before I could move my beam to try and catch a glimpse of what was around the corner and across from that, I caught sight of some Ferals in the living room. There were six that I could make out, but they were all huddled in a single, sleeping pile, and for all I knew there could be more around the corner. Way too may for us to simply go right down and fight them all.

Pulling my head back up, I sat down beside the opening and rested my arms on my pulled up knees while I tried to think of a strategy. "There's at

arms on my pulled up knees while I tried to think of a strategy. "There's at least six," I whispered to Kara, who in the soft glow from my flashlight I could tell was watching me curiously. I moved my beam around the attic, searching for something up here that might be of use to us, but the attic was empty. I took a deep breath to prepare myself for action, and then leaned through the hole again.

I gave a soft whistle, trying not to wake all the Ferals at once, but it was so quiet none of them heard. I did it again, a little louder this time. One of the creatures closest to the hall shifted, and I tensed, waiting for it to get up and come at me. After it rolled over without rising, I could tell my attempt was unsuccessful. I was about to whistle louder again, but before I got a chance there was a swift movement on my right. I didn't even have time to rush backward before a Feral sprinted out of the open bedroom and vaulted itself up the stairs of the attic, its hand flying ahead of it to reach for me. Its hand caught me in the face, and I closed my eye just in time for its long, gangly fingers to bruise it instead of remove it.

The frightening suddenness of the attack startled me, and I fell backward as the Feral shot up the stairs. I brought the pole up, ready to launch my weapon through its chest the moment it reached the attic, but once its head emerged Kara struck it with the butt end of my rifle. I winced as it tumbled back down the attic stairs with a few loud thuds, and then again when it hit the ground and roared furiously. I knew it would wake the others. There went my wish of eliminating them one by one.

I scrambled forward just in time to see the same Feral shooting back up the stairs, and this time I managed to send the pointy end of my weapon straight though its breastbone. I yanked back on the pole as the Feral dropped back to the floor of the house, but another one was already on its way up. I immediately sent my spear forward again, catching this Feral in the face. I'd hardly killed the thing when an emaciated arm reached up from behind it and took a strong clutch on the sleeve of my shirt. The Feral I'd just stabbed in the face became a dead weight on top of the one that had just grabbed me, and as they both began to fall back I felt myself being pulled through the opening of the attic.

That moment I panicked, releasing my hold on our only silent weapon in order to grab the edge of the opening with my free hand and keep from

order to grab the edge of the opening with my free hand and keep from falling through. Just as the Feral the spear was stuck in started getting out of reach Kara tossed the rifle behind her and lunged forward, catching the very end of it in both her hands. I didn't get to see if she managed to keep her hold on it though, because the creature on me was pulling harder, trying to climb up my arm to get at me more ferociously. I wriggled my limb frantically, trying to break its grip, but its nails were practically embedded in my skin. Another Feral was attempting to bypass the one on my arm now, struggling to get past it and up the steep and narrow set of stairs. The metal spear plunged by my head and into the one clambering up the stairs, and as it dropped the one on my arm widened its jaws.

"Kara!" I yelled hysterically, knowing it was about to take a chunk out of my flesh but not being able to let go with my other arm and defend myself because I'd fall through.

She sent the weapon into the side of its head right as its teeth came into contact with my skin, and I frenziedly shook the limp thing off the moment I felt it's grip on my arm loosen. I didn't have time to feel relief that I'd been saved from a bite, because two more Ferals were already on their way up the stairs. I pushed myself up as swiftly as I could, adjusting my stance so I wouldn't be caught in another comprising position.

"Spear," I prompted in a rush as I kicked my foot down on the first Feral that got its head into the attic.

By the time the next one reached the opening Kara had tossed me the weapon and I plunged it into the creature. Initially, I'd underestimated the spot we were in, but the attic was the perfect place to launch an attack. I dispatched the remaining two Ferals the same way we'd gotten rid of the other five, and despite the surprise and almost getting bit, it seemed too easy. When the last one fell to the pile of bodies beneath the attic I casted the spear aside and dropped to the floor, laying on my back and panting heavily to catch my breath. I'd hardly lain down when Kara picked up the flashlight and knelt by my side. In her concern she grabbed my arm roughly and pulled it toward her, and then she shined the bright beam up and down the length of it, looking for a bite wound.

"I'm okay," I assured her, taking another deep breath as my heartbeat struggled to return to normal.

She didn't seem entirely convinced as she continued to scan my arm, lifting it straight up to examine the underside. She lowered it again and pushed up my short sleeve, pointing to where the Feral's nails had dug into my arm. The small wounds weren't deep, and only one or two had broke skin, but I could understand her worry.

I pushed myself up and off the floor, making sure to pick up the rifle before she got any wild ideas about me being infected. "We'll keep an eye on it," I told her, trying to ease her mind without sounding concerned about it myself. I sat back down at the edge of the opening, dangling my feet to the fourth step while I reached out, silently requesting the flashlight. "Wait here, I'm going to make sure the rest of the house is clear."

We'd made enough of a racket that I was sure any other Ferals in the house would have alerted us to their presence by now. Mostly I wanted to assess the scene before Kara might be exposed to a gruesome look at her dead companions. As she picked up the spear, I assumed she was preparing to wait until I came back, but when I reached the bottom of the stairs I could hear her coming down behind me.

I turned around to see her already at the last step. "You should wait," I whispered, "There could be more."

She shook her head, adjusting the metal pole in her hands with a resolved look on her face. "I left them. I'm not leaving you."

I knew I wouldn't be able to change her mind. What I didn't know was whether or not I could tell her what to do, even if I did think it was for her own good. She was young, but she wasn't a child, and she could take care of herself well enough that she'd already saved my life a couple times. So I didn't protest, and simply nodded before turning into the open bedroom on the right.

There were old things left over in the bedroom from the family that lived here before the outbreak. Now that my mind was starting to neglect the

here before the outbreak. Now that my mind was starting to neglect the scent of death, I could smell the musty odor of the old clothes hanging in the closet and the mussed blankets on the bed. Every step we took over the worn brown carpet sent a flurry of dust sparkling in the beam of the light. I cleared the open closet, and then bent down to check under the bed just in case. When I straightened back up Kara was pulling a couple pieces of clothing out of the closet and shoving them into her backpack.

I wasn't going to say anything about it, for all I knew she was being resourceful again, but when she saw me looking she answered my unspoken curiosity. "I used to sleep in here," she said quietly, zipping up her backpack and throwing it over her shoulders. "Some of the clothes are mine."

I nodded understandingly, but continued to watch her for a few moments, wondering if I shouldn't put my foot down about her going through the rest of the house with me. At my lingering gaze, her eyes darted left and then right before settling on me, and she pursed her lips unsurely. There was a childlike playfulness in the shiftiness of her glances, like that shy awkwardness my teenaged niece used to get when she didn't know what to say. All Kara was missing was the slow, embarrassed nod. If it had been appropriate, I might've chuckled. It was comforting to spot something familiar in a teen that I'd been suspicious of for the past few days.

"Are you sure you want to see everything?" I asked eventually, finally expressing my genuine worry. "You can wait in the attic if you want. I'll be fine." Her eyes wandered toward the door, and it held her gaze as she nodded.

Since she seemed set in her decision, I led the way back to the hall, holding my rifle at the ready as I pushed open the closed bedroom door. When nothing immediately came sprinting out we strode in, keeping our senses alert for any threat.

"Who'd you live here with?" I asked Kara as we explored every corner of the room.

It took her a few seconds to answer, and I almost wasn't sure if she was

going to. "My dad, my uncle and his girlfriend, and another guy name Bill."

We made our way to the next door in the hall, and I did a brief check into the small bathroom. I was about to answer as we reached the living room, but the sight stopped me in my tracks. I'd been about to extend my condolences for Kara's loss, but that wouldn't suffice now. Not with what we could see. The Ferals who'd attacked must have been starving, because there was hardly anything left of her four guardians. There were bloodstains all over the room. Some of them were mere splats against the wall, and others were seeping puddles in the dark carpet. It had only been a few days, but aside from the blood, practically all that was left of the group were skeletons and shredded clothing. The Ferals had eaten everything. If my nose wasn't already adjusted to the smell, the addition of this sight would probably have made me vomit.

There were more bone-shaped bodies than just four. I counted eight in total, which meant at the time of the attack the group was wildly outnumbered, and Kara was lucky she even got away. I glanced over at the girl to judge what kind of reaction she had. If she was going to burst into tears, I could comfort her. If she was going to go on an angry Feral-killing spree, I could stop her. But she was just standing there, staring blankly as though she'd never known them at all.

After a few moments she looked at me and held out her hand. "Can I have the flashlight?"

I handed it to her, and with it she strode forward to examine the bodies. She walked around the edge of the room to avoid the black puddles in the carpet, and finally stopped at a bloody skeleton next to the couch and knelt down. The only source of illumination in the boarded up house was the flashlight, and I watched as Kara clutched it between her chin and shoulder, and her hands were spotlighted as she reached down. One by one she pried the bony fingers from the grip of a shotgun, and every time there was a gritty crack I cringed. When she'd successfully pulled the weapon from the dead man's hand she wiped the dirtied grip with the quilt that was draped over the back of the couch. Then she moved on to check the next one.

"Kara," I said softly, treading over carefully and gently taking the flashlight from her. "Are you okay?"

"People kill, people die," she answered with a light shrug, reaching down for the bright red fire axe on the floor. "It happened before the outbreak, and it's going to keep happening forever. I don't need to get choked up about it."

She was too young to truly know about violence like that before the outbreak, and the way she recited it the words didn't sound like her own. It sounded like she'd experienced death plenty of times before, and like her father had been preparing her for this since the beginning. I didn't know what to say to a kid who'd lost everyone she knew, or how to respond to a kid who didn't seem to care. So I didn't say anything, and instead carried on to pick up the next weapon. I bent down to grab the large knife, and as I straightened up I felt the tiniest breeze against my cheek. With the flashlight in hand, I directed the beam toward the kitchen across from the living room. Through the empty doorway that led to the kitchen, I could see that the back door of the house was cracked open. That must have been how the Ferals got in, as it was the only entrance of the house I'd seen that wasn't boarded up.

Pacing over, I closed the door quickly. It felt like it had already been open too long and was putting us in danger. We were lucky no other Ferals in the surrounding area had come to investigate if they'd heard the noise. But after I released the handle the door slowly swung back open. It was broken, and the only way I could think to keep it closed was to put something in front of it. I passed a searching glance around the kitchen, looking for the heaviest thing I could spot. The refrigerator. I could tell Kara was watching as I pulled the appliance away from the wall with a grunt. After I unplugged it, I scooted it all the way toward the door, wincing each time the bottom of it screeched against the laminate tile. When it was safely blocking the exit I turned and leaned my back against it, taking a deep breath to try and relax.

"What do you want to do?" Kara asked from where she was now sitting atop a kitchen counter.

"Th[illegible]

"There are things we need," I answered, going over my mental list of supplies. "Water's most critical."

Without saying anything Kara used the toe of her shoe to open a nearby cupboard. When I moved the light beam to see what was inside, I couldn't help but grin. Every shelf was filled with gallons of water. "We had plenty of water. Just no food."

"You're sure there's food at the place you told me about?" I couldn't resist striding to the cupboard and happily gulping down almost a quarter gallon of water. Kara nodded as I passed the jug to her. "How come you guys were leaving instead of going there to get it?"

"Because of the Banshees," she said, and set the bottle on the counter next to her. "There's too many of them."

I raised an eyebrow at her, because if she was talking numbers then we were at more of a disadvantage than her group had been. "And you think we have a shot?"

"You're not afraid," Kara replied, looking down shamefully, as though she thought she was doing something wrong by implying the others were scared. "You're brave."

She was wrong, I *was* afraid, but surviving in a world like this meant learning when to ignore your fear. I only had two cans of food left. Now was one of those times when ignoring fear was necessary. "You're sure it's the only place that has food."

"Except for the grocery store, but there's even more in there." She nodded, holding the head of the axe in her hands and absentmindedly kicking the handle back and forth between her feet. "We already went to every house we could. There's nothing left."

I clicked off the flashlight so it wouldn't waste any more of the battery, and then I leaned back against the counter at Kara's side. "How many Ferals are at the spot you're talking about?"

She didn't answer right away, and a few seconds later mumbled,

¨Eleven.¨ After a short pause she added, ¨Usually. Sometimes more.¨

All I could do was sigh. That many Ferals just to get to food sounded like a nightmare, but it was our best option. We could start on our way to the next town with the two cans that we had, but we had no idea what it was like the next town over. Food could be scarcer there than it was here. Or worse, it could be claimed by a group of bandits. There was a sure source here. The only problem was it would probably take a fight to get it.

"I think we've had enough excitement for tonight," I mused, and Kara vigorously nodded her agreement. "We'll scout it out tomorrow night and try to come up with a plan." I fiddled with the flashlight in my hand for another minute of thoughtful silence. East was our destination, but we were in no rush to get there. Plus, I didn't know how much food there was at the place Kara wanted to go. There might be more than we could carry, and leaving behind perfectly good and valuable rations was one of the worst things you could do during times like these. "If it comes to it," I started, and all I could hear of Kara in the dark was her still kicking that handle back and forth. "Would you be okay with staying at this house for a while? In the attic."

"Yes." She answered quicker than I thought she would, and then I heard her hop off the counter. "Should we move the bodies outside?"

Even though I couldn't see her in the dark, I looked her way as if to study her. I couldn't quite figure her out. She seemed so indifferent, but she cared, or else she wouldn't have saved my life like she did. "Sure," I said, moving toward the refrigerator to reopen the only unsealed door. If there was any child left in her, I'd find it eventually.

Of All The Strangers

The Stranger by Lord Huron

Of All The Strangers

Genevieve

I shot up in my bed, frightened out of sleep by the suddenly deafening alarm. It was completely unfamiliar seeing as we never had sirens for any kind of natural disaster in Rochester. I couldn't even fathom where it was coming from – it was so loud it sounded like it was coming from everywhere. The shrill pitch echoed off my bedroom walls and hung in the air with a piercing thickness. Even the glass of my window was shaking so badly I thought it would shatter.

Over the sound of the alarm I barely heard the heavy thud of footsteps rush past my room, and an abrupt shadow crossed over the crack at the bottom of my door.

"Dad?" I called, but I knew he wouldn't hear me. I hadn't spoken loud enough, too frightened by the possibilities of the alarm to raise my voice.

My heart was pounding so rapidly there was hardly a desire to even get out of bed and investigate. Nothing like this had ever happened before, no fire alarms, no intruder alerts, but I imagined my dad would have come in to either warn or calm me by now. At the very least stopped by on his sprint past my door. That's how I knew something wasn't right.

Forcing myself to get out from under the safety of the blankets, I strode to the window and lifted a part of the blinds with one finger. The view I got wasn't of my own street, I wasn't facing the right way, but from here I could see into the city a few miles away. It was alive. Bright, flashing lights were going off everywhere. I glanced over at the clock on my nightstand. It was three in the morning, way too late for there to be as many cars on the road as I could see from here. Plus there was a thick cloud of gray smoke set against the dark blue of the night sky, floating up

from a building somewhere in the city. Something was so wrong.

There was more pounding of footsteps past my room.

"*Dad?" I called. Hardly moments later the gait crossed my door again, going once more the other way, back down the stairs.*

In my unconfident terror, and fearing the worst, I searched my dark bedroom for something, anything I could use as a weapon, and the only thing that caught my eye was the vase sitting on my desk. It had a narrow enough neck that I could grip it in one hand, and a wide and thick enough body to do some damage if I had to hit someone over the head with it. I pulled the single fake flower out of it and turned it upside down, clutching it tightly as I eased open my bedroom door.

That earsplitting wail was blaring just as loud in the hallway as it was in my room. Poking my head out I glanced up and down, and not a movement in sight I strode forward to the balcony that overlooked the living room. An unfamiliar silhouette stood stiff at the foot of the couch, and before I could even fully focus on it I scrambled back and out of view. My heart nearly burst at sight of it, but once the initial shock wore off my mind processed who it was. It was the older man from next door. Something Greely. Ben I think. My dad was always talking to him out on the front lawn, but I couldn't think of a reason why he'd be in my house in the middle of the night.

Hiding the vase behind my back in case Mr. Greely was up to something, I snuck back to the balcony to look down once more. This time in the light of the moon pouring through the windows I could see my dad down there with him, in a frantic rush to throw things into a duffel bag on the couch.

"*Dad," I said in a loud whisper, but it wasn't enough over the siren. Instead of trying to holler for him I dashed down the stairs, and when I got there I rushed past the neighbor and hurriedly tapped my dad on the shoulder. "Dad! What's going on?" I yelled into his ear.*

I'd never seen him look so panicked, not even the day we got that call about Mom, and it certainly didn't help when he turned me back toward

the stairs. "Go get your brother. Pack a small bag for the two of you. Hurry!"

"*Dad!" I yelled again, now completely terrified. "What's happening?"*

"*No time to explain," he said over the alarm, and then gave me a hasty push. "Go!"*

There was enough distress in his voice to get me to run back up to the second floor without looking behind me. I threw open my eleven year old brother's bedroom door to find he was even more frightened than I. He was sitting up with the blanket pulled to his chin, and when I burst in it scared him so bad he threw it over his head to hide. I didn't waste time saying anything to him – my dad had successfully put me into a rushed panic. My brother's school backpack was on the ground by his nightstand, so I picked it up and dumped everything out onto the floor.

"*Micah, get dressed!" I shouted, turning around to his dresser and grabbing the first clothes my hands touched.*

When I whirled back to put them into his bag and he hadn't moved I threw the blankets off and scooped him up. Then I set him down and pushed him toward the dresser. He looked downright stiff with horror, but he did as I said and pulled some clothes out to put them on. I made a mental note to grab his toothbrush from the bathroom on the way to my own room while I glanced around to see what else of his I was missing. I wasn't sure what was going on or where we were going, so I stuffed his handheld game into it and then zipped it up. Thankfully Micah was moving swiftly, and as he finished pulling on a jacket I put the bag onto his back and then dragged him to my bedroom.

I did the same thing with my backpack, dumping its contents onto the floor and then shoving some spare clothes into it. Then I speedily got into a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. After I'd remembered to get our toothbrushes we flew down the stairs to where our dad had already closed the duffel bag. What he was doing now was enough to scare me pale. I didn't even know he owned a gun, but he was shoving bullets into a magazine, one by one with such shaky hands I don't know how he

managed, until it was full, and then he jammed it into a shiny black pistol.

"*Dad!" I shouted with resolve, giving him a serious look so he'd finally answer me. "What the hell is going on?"*

"*National emergency," he yelled back, throwing the duffel bag over his shoulder, still gripping the gun in one hand. "We're going to stay in Ben's basement for a while."*

My heart fell as I glanced over at Mr. Greely, noticing for the first time that he had a gun in his hand too. Then I gasped, remembering something I'd left in my room. "Mom's bracelet!"

"*We can't wait any longer," my dad hollered over the siren. "Let's go."*

He put a hand on my brother's shoulder to lead him to the door, and Mr. Greely turned just as impatiently, but he didn't say we'd ever be coming back for it. "I'm not leaving it!" I shoved past them, racing to my bedroom before my dad could stop me. I threw open the lid of my jewelry box, where I always put the bracelet, but it wasn't there. I was still in such a panic and my mind was moving too fast that for a moment I started digging things out of it, frantically reaching the bottom of the now empty box. Then I turned, finally recalling that I'd taken it off and put it on my nightstand, and I rushed over, clapping the thing onto my wrist as I darted back downstairs.

"*Okay!" I shouted to them as they stood waiting near the front door.*

My dad took in a deep breath to yell something back, but then the siren stopped. Compared to the high-pitched alarm the following silence was almost excruciating. It was so quiet every one of us froze. Over the exhausted ringing in my ears I could just make out the loud shattering of glass somewhere on the street. Then gradually my ears adjusted to the comfortable volume of the world around me, and I started picking up on softer noises again. But it wasn't comfortable, and it was anything but soft. There were still ambulance and police sirens going off in the distance. Far off shouts, panicked and angry and scared. Barking dogs. Crashes and more breaking glass. Gunshots. A bloodcurdling scream.

Suddenly I didn't want to leave the house. Even though I couldn't see what was happening, it sounded like chaos out there, and in here it seemed so safe. I didn't have a choice though, because hardly three seconds after the siren shut off Mr. Greely pushed open the front door. My dad followed after with Micah at his side, and once I'd made it out he closed and locked it behind us.

While he locked it I looked up and down our housing-track. Nobody else was outside, though a few of the lights were on in some of the homes. Whatever was going on it hadn't appeared that it had reached us yet, and all the noise seemed to be coming from the next street over. As my dad finished with the door and shuffled us out onto the sidewalk I saw some people at the end of our street. Four of them, one trailing about thirty feet behind the others, all walking so casually it was as though they had no idea what was going on or that it was three in the morning. I followed behind the others as we started the short distance to Mr. Greely's house next door, forgetting about the people at the end of the street.

We'd hardly made it to our mailbox before I heard the sound of sprinting footsteps behind us. I glanced back to see one of the people running toward us, only about twenty yards away by now. Thinking he might be hurt or need help I stopped and turned, but the moment after I did there was a deafening bang beside my ear. I let out a pained and startled shriek, and then nearly screamed again when the man who'd been running toward us dropped dead.

I turned to see Mr. Greely holding his gun up. "You just-" Then I looked over at my dad, wondering how he wasn't furious or panicking. Micah was staring wide-eyed at the body, and I grew angry that my dad wasn't doing anything about it. "Dad! He just shot that guy!"

Before he could answer there was an animalistic howl, and when I faced the street once more I could see those other three people bounding toward us. One of them had let out that sound. I wasn't mad at Mr. Greely or Dad anymore. Something was so horribly wrong.

"*Run!" Mr. Greely shouted, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me after my dad and brother, who were already in retreat toward the neighbor's*

yard.

I didn't look back as I took off toward the basement doors in Mr. Greely's backyard, knowing those other people were in pursuit not far behind us. I was halfway through the hatch behind Mr. Greely when I got the vague feeling like something was missing.

"*My bracelet!" I shouted, scanning the grass of the side yard and then the street. I could just see the distant sparkle of it on the concrete. In my rush I must not have fastened it correctly, and it had fallen off. I started to push myself back up the basement stairs, but Mr. Greely grabbed the back of my jacket, stopping me. "I can make it!" I said desperately, trying to break free of his hold. I was the fastest girl on the soccer team. I could make it.*

But I wouldn't have made it. As I stared after the priceless piece of jewelry a brief shadow crossed over it. I didn't get to see the sprinting person who'd reached us because Mr. Greely shoved me out of the way, firing one shot as the person reached the door. The man tumbled down the stairs with the pained bellow as Mr. Greely slammed the doors closed so the others wouldn't get to us. While he was busying himself with throwing a lock on it the person darted up from where he'd landed on the basement floor.

God was something wrong. In the moonlight the man's eyes were dark and hollow, like something crucial was missing, and they locked onto Micah. Despite the blood I could barely see oozing through his t-shirt and how painful the wound must have been, he let out an incoherent yell so deep and loud and furious it was like a roar. His feet left the ground as he lunged for my brother, but he didn't make it, because my dad fired multiple shots until he finally landed a fatal one.

I was sitting on the floor where I'd fallen after Mr. Greely pushed me, staring, breathing so fast and shallow I was starting to get lightheaded.

"*Genevieve," my dad said after a minute. He was holding Micah in his arms, one hand over the kid's eyes so he wouldn't look at the body.*

No one was there to cover my eyes, I couldn't tear them away, and my

chest was heaving painfully fast. "I don't want to know anymore."

…

"Morning," I greeted Cap as I made my way into the meeting tent. When we got back from retrieving Blake from the raiders last night I'd been told Cap wanted to see me first thing in the morning.

He nodded in acknowledgment, turning to the soldier who was always standing guard at the entrance of the tent. "Would you give us a minute?" The soldier made his way outside while Cap waved me in. "How's Blake?"

"April took good care of him," I answered, adjusting the rifle over my shoulder so I could sit in the chair in front of Cap's makeshift desk while he took a seat across from me. "A couple bruised ribs, but other than that and some cuts, he's fine."

"And Echo?" he asked, seeming somewhat tense about why he'd wanted to see me. He was sitting straight up in his chair, when usually he slouched or stood, and he was wringing his green hat in his hands.

"She's secure," I assured him, completely emotionless, trying my hardest to keep myself distant at the thought of her. "Still sleeping. I've got Garcia standing watch outside my tent."

"Good." Cap leaned back in his foldup chair, studying me intently, unsurely, like he could see the hate on my face even though I tried not to show it. "I told her she could stay," he started, pausing to gauge my reaction.

"I know," I said with as much composure as I could manage, trying not to let him see just how unsatisfied I was with his decision.

"It was the only way I thought she'd take us to Blake." His voice was a placating offer, an attempt to nullify my bitterness.

"I know," I said again, growing slightly irritated, not at Cap, but at the fact that I had to sacrifice living with the girl who killed my family in order to

get my best friend back.

"I've never seen you so," Cap stopped to study me again, lost in his thoughts, until eventually he decided he couldn't even find a word for it. "I don't know."

He hadn't been told yet why I despised Echo, and he certainly didn't know we'd been acquainted before the outbreak. But if he was going to point it out, I might as well tell him the truth. I just didn't know how he'd react, because he'd also been there the night the raiders got our companions killed. "It was her group. At the elementary school."

I could tell he knew right away what I was talking about. That night I'd been so hysterical and frantic and furious that Cap had to physically restrain me so I wouldn't get myself killed. But if he was shocked he didn't show it, and instead he was silent for minutes, thinking to himself so deeply it was starting to worry me.

"You know our stance on raiders," he said finally. "This is a world *for* criminals, and to ensure the safety of all those people out there that depend on me," and he motioned toward the door of the tent, "I've had to take a drastic approach." When he paused again, I nodded him on. He kept stopping as though he didn't like what he was about to say. "I made a deal with her, and she honored her part of the deal." This time I just sat there, completely unsure of where he was taking this. "I can't send her back out, where without supervision she could be a danger to anyone else. You're the only one I trust enough to watch her in our camp. Unless you take her and one of your soldiers far enough away into the woods that no one can hear."

After that I stared at him in shock, struggling to let it sink in and not entirely willing to believe I'd heard him right. I'd have thought it would be a relief, having Cap's permission to take care of Echo. I'd wanted so badly to do it just the day before, and I still couldn't say that I wouldn't if she provoked me enough. But this wasn't a relief. Whenever I looked at her, whenever I saw her face, and her battle wounds, and her tattoo, I saw the girl that killed my family. Now, sitting here in front of Cap, there was a part of me that pictured the girl from high school. I hadn't forgotten her, the girl who was quiet and awkward, and who always needed me to

her, the girl who was quiet and awkward, and who always needed me to stand up for her. Did I want Echo to pay for what she did? With everything in me, I did. She wasn't that meek girl anymore. But I wasn't a murderer, not a cold-blooded killer like her.

"Don't make me choose," I whispered pleadingly. I could follow an execution order, especially if it meant the safety of our civilians, but I couldn't sign the warrant myself, not even if it meant spending every minute of my time with the girl who stole everything I ever cared about. Not like this.

Cap sighed, gaining that set expression on his face for whenever he'd made up his mind. *Stubborn bastard.* "You're not a kid anymore, Genevieve. These are the decisions we're forced to make, whether we like them or not. Whatever you choose, you choose now. If she stays, I won't hear in three or four months that you've changed your mind."

He wasn't joking, and he wasn't going to help me along by making it clear what he wanted me to decide. There was so much going through my mind that I continued to just stare at him for a few minutes. What if I did decide to finish her? Maybe I'd feel relieved at having my revenge. Then again, maybe I'd feel guilty and start to hate myself. And what would Cap think? Maybe he wanted me to take her into the woods, to make sure our camp was safe without a doubt in our minds. Or he was probably testing me, and would be severely disappointed if I didn't spare her life. But sparing her life meant having to live with her, having to see her face day after day only to be reminded that I didn't lose my dad and brother because we weren't fit to survive, but because some selfish assholes decided to get reckless.

I wanted her dead. That much was certain, but it was only with ninety-five percent of me. There was still that five percent that remembered the timid, submissive teenager. Maybe that was why I hadn't even killed her yet, on the roof, or back in the city. No matter the reason, I wouldn't be able to do it without being one hundred percent sure. I could take her into the woods easy enough, but I knew myself well enough to know I wouldn't be able to pull the trigger. And now that I'd thought it through, part of me grew angry that Cap was even making me decide. It was his fault he'd made that deal with her in the first place. His fault I was in this

fault he'd made that deal with her in the first place. His fault I was in this position. He should be the one to decide.

"Damn you, Cap," I said quietly, refusing to look him in the eyes. I didn't have the guts to yell at him, to let him see how I was really feeling. More than he was a caretaker to me, he was my commander, and just like all the other soldiers I had to maintain some level of respect.

"I'm sorry. I don't have any other options." He sounded entirely sincere, but it didn't help. When I didn't say anything else, still refusing to look at him so I wouldn't lose it, he knew I'd made my decision. "Bring her in for briefing as soon as she wakes up."

I didn't say anything to him, just left and strode back to my tent. I was still upset, but more than angry now I was disappointed. I'd always heard if you saved a life you were responsible for it, I just never saw to take it seriously. I was more responsible now than I would have ever wanted. By the time I got to my tent and let Garcia go, I resolved that even though I couldn't find it in me to kill Echo, I could still make her life miserable. Starting now.

"Hey, wake up!" I said loudly, giving her leg a harsh tap with my boot.

Startled out of sleep she tried rapidly to sit, but her hands were locked to the support pole of the tent, so she only got halfway before being roughly pulled back down. "Ow," she whined when she fell back onto her pillow, and then stretched one of her hands to rub the top of her head. "Could you at least be a little gentle until my concussion is gone?"

I ignored her request, irritated she had the nerve to ask me for anything. Hadn't I given plenty? It was bad enough I had to wake up grumpy from now on and see her, even worse if she was going to start complaining. Kneeling down beside her, I undid the cuffs around her wrists and then stood. She didn't make to get up once I'd taken them off. She just lay there, bringing her hands to her temples and massaging them sedately.

"We've got shit to do," I said impatiently. "If you insist on lying there, I'll cuff you back in and you can stay here all day." At my threat she sat up again, and then pushed herself onto her feet so provokingly slowly I could

near the grinding of my teeth in my ears. ¨Hurry. Up.¨

"Stop rushing me." Her smoky gray eyes narrowed at me while her hands went to her head, rubbing it like it was still hurting. "This is your fault. April said I should take it easy."

If I had known she was going to milk it, I wouldn't have hit her so hard. "She'd say the same thing if you stubbed your toe," I quipped irritably.

Echo still didn't seem concerned with getting a move on. As if to purposefully annoy me she put her hands on her hips and leaned back, lazily stretching until her spine cracked. "Could I get a cot in here? It's really uncomfortable, especially with those cuffs on."

I hated the fact that she was even sleeping in my tent, and now she wanted to bring another cot in? The only reason I didn't make her sleep outside last night was because I needed to be able to keep an eye on her. She'd already slipped out of the handcuffs once. I don't know how, but if she'd done it once I wouldn't doubt she could do it again. "We don't just have spares lying around," I told her coldly.

She watched me quietly while she ran her fingers through her medium length, light brown hair, untangling it until it fell in waves. Then she pulled it up into a messy bun, with a couple stray ringlets falling out the back and over her slender face. "Well, where'd you get yours from?" she asked.

"Would you stop talking and put your shoes on already?" I begged in annoyed exasperation.

She sighed and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, which accentuated the small laugh line at one corner of her mouth. She'd always had that laugh line. Back in high school I used to think if it weren't for the fact that she was so awkwardly shy and a major nerd she could have been more popular. She was attractive, especially with that line adding a caliber of subtle sex appeal. Now I hated it. It made it look like she was constantly smirking. As if she were taunting me. Like she thought it was funny she ripped my family away from me.

After a couple seconds she looked at me, and she must have seen by the look on my face that I wasn't messing around, because then she slipped into her already tied shoes. "Okay, I'm ready," she said, and I motioned toward the entrance of the tent for her to go in front of me. She glanced back at the support pole I'd locked her to as she stepped outside. "What, no cuffs?"

I followed her out, pointing straight ahead when she looked over her shoulder at me for direction. "It'll make people uncomfortable if they think we don't trust you," I told her, giving her shoulder a push when she slowed down too much.

At my push she turned to scowl at me, but took the hint and sped up a little. "Wouldn't want that," she said sarcastically, and then, "Where are we going?"

"Stop talking to me," I growled quietly. She was acting so friendly it made me want to punch her. I was the furthest thing from a friend she'd ever have.

Thankfully we arrived at the meeting tent before she could find anything else to say, and when we stepped in Cap waved her over. "Echo, have a seat." He glanced at me while she made her way to the makeshift desk, but he didn't look for long because he could tell I was still upset with him. I stayed near the entrance, folding my arms across my chest to wait until I could leave again, and that time couldn't come soon enough. "I want to talk to you about you staying here," he told Echo once she'd sat down, and he made his way to his own chair. She nodded to let him know she was listening. "This is probational, and will be for a while until I decide whether or not we can trust you. You're starting out on thin ice, so I wouldn't go around poking holes in your foundation."

"Okay," she said agreeably, and then fell silent to hear what else he had to say.

"You're to remain with Genevieve at all times." I held back a dissatisfied sigh at that. "Unless she puts someone else in charge of your supervision, which won't be often." At that last part he looked at me, as if

to let me know that was *my* rule instead of Echo's. "We run things like the military around here. Genevieve isn't just your handler. She's your superior officer, meaning you will take orders and comply to her requests with respect and drive, just like every other soldier here. And until you're off probation, every other soldier here will be your superior instead of your peer. Understood?"

"Understood," Echo repeated, peeking over her shoulder at me with what looked like remorse in her eyes before turning back to Cap.

"Let me make perfectly clear where we stand," Cap said, standing up and folding his arms across his chest, mirroring my stance. "We've never been lenient with raiders. Usually we exact a shoot on sight policy. As a raider I cannot overlook your history, and as far as I'm concerned, you won't be set loose on the world again. Quite frankly, your options are adaptation or death. There will be zero tolerance if your superiors bring me unsatisfactory news."

Echo was quiet for a few seconds, absorbing the information before she nodded again. "I won't disappoint you."

"Good," Cap said, appeased, though I wasn't quite as assured. "I'll let Genevieve explain the rest while she shows you around camp."

Echo stood, but I was already halfway out the door, and I heard her footsteps hurry to catch up with me. "You know where the DFAC is," I told her flatly, pointing in the direction of the food.

"Deefack?" she repeated phonetically, confusion clear in her voice.

"The dining facility, where I almost beat the shit out of you," I answered, turning away from the general direction of camp and heading toward the river, not really caring whether she was keeping up or understood my answer to her question.

I heard her mumble behind me, "You're lucky I've had a concussion," and I turned to give her a look so fierce she visibly snapped her mouth shut.

Neither of us said anything else until we reached the creek, and despite

my rage-fueled pace she managed to keep up. "This river marks the southeastern border of the camp." Echo made her way to my side, bending down to run her hand through the surface of the water. "If you don't bathe at the tent, you do it here. If you're thirsty there's a container of water at the DFAC, or you go upstream to drink," I told her, and then pointed south of the river. "You do your business downstream or a mile into the woods. Got it?" She nodded, and I made a motion toward deeper into the forest. "There're watch posts a quarter mile out from every side of camp, four total, up in the trees, and two soldiers are constantly circling the borders."

"That's all you have for security?" she asked, following close behind as I started back into camp.

"Our civilians are well armed and there are more soldiers all over the place." As we walked I adjusted the rifle over my shoulder because I could feel it slipping, and when I looked back I caught Echo's eyes locked onto it. I don't know what she was thinking, she didn't necessarily look like she wanted to be anywhere near it, but I still didn't trust her. "Don't get any ideas," I warned.

Her eyes darted up, and I could see her cheeks redden at having been caught. I was going to let it go, not too concerned seeing as she didn't even have her pocketknife, but after a few moments she explained, "I just don't want to get hit with it again."

When I took a short gaze behind me once more she was gently fingering the gauze bandage taped to her forehead. There was enough genuine fear in her voice to almost make me feel bad for hitting her so hard. Almost. "Then don't test me," I offered indifferently.

She was quiet for the rest of the time while she followed me. I led her past the living quarter area of camp to where it turned into roughly cleared wilderness, knowing we'd reach the gardens soon. Some of the civilians were still working on clearing land so we'd have a smoother spot to expand the farmland, but for now we put up with a few trees here and there. Before we could reach it we passed the butchers outpost, where the hunters cleaned any of the game they brought back.

I didn't tell her what this place was, but she must've glimpsed the skinning rack and the vapor seeping through the cracks of the smokehouse, because she asked, "Do you eat the horses?"

She was talking about the five horses tied up near the smokehouse. We didn't eat them. The hunters took them out to travel faster and easier, but even with all my scorn for Echo I couldn't resist teasing her. Maybe it would make me feel a little better. "You weren't complaining at breakfast yesterday." Obvious horror riddled her face, and I could've sworn I saw her gag a little. It was enough to make me snort with laughter. "They're for riding," I told her, continuing on toward the gardens. "Dumb ass."

"Bitch," she retorted quietly, her footsteps picking up behind me. "Can we go hunting?" she asked hastily before I got a chance to turn and glare at her, as if she knew I was going to do it.

"We can do whatever we want." As we continued my hand felt for the knife at my thigh – a subconscious habit to make sure it was still there. "But I'll be damned if I'm giving you a gun."

"Ever?" she asked. I heard her footsteps quit following, and when they still hadn't picked up a few seconds later I stopped and turned. She was bent over with her hands on her knees, breathing deep and slow. "I need a quick rest."

"Seriously?" I asked in rhetorical disbelief, scoffing with annoyance. I didn't want this tour to take all day. Hell, I was already debating who I could dump her with and whether or not Cap would find out.

"My head is pounding," she growled angrily, but she straightened up like she didn't want me to see any weakness. I couldn't have cared less if her head hurt. As far as I was concerned, she deserved it. But the last thing I wanted to do was carry her back into camp if she passed out, so without saying anything else I stood there, waiting not-so-patiently for her to recover. "That gun in your tent is *mine*," she said after a minute, continuing the conversation and striding toward me to let me know she was ready. "So is the knife."

I picked up my pace back toward the garden, already reaching the first

I picked up my pace back toward the garden, already reaching the first patch of plants after a few feet. "And I'll keep them nice and safe for you," I assured her monotonously. I'd keep them safe, but as of now I wasn't sure when I'd give them back. If it were up to me she'd never get them, but she was going to start going on missions with us, and it would be worse if she didn't have a weapon and was a burden on the rest of us.

There were a few people at this particular patch of garden tending to the crops, and I waved as we passed by. It was only another minute weaving through thin forest until we reached the start of the largest and most well-cleared area of land. So far we'd managed to plant across almost forty acres, though a lot of it wasn't yielding anything yet and was inconsistent because of trees. Our camp still relied somewhat on whatever food Second Platoon brought back from their runs, but we were slowly growing independent of the outside world, and that was something nobody could complain about.

"This is amazing," Echo murmured, following me between knee-high rows of vegetables, and when I glanced back she was staring in every direction, wide-eyed with awe. A good amount of the camps inhabitants tended to the gardens, so there were quite a few people out here already. Despite how hush-hush we'd tried to keep Echo's situation, I could tell some of them already knew who she was, because a few were watching us walk by, elbowing or whispering to the person next to them. "How long have you been out here?"

"Year and a half," I answered without turning around again. "About." I was taking her to the very edge of camp and then a quarter mile out so I could show her what the patrol blinds looked like. Now that my platoon was back, Cap would likely give us a break before sending us out again. A break didn't mean we got to sit on our asses though. When Second Platoon was out on a run it meant my platoon was in charge of patrols, which ran in twelve-hour shifts. Plus there was the fact that when a soldier didn't have a day shift we were usually expected to do some kind of work just like everyone else.

"How many people are there?" she asked, her voice carrying to me over my shoulder.

"Exactly?" I said, and then paused until I heard her 'mhm'. I didn't even need to think about it to know how many people there were exactly. It was my job to protect and supply for them. That number was one of the most important pieces of information I had. "Two hundred and seventy-three, including you."

"Holy shit," she said in shock. "How?" Her question was a little vague, so I glanced back just long enough to raise my eyebrows at her, impatiently, just so she'd know I still wasn't enjoying the conversation. "Whose idea was it to live out here?" she asked, but she didn't stop there. "How do you know what to do? Where'd all these people come from? Do you have some kind of government or something?"

I sighed at her onslaught of questions. Answering them wasn't what I wanted to do right now. What I wanted was silence, preferably indefinite silence. But she was going to ask them, and I'd have to answer sometime. Might as well get these introductions out of the way so she'd never have to speak to me again after this. "Cap had a friend that used to be in the military with him that was with us since the beginning. He was really into survivalist stuff." He was one of the three we'd lost to our first winter in the woods. Despite the fact that he knew how to survive in any condition, he was so concerned with making sure everyone else was healthy that he didn't take enough care of himself. He'd have given the shirt off his back for a complete stranger. He ended up getting pneumonia. "It was his idea." We reached the end of the gardens and I glanced around for a second, judging where we were, and then veered to the left a little where I knew the patrol outpost would be. "He helped with a lot of the initial living out here, taught some of us who didn't know how to hunt, taught us which plants we could eat and stuff like that. There were only about twenty of us back then."

I heard Echo mumble a surprised profanity, probably at how much our population had exploded just within a year and a half. I continued to explain away what I suspected was her wonder, "Since they were military, before coming out here we traveled to the base to get supplies and vehicles. There were some soldiers that had been there since the outbreak, living off MREs and sitting on top of enough weapons and ammunition to keep us stocked for years. A couple of them recognized

Cap, and since Cap was the highest ranking they didn't mind when he asked them to tag along." I stopped my recount of our history, forgetting what her other questions had been.

"The people," she reminded me after a minute.

"Yeah," I said in recollection. "Once we had a basic camp set up out here we started sending vehicles to look for survivors. Most of these people are from nearby areas, and they didn't hesitate to come back with us. The more people we got, the easier it got to start expanding." I paused for a moment to think back to her final question, then asked to make sure, "Government right?" She answered in the affirmative. "Cap's the boss, he makes the decisions. Nobody's had any complaints so far, we sort of just go with what he says."

"Like Queen Elizabeth," Echo said quietly.

"What?" I asked through a laugh, put off by how completely random that sounded, and by the fact she was comparing Cap to a queen. If only he'd heard it. No doubt his machismo would've taken a hit.

"Everybody loved her," she answered, adding a shrug when I glanced back at her awkwardly. "What? You want me to make a different comparison?" she asked with a chuckle. "Henry the eighth? President Roosevelt?" Then she added with another laugh, "King Arthur?"

I rolled my eyes in slight amusement, and then, realizing she'd made me not hate her for a brief moment, I grew irritated. "Jesus, you're still a fucking nerd," I told her mockingly, regaining my bitter tone.

She undoubtedly picked up on the change, because she answered more defensively than she had about anything I'd said yet, "Haven't you ever picked up a goddamn history book?"

"Been kind of busy not getting my face eaten off," I told her in annoyance, stopping once we reached the patrol post. I shielded my eyes from the rays of sunlight streaming through breaks in the trees overhead and glanced to the platform twenty-five feet up. "Hey, guys," I waved to the two soldiers in the blind.

"Hi, LT," they both called down in unison.

I glanced back at Echo, who'd been leaning against a tree tiredly and straightened up coolly when I looked at her. "Patrol tower," I said, pointing into the tree. "Evening shifts get a pair of night vision or thermal binoculars. We've got a shift in a couple days."

Without waiting for her to respond, recover, or come up with any questions, I started back toward camp. She followed me silently while keeping her distance, though I couldn't be sure if she was moving slowly because of the concussion or just because she was a little bit afraid of me. We were only a few yards from the outskirts of the living quarters when I stopped again. Once more she was leaned over with exhaustion, but this time she didn't seem to care if I saw or not, as it appeared she was panting too heavily to even notice me. So maybe her concussion was pretty bad…

"You want to eat first? Or go to the medical cabin?" I asked, looking her up and down and thinking based on her condition I'd let her decide.

"Medical cabin?" she repeated in confusion.

I nodded, folding my arms across my chest and leaning back against a tree while I waited for her to catch her breath. "Don't you need to get your stitches checked, or get medicine or something?" I honestly had no idea, and I didn't really care. But regardless of how much I hated her, she was one of my soldiers now. I owed her the same responsibility I gave all my men. Whether I was still going to make her life miserable or not, I had to make sure she was healthy. Otherwise she'd be even more of a burden.

"Oh, yeah, let's do that," she said, gray eyes scanning me unsurely. "Thanks," she added, like she thought I was being nice for her sake.

"Whatever," I said casually, and not wanting her to think I cared, I pushed myself off the tree and rushed her impatiently. "Well, then, hurry up."

She had an exasperated look on her face like she wanted to sigh, but she straightened up to follow me. At the medical cabin April checked on

Echo's concussion, applied some ointment to the stitches on her forehead, and then covered it with fresh gauze. She offered to put some ointment on the cut over my eyebrow from when Echo hit me, but I didn't want to give Echo the satisfaction of thinking she injured me, so I declined. After that we strolled to my tent so I could grab my eating utensils, and I'd been enjoying her not talking to me the entire time until she saw me pull them out of my trunk.

"Where could I get some of those?" she asked, on my heels as I made my way toward the DFAC.

"Second Platoon is scheduled for a supply run in a few days," I told her unconcernedly.

She hurried to walk at my side, glancing over at me while she spoke. "What do I do until then?"

"That's really not my problem," I answered indifferently as we reached the serving table. I smiled at the woman on the opposite side of me and held out my bowl so she could fill it. "Morning, Aminah."

"Good morning, Genevieve," she greeted happily while she dropped some fresh vegetables into my bowl. Then she turned a joyful smile on the raider. "Hi, Echo."

"Hi, how are you?" Echo asked her with a genuine grin, and I rolled my eyes as I continued down the line to get some coffee, somewhat resentful of the fact that Echo was already making friends.

Only a few moments after I sat with my meal Echo plopped down across from me with her own bowl of salad and a cup of coffee. "Where'd you get those?" I asked in unpleased surprise. The vengeful asshole in me was kind of hoping she'd struggle with it.

"Aminah let me borrow them," she answered nonchalantly, shoving a massive bite of vegetables into her mouth and then letting out a satisfied groan. "What's the dressing on this?"

"Herbs," I told her irritably, watching as she shoveled down more food before she'd even swallowed her last bite. She looked thin, but it didn't appear she'd been completely starving before coming here, and the salad wasn't *that* good. Or had I just stopped appreciating things like I used to?

"You know what they look like?" she asked, clarifying a moment later, "The plants." I simply nodded, wishing she'd let me eat in peace. "Can you teach me?"

I met her eyes with my own for a brief second before glancing down at my food without supplying an answer. This whole time she'd been talking to me way too much. All I really wanted was for her to learn how to pull her own weight around here so that other than making sure she didn't get into trouble I could act like she didn't exist. It wasn't long until Aminah came over, since most everybody had already eaten and was getting to work, and she conversed with Echo like the raider was the most interesting person in the world. And Echo had such casual answers to all her questions. Where'd you come from? The city. How'd you survive? Scavenging. What about the Ferals? We avoided them. Fucking lies is what it sounded like to me. Echo was a violent crook. A murderer. She might be able to fool some people, but not me.

By the time I was finished with my food and drink I couldn't listen to any more. "Let's go." I stood, unconcerned with whether Echo was done or not, and started toward my tent before she was even on her feet.

It took her a minute to catch up, but I could hear her footsteps crunching through the leaves, hurrying toward me. "Slow down," she said pleadingly, only a few feet behind now.

I angrily glared at her over my shoulder. "Shut up." Blake was sitting alone at the fire pit nearest our tents when we reached the area, cleaning his pistol. I sighed with relief that so far he was obeying April's orders of bed rest, and before I even greeted him I pointed at Echo. "Can you watch her for a bit? I'm going to take bath."

He opened his mouth to give me a response, but Echo spoke before he could. "I want to take a bath."

could. "I want to take a bath."

I let out an exasperated breath while I raised my hands to my head, stressfully massaging my temples. I didn't even answer her, hoping my aggravated silence would be enough to discourage her. By the time I grabbed the stuff I needed out of my tent, I realized it hadn't, and she was holding her own towel and a bar of soap in her hands, waiting for me. I shoved past her in the direction of the river, not once looking behind me to make sure she was keeping up okay. When I got there I stripped as usual, and then dove into the water without feeling how cold it was first.

For a minute the icy fluid and the soft tones of the stream almost calmed me down. Until Echo's voice carried to me from the bank, complaining about the temperature. I looked over to scowl at her, but despite her remarks, she wasn't being a wimp about it. She was already on her way in, half-dressed by her undergarments, just like I was.

"What's that?" I asked, glimpsing a scar on the inside of her right hip before her waist disappeared beneath the surface.

"What's what?" she said, dunking her head back under the water just enough so it wouldn't reach the gauze on her forehead, and then resurfacing with a shiver.

"The scar on your hip." It was thin, but still nearly three inches long. "What's it from?"

She looked at me for a couple seconds before turning away, half ignoring me while she started to work her soap bar into suds. "Knife wound."

"Seriously?" My jaw dropped in shock. It was huge for a knife wound, and all resentment aside, now I was curious. "How'd you get stabbed?"

She stored her soap bar under the shoulder strap of her bra while she scrubbed the suds into her hair. "Don't worry about it," she told me indifferently.

I stared at her for a bit, taking in the cuts and bruises on her face that hadn't been done by me. Part of me wondered if maybe she really did

hadn't been done by me. Part of me wondered if maybe she really did have it rough with the raiders. She'd said so herself that half of them wouldn't have minded seeing her dead. I couldn't blame them, but there still might have been a slight, very small bit of sympathy forming in the bottom of my gut. "No, seriously. What happened?"

"Nothing." Her voice gained a tone of impatience, but she was desperately avoiding making eye contact with me.

My curiosity was too deep for me to just let it go. "Echo," I started sternly, "How'd you get-"

"Robbing someone," she interrupted hastily.

Any sympathy I might have been on the way to feeling moments before was completely gone. It was replaced by a familiar, hate-filled rage. "Fucking serves you right," I sneered fiercely.

"That's why I didn't want to tell you," she whined, staring at the reflective surface of the river and face riddled with shame.

I just continued to glare at her, a cold, hard, furious scowl. It wasn't just my dad and brother I thought about whenever I was reminded of where Echo came from – which was constantly. It was every single inhabitant at this camp. Mercy would be a meaningless word to me if someone ever tried to hurt any of my citizens or soldiers. "Being a thieving bitch is your own damn fault."

She was quiet for a minute, and even though I turned away to keep my animosity from getting to the point where I'd want to beat the shit out of her again, I got the feeling she was pouting. "Genevieve," she said eventually, voice sounding severely dejected. I refused to answer, but she asked anyway, "Would it make a difference if I told you how sorry I am?"

Despite the cold water that chilled me to the core, I felt my entire body fill with an enraged heat. I wouldn't be surprised if my face was completely red, and when I turned to face Echo she visibly flinched. "No it won't make a goddamn difference!" I yelled irately, clenching my fists as they

hung at my sides. "And fuck you!" She was lucky she was out of arms reach. "If you ever try to apologize again I won't *almost* put you into a fucking coma." I started upstream, wanting to be as far from her as possible. "Don't follow me," I called furiously over my shoulder.

At this point I didn't give a shit if she got into trouble because I wasn't watching her. That would be all the better, because then maybe Cap wouldn't put up with her and he'd put us both out of our misery. Goddamn Cap. When I was far enough away that I felt alone I sat in the shallow part of the river so it was up to my neck, and stared blankly across to the other side. Part of me wished I'd taken Cap up on that offer and shot Echo in the middle of the woods. It was too late now. And I wasn't moving from this spot until I could be absolutely sure I wouldn't shoot her the second I had my rifle back in my hands.

Female Robbery

Female Robbery by The Neighbourhood

Female Robbery

Echo

I'd been strolling in the dark down a major street for the past few hours, every once in a while going through an empty building to look for food. I was starving. Had been starving for the past week since the outbreak started. Biters were everywhere, and all I had to protect myself was a hammer I'd taken from the house. I should have grabbed some food too, maybe some supplies, but all I could think about was leaving. I couldn't stay there another second after what happened.

Now I was crouched behind a vehicle, hiding from a large group of people a few streets away and heading my direction. When I first left the house I'd been searching for someone, anyone who would take me with them. But from the dark of my hiding spots the last week I'd learned to avoid people. Most of them were still panicked and afraid and distrustful, even of me though I was still young, and if I got too close they'd shoot or attack with whatever weapon they had. Others would attack for no reason, just to see what kind of supplies you had. Either way, my hammer was insufficient to defend myself. I'd been invisible my whole life, remaining so shouldn't be too difficult.

It would have been safer if I'd gotten inside the car to hide instead of crouching beside it like I was now. I would've been less visible, but I was too afraid of setting off an alarm, and the group was getting close enough that they'd hear me if I moved. Lifting myself just enough to see through the windows, I counted twelve, and even though it was too dark to be sure, they all looked pretty young. Some of them were lagging pretty far behind the others, but I knew they were all together by the way one in the front group would turn to loudly whisper something to someone in the back. They were making more noise than they needed to, and the fact

that they weren't afraid of the Biters made me terrified of them. Sane people were afraid.

The group crossed to my side of the street, only a couple buildings away by now, and the change caused my heart to speed up fearfully. I was about to dart across the sidewalk and into the black alley I knew was there, hoping I'd do it quick enough that none of them would see me, but before I could there was a fast, sharp whistle from behind me. The noise caused me to spin around, pinning my back to the side of the car, and I must have looked panicked, because one of the two men I was facing let out a chuckle.

"What're ya doing?" The one who chuckled asked casually. He was small, thin but well muscled, with short black hair and dark eyes.

"Wh-wh-what am I doing?" I was so terrified I stuttered, repeating his question because I could hardly think enough in my fright to come up with an answer. The men must have been with the group, because at the whistle a few of them hustled over and gathered around me.

"Look," said the other guy who'd first found me, pointing his finger at me. His brown hair was buzzed, and not only was he much taller than the other one, but he was larger too. "She's shaking."

I was *shaking, horribly. The only thing it accomplished was amusing my spectators. "Come here," the black-haired one said fiercely. He grabbed my arm, pulling me off the ground and close to him. He stared me down for a few long seconds while I trembled in his grasp. "You're pretty, ain't ya?"*

He continued to leer at me, like he was waiting for an answer. All I could do was repeat his question again, "Pretty?"

A couple more had reached us now, and I finally remembered I was holding the hammer in my hand. I knew I would never get away, even if I managed to knock this guy out. There were too many of them. I attempted it anyway. I brought my arm up with the intent to bring it down hard against his skull, but he caught my wrist the moment I did. I tried to

wrench away from his hold while maintaining my grip on the makeshift weapon, struggling against his strength while some of the others snickered at my useless attempts.

"*A fighter," he grinned, chuckling menacingly as he gave me a rough shake to cease my worthless battle. "I love it when they have spunk."*

"*Victor, let her go," one of the girls who'd just walked up told him. "She doesn't have anything we could take."*

Victor glanced toward where I'd been leaning against the car, only to find there wasn't a backpack there or over my shoulders. I had hardly a possession on me. "I don't have a-anything you could take," I reaffirmed with a frightened shiver. "It's true, I swear."

The large guy with the brown hair snickered in amusement. "Is there an echo out here?"

"*E-e-echo?" I asked, causing most of them to snort with laughter.*

The girl who'd spoken before didn't find it funny. "Victor," she repeated impatiently.

"*Oh, shut up," the bigger one told her in annoyance.*

The man who was still holding onto my arm smiled at him, "Thanks, Decker." Then he turned his eye on me. "Besides, she's got something I want."

"*What do you w-want?" I asked, shaking more violently than before. I was going to die. They were going to kill me. I inhaled a deep breath, preparing to scream. At least alerting some Biters to our presence might cause these guys to let me go and run. Or they'd kill me first and then run, but either option was better than the one I could see in Victor's eyes.*

"*Leon," the girl whined before I could let out a wail, talking to one of the guys who'd just arrived with the last of their group.*

"*Yeah, Leon," Victor grinned triumphantly, as though he thought Leon*

would agree with him. "What should we do with her?"

My heart fluttered with relief when I saw Leon, but then it dropped, as I hoped he was even in a position to admit he knew me. His eyes went from the girl, to Victor, to me, and then they widened in shock. "That's my cousin!" he almost shouted, catching himself at the last second and lowering his voice. When Victor looked confused instead of loosening his grip on my arm, Leon narrowed his eyes viciously. "Let her go, asshole." He rushed over as Victor released me, and I almost sighed when he put his large hands on either side of my head, studying me with awe.

"*Your cousin?" Victor asked as Leon gave me a familiar embrace, and his smile gained such a friendly tilt at such an instant speed it scared me even more. "She's family!" he said excitedly, and once Leon let me go Victor wrapped me in a hug and spun me around. It made me stiff with tension. I didn't know this guy, and so far I didn't like him. I definitely didn't want to hug him. He put me down and I practically fell backward I was so rigid, but I managed to catch myself after a stumble. "On our way then," Victor said happily, leading the way in the direction the group had been heading before finding me.*

Leon patted my back, giving a nod to let me know I should follow them as he carried on ahead. I just stood there, watching as one by one the fourteen group members passed me by. Victor glanced back over his shoulder a few moments later, and when he noticed I wasn't following he stopped. "Echo," he waved impatiently. "Come on."

I didn't want to go with them, even if Leon was there. They were scary and mean, and probably would have killed me if Leon hadn't been with them. Before my legs could carry me running the opposite direction, I caught the eye of the girl who'd stood up for me. Even though she had a piercing in her bottom lip and another in one eyebrow, and her short black hair had a blue stripe in one side, she wasn't as frightening as the rest of them. She even gave me a smile that was almost comforting. It was soft and friendly, but not the creepy kind of friendly that Victor was. It was magnetic too, because my legs immediately carried me forward. When I reached the group Victor put an arm around my shoulders, leading me with him at the head of the caravan.

"*Echo," he repeated with a laugh. "I think it fits."*

"*Sure," I agreed uncomfortably as I tried to shrug him off and peeked over my shoulder at Leon, who just gave me a mischievous wink. Part of me felt relieved I wasn't alone anymore, and especially that I'd found someone I not only knew, but someone who was family. The other part of me though, that part felt doomed.*

…

"You've got to be shitting me!"

The shout woke me early in the morning, and I instinctively shot up and reached under my head for where I always kept my knife under my pillow. Then I remembered where I was and that I didn't have my knife, and that reminded me of who was yelling and why. It was Genevieve. She was standing above me, her face twisted with rage and glaring at me furiously. If looks could kill, I'd have already died a slow and agonizing death. She was mad because I'd taken the handcuffs off last night, but I didn't know what else to do. She wouldn't tell me how I could get any kind of bedding rather than sleeping on the hard ground. The only option I could see to get even remotely comfortable was to take off the cuffs so my arms weren't pinned above my head.

"Get up!" Genevieve roared, not waiting for me to do it and instead pulling me up by the collar of my sweater.

She immediately began digging through my pockets, frisking me almost too personally. "Geez, you're so touchy," I told her with a feigned annoyance that was betrayed by my amused smirk – she got mad over the littlest things. But my smirk disappeared instantly when she took the collar of my sweater in both her fists and pulled me so close to her I was afraid she might wrestle me to the ground.

"Where is it?" she asked angrily, giving me a rough shake.

I raised both my eyebrows innocently. "Where's what?" I couldn't blame her for being upset though. This was the third night in a row I'd slipped out of those obnoxious chains.

"Whatever you've been using to pick the cuffs!" she hollered.

"That's a good question," I mused, staring straight into her deep, rich brown eyes. If it weren't for all the rage there, I might have felt bad for ignoring her rules. When I didn't say anything else, just standing there in provoking silence, she twitched her head expectantly. "I can't tell you," I answered finally, holding back a chuckle at how frustrated she got. She looked like she was about to throw a kiddy-tantrum. "But you're more than welcome to go digging around again."

"What I should have done," she yelled, and I could tell she'd reached her breaking point, "Was tell Cap you were disobeying orders the first time you did it! This is strike three." She pushed me backward and stormed out the entrance of the tent, shouting over her shoulder, "Sayonara, bitch!"

My heart fell the moment she finished that sentence, so I hurried after her, telling myself I shouldn't have been so sarcastic when her fury had so obviously hit its peak. "Wait, Genevieve!" In my panicked rush I practically stumbled out the door. Blake was sitting at a campfire nearby watching her stomp in the direction of the meeting tent, and when I fell out he glanced over at me and laughed at the spectacle. I ignored him and ran toward Genevieve. "Genevieve, I'm sorry! Please, wait!" She stopped and turned to face me, scoldingly setting her hands on her hips until I caught up. "Don't tell Cap," I begged. I needed to start taking her hatred for me more seriously. "I'm sorry. It's just so uncomfortable on the floor. With the cuffs on I can barely sleep."

"Do I look like I care?" she asked with a purposefully insensitive scowl.

"No," I answered, my voice as apologetic as I could make it. Then I added pleadingly, "But I don't know what else you want me to do."

"Deal with it because you're a goddamn murderer!" she quipped bitterly. "You're lucky prison isn't an institution anymore or I'd put you away for life! Stay with Blake." She turned back in the direction she'd been heading before. "I have to meet Cap."

At first I couldn't even respond. I'd never been called a murderer before. That word, especially coming from Genevieve, it made me sick to my stomach. It was like she'd pulled up a picture of all four of them and flung it at me. Once the initial blow wore off I went into an offended fury. She didn't care what I had to say. All she wanted to do was judge me and watch me suffer without ever knowing what I'd been through. Without knowing the things I'd had to do. The thought was so aggravating I didn't care anymore if she'd tell Cap or not, I forgot about it completely.

I turned on my heels back toward the tent, clenching my balled up fists at my sides. "Fine," I mumbled as I passed a still chuckling Blake. "She doesn't want to get me a cot. I'll make a fucking bed."

I gathered an armful of fallen leaves and pine needles from the ground and took them into the tent, dropping them onto the floor and then heading for another one. When I came back out the second time I could see Blake in the corner of my eye. He wasn't amused anymore.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Even though he sounded worried, I was still too carried away to let it stop me.

"I'm making a bed," I answered shortly, taking another armful of leaves into the tent and dropping it onto the others.

"You know Gen is going to freak, right?" he cautioned when I came back out. When I didn't respond he added warningly, "She hates dirt. She literally bathes like every day."

"Whatever," I said indifferently, going back inside to arrange the foliage into the shape of a bed.

From the interior I could hear him laugh, "Having you here is going to be the most amusing thing since the apocalypse."

Then Genevieve's voice carried to me. She was back already; Cap probably didn't have anything for her. "What's amusing?" she asked Blake.

He must have shaken his head, because I didn't hear him answer. I

panicked though – I already regretted this. Wanting to make it seem like it was no big deal I sprawled out on top of my new leaves, folding my hands behind my head and closing my eyes like I'd been so relaxed since Genevieve left that I'd fallen asleep. To be honest, it wasn't as comfortable as I imagined. I could already feel a stem pricking against my back, making me want to scratch at it. This wasn't worth it the trouble I knew it would cause.

A fresh stream of warm light flowed onto my face as Genevieve opened the flap of the tent, and I could just feel the tension as she spotted me. "Echo!" she screeched, and a second later, before I could even crack one artificially-tired eye to look at her, she hauled me off the leaves and threw me out the entrance.

I landed on my back in the dirt outside, where she pitched herself on top of me. She was so pissed one of her fists was already flying at my face, and I dodge my head to the side just in time for her knuckles to slam into the debris beside my ear instead of my nose. Before she could wind up again I grabbed her wrists tight, using every ounce of strength in me to keep her from breaking free and adding more wounds to my still beat up face.

My first reaction after securing her hands was to say 'sorry' again, but I didn't want to do that. Saying it would mean admitting regret about putting the leaves in the tent. It would mean admitting I knew I was doing something wrong the whole time. The moment I heard her voice approaching I already felt guilty for not respecting her space. I just didn't want her to know that now I felt bad, because she'd still hate me and want to kick my ass anyway. Nor did I want to retaliate and beat her up, even though my concussion was almost gone and I knew I could. I didn't want her to hate me more than she did. What I wanted was for her to forgive me, and this wasn't how I was going to get it.

"Alright," Blake grunted as he strode over. He wrapped one arm around Genevieve's torso and pulled her off of me, easily carrying her a few feet away. "No need for more stitches."

I pushed myself onto my elbows, noting how she looked like she wanted

to come at me again. Thankfully Blake's ribs were still healing from when my group had taken him, and I doubted Genevieve wanted to risk hurting him by getting into a fight with me. So instead she huffed angrily, "I'm going to breakfast. Alone!" Then as she turned she yelled over her shoulder. "That tent better be spotless by the time I get back!"

Blake just stood there watching after her, and once she was out of sight he glanced back to where I was still leaning on my elbows in the dirt. "Told you."

"I know," I sighed, disappointed with myself as I pushed up and stood. I wasn't at the complex anymore. Retaliating wasn't going to earn me respect.

When I got into the tent I shoved all the leaves out the flap-entrance. Then I got down on my hands and knees, painstakingly brushing out every speck of dirt I could see until the floor was spotless, just like Genevieve wanted. It took a good fifteen minutes to finish, but it looked as clean as it had before I made a mess of it. Once done I made my way over to a log in front of the fire, perpendicular to the one Blake was sitting on.

"I'm surprised she hasn't murdered me in my sleep," I groaned as I plopped onto the seat and pressed down part of the tape holding the gauze onto my forehead, because it had come loose in the scuffle.

Blake looked up at me for a second and then down at the fire, shaking his head with disagreement. "She's not that girl."

There was a stabbing splinter of judgment in his voice, like it said something about me that I'd even think that about her. "You don't think she'd be justified?" I asked, searching for some vindication, and at the same time wondering if his judgment of me wasn't in the least bit accurate. Would I have been even this merciful to someone else who'd killed my family?

"No," he said seriously, setting his hands on the edge of the log behind him and leaning back casually. "And neither does she."

"She doesn't act like it," I told him bitterly, a reminiscently painful throb starting in the wound on my forehead. Despite the tone of my remark, I wasn't bitter about the way Genevieve was acting. I was bitter about the fact that I couldn't change it, that I couldn't go back in time and not rob the elementary school, and not stay with the raiders. I was bitter because I deserved it.

"Cap gave her an option, you know," he said impatiently, as though I'd offended him. He didn't know I wasn't trying to insult Genevieve. I hadn't done much conversing with him yet, but right now it didn't seem like he was too fond of me, so I passed him a carefully curious look, seeking explanation. "After you guys brought me back, she said he gave her the option of attaching herself to you or taking you into the woods and killing you."

My eyes instantly did a shameful dart away from his gaze. The way things were going, never in a million years would I have guessed Genevieve had made that choice without being forced. Aside from filling me with a crushing amount of guilt at how horribly I'd been treating her, it made me afraid to look at who I'd become. I wanted so badly to think she'd truly kill me, because I would understand it. Violence was familiar, it was acceptable, and I could defend myself from her physical blows. What I couldn't defend myself from was the moral ones.

"Did she tell you we used to know each other?" I asked a minute later, once I'd managed to push off some of the weight. I owed her more than I thought. Blake shook his head. "In school. I was shy and awkward, and she used to stand up for me all the time. She made my life so much easier." He was watching me curiously, but he didn't look judgmental anymore. He looked calm and gentle, like he was willing to listen to the things Genevieve wouldn't. I'd always been a decent authority on character, Blake was a good guy, and just maybe he might be the one who could change things around here for me. It made me want to open up to him. "I used to imagine all the ways I could repay her. Make it up to her, you know?" He nodded understandingly. "Guess I've done a shit job."

"You don't seem so shy and awkward anymore," he meditated, reaching

for a stick at his feet to stir the embers of the dying fire.

I gave a humorless snort. "Living with raiders will change you."

"Did you like being there?" he asked as he returned the stick to his feet.

"No," I admitted quietly. Part of me was afraid he wouldn't believe it, but when I glanced over at him he appeared intent on hearing me out. "None of them really liked me," I continued, more and more eager to appeal to the rational side of him. "I didn't belong there, and they knew it."

"Then why'd you stay?" It seemed he was wondering the same things I used to ask myself. Why were you such a coward? Why'd you choose being a killer over being alone?

"How did Cap put it," I mumbled softly, trying to remember what the old man had told me when I met with him. "Adaptation or death."

"By Feral?" Blake clarified, running one hand through his short blond hair and then leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees. It made him wince a little bit with the pressure it put on his ribs, but after a moment he relaxed into the position.

"Or not," I answered, because they would've killed me if I'd ever attempted to leave. Just like Decker tried to kill me. "The leader was my cousin," I explained when he didn't say anything else. "They found me a week after the outbreak. I didn't have any food, a hammer was my only weapon." I paused to consider why I'd truly gone with them that night, other than the fact that I was terrified of running away. Then I gave an unsure, reminiscent shrug. "I guess he was familiar. I don't know."

Blake nodded with what looked like complete understanding, and then he sat there for a couple minutes, thoughtfully silent. Every once in a while he'd look at me for the briefest of moments, and then glance away as if it made him uncomfortable. Eventually he pushed himself off the log. "Wait here," he said, and then walked away without explanation.

I stared after him as he strode to his tent a few yards away, and when he came back out he was holding something in his hands. Upon his return

he dropped the item into my lap and resumed his seat. Once he sat down he pulled a tin cigarette box out of his pocket, lighting one up while he watched my eyes fall on what he'd given me. I stared down at the magazine. It had a stunningly beautiful girl on the cover, nude if it weren't for the words that covered her up. It made me blush, and for a second I was afraid he knew.

"Um," I looked up at him awkwardly, completely thrown off by what it was for. "Do I want to open this up? Will the pages come apart if I try?"

Blake's eyes widened in surprise and he snorted with laughter, clutching painfully at his bruised ribs. "The pages are fine, I promise," he assured me, still laughing, and then explained, "Second Platoon is scheduled for a supply run soon. Unfortunately for you, Second's lieutenant is the brother of the guy you kicked in the face on the roof. Asking him nicely probably won't cut it, but he's got a secret thing for skin mags, especially that girl on the cover." In an unexpected show of comfort, Blake reached over and offered me his cigarette with an unsure look on his face, like he wasn't sure I'd even take it. "I was saving it for if I ever needed something big from him, but you can trade it so he'll get you some kind of bed on the next run."

"Are you sure?" I asked in shock, letting out the breath of smoke I'd taken and handing the cigarette back to him. I didn't want to take the magazine if he'd been saving it for a huge favor.

He shrugged as if it was no big deal. "As amusing as it is seeing Genevieve so intense around you, it's probably best to keep fights to a minimum."

I chuckled, giving a nod of agreement. "Thank you," I told him, genuinely appreciative even if the method was a little… gross. I rolled the magazine in my hands so I wouldn't have to see the cover anymore, and then shoved it into a deep side-pocket of my black cargo pants. Without looking at Blake I asked, "You don't hate me?"

"Well, my best friend hates you, so I don't necessarily like you," he answered honestly and let out a thoughtful sigh. "But I don't really know you."

"Are you saying I could change your mind about me?" I asked as I looked past him and deeper into the camp, a particular sight holding my gaze. There were some people walking around, and through the breaks in the trees it looked like a girl our age was heading towards us.

"You can try," Blake answered, following my gaze behind him and then greeting the girl as she sat down at his side. "Hey, Casey."

"Hi," she said cheerfully. She glanced over at me, and her gaze lingered for a few seconds before she turned her attention back on Blake. Then she shyly brushed one side of her dark red hair behind her ear and made a subtle scoot closer to him. Either Casey was his girlfriend, or she obviously had the world's largest crush on him. "Doc April asked me to bring this to you," she told him, holding up a small cup that I couldn't see into from my seat on the adjacent log. "She said it's for your ribs."

"Thank you," he smiled gratefully, and when he tried to tactfully scoot away from Casey I came to the conclusion that she wasn't his girlfriend. She nodded in acknowledgement, and then her green eyes wandered to me again. This time Blake noticed it and motioned toward the red head. "This is Casey," he told me.

"I'm Echo." I smiled friendlily, and stuck out my hand thinking it was the right thing to do now that I was somewhere more civilized than the complex.

"I know who you are," she said flatly, not bothering to shake with me.

"Great," I mumbled sarcastically, pulling my hand back apprehensively. At the blankly unpleasant look on Casey's face, I stood. "I'll just go back in the tent."

"Why?" she asked, sounding genuinely confused that I was about to walk away.

I cocked my head, almost as confused as she sounded. "You look like you're about to make a hate speech."

When Blake chuckled at the exchange Casey looked at him curiously, then back at me, and again at him. "Wasn't she with the ones who took you?" she asked him, and now I understood why she seemed unsure of whether to be bitter or friendly toward me. She couldn't figure out why I was sitting here with Blake when she thought I was responsible for his bruised ribs.

I was just waiting for Blake to say 'yes,' and then for Casey to glare at me, or maybe even make that hate speech. "She's the one who got me out," he told her instead, and when he winked at me I gave a genuinely relieved and grateful smile. I didn't need any more enemies around here, and thankfully he knew it.

"Oh," she said, gaining that cheerfulness again. She had an almost innocent, giddy kind of personality, and I couldn't figure out if it was because she had a crush on Blake or if that's just how she was. Now she stuck out her hand, shaking mine fervently when I gripped it. "Nice to meet you." After letting it go she stood, turning to face Blake and folding her hands timidly in front of her. "Anyway, I got to go back to the medical cabin. I'll see you later."

She looked hesitant, like she was hoping Blake would ask her to hang around, but he didn't seem to pick up on it and just waved. Once she disappeared between the trees he reached for the cup she'd given him. He stuck a couple fingers into it, and when he pulled them out they were covered in some kind of ointment. I watched as he stood, lifting his shirt to rub the ointment over his ribs. There was a hand-sized, splotchy bruise on his skin, and I couldn't help but frown at the sight of it, because it looked worse than I'd thought it would.

"I didn't know it was that bad." I couldn't even look at him any more because, though I knew it wasn't my fault, I felt guilty about it.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he assured me, pulling his shirt back down and resuming his spot on the log. Then to change the subject he said, "Sorry about Casey," and added a moment later, "Being a bit standoffish."

I shrugged indifferently. Casey was my best friend compared to how

I shrugged indifferently. Casey was my best friend compared to how Genevieve was treating me. "Is she your girlfriend or something?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "She likes me."

"I could tell," I laughed in agreement, and recalling how he shied away from her asked, "You don't like her?"

"I try not to even think about it," he answered, tossing the empty paper ointment cup into the red embers where the fire used to be. It sizzled for a moment before a small flame formed and devoured the cup. "We're out on missions too much. Especially a girl like Casey, she'd be worrying too much."

I nodded in understanding, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. "Does Genevieve have a boyfriend?"

Blake shook his head again. "She's kind of the same way, I mean, she's never had a long term interest in anyone." His hazel eyes darted around suspiciously for a second, and then he leaned toward me like he didn't want anyone to overhear. "Kellan tries his hardest to flirt with her successfully, but between me and you, he's lucky she hasn't given in. I'll kick his ass if he ever convinces her."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Who's Kellan?"

"One of the soldiers," Blake answered. "Tall, dark curly hair, green eyes. You've met him." I remembered him all right. The one who told Genevieve the first time I snuck out of the tent and got me beaten up because of it. I grunted my disgusted acknowledgment, and Blake raised an eyebrow. "You already don't like him?"

"He reminds me of that guy you and Genevieve saved me from," I told him honestly. "The one who was trying to strangle me." Decker.

Blake squinted thoughtfully at that. "Huh," he huffed a moment later, as if maybe he recognized it. I wished I'd gotten the chance to ask him if he could see my point, but just then Genevieve reached us, and I didn't get a chance.

She gave Blake a smile in greeting. She'd always had such an inviting smile. It never really showed her teeth. Her thin lips never parted, and just one side turned up more than the other, tilting the smooth, light pink flesh into a crookedly modest grin. But once her gaze landed on me the curve in her lips fell, and without saying anything she strode to the tent to check on the job I'd done. She must have been satisfied, because after only poking her head in for a couple seconds she came back over. It didn't look like she was furious anymore, though she certainly wasn't pleased with me. Breakfast and a little time away had calmed her down some, and her hatred had returned to the placid resentment visible only in her eyes.

"You staying here today?" she asked Blake, ignoring me as she moved behind him and set her hands on his shoulders so she could lean forward casually.

He glanced up at her and rolled his eyes. "April won't let me do anything else yet."

I sat there and watched them talk about what they were going to do today for a minute in silence. Blake was undershooting it when he said Genevieve was his 'best friend.' I wasn't sure exactly how long they'd known each other, but even in this short conversation there was the occasional teasing jab followed by a counter-remark or a rough smack on the back of the head. I never had any brothers, but it was exactly how I imagined I'd act with one. They were like siblings. It confirmed that if there was anyone who could help my situation with Genevieve, it was Blake.

"Let's go," Genevieve said, and when I realized she was talking to me I stood instantly, not wanting to give her any reason to be impatient. I was going to make a genuine effort to make everything up to her.

Even though I already knew from her conversation with Blake, I waited until we'd strode away from the campsite to ask, "What are we doing today?" The past couple days, since my concussion was still healing, I sat leaned back against a tree while Genevieve helped some people set up solar panels.

I'd tried to make my question seem enthusiastic, but the effort appeared lost. "Cabin detail," she answered flatly without looking over at me.

"Are those solar panels working?" At that question she shot me a fierce look.

I wasn't sure if it was just too soon after I'd pissed her off or if she simply didn't want me ever trying to talk to her, but I got the message. I didn't say another thing until we reached the clearing where the loggers put the lumber they retrieved for cabins. There were already people carrying large pieces of wood, some to the massive pile I was standing in front of now, and others to some site nearby where I could hear the hammering of a cabin being built.

"You can sit over there," Genevieve told me, pointing to a group of trees not far away as she turned her back on me to pick up a thin log. "Just make sure you're out of the way."

The large piece of wood, though realistically probably not very heavy, was long, and it was obvious Genevieve was struggling to pick it up as she tried to lift it to her shoulder. I considered her instruction, glancing toward the group of trees and then back at her. My concussion was almost gone, and while it wouldn't hurt to get a couple more days of rest, right now starting to prove myself to her was more important than trying not to get a headache.

She'd barely managed to lift the lumber to her shoulder when I hurried forward, setting myself underneath the half behind her. When she felt some of the weight shifted she looked back, appearing shocked at seeing me trying to help. It didn't appear she could decide whether or not she wanted to accept that help either, because she practically glared at me for a good thirty seconds before her gaze softened. Turning around once more she scooted the log backward so it was better balanced over both of our shoulders, and then she continued forward.

For most of the day I helped her carry logs back and forth, and when enough had been gathered we worked at whatever else the builders needed. Eventually it was time for dinner, and that was as silent an event for me as the entire day had been. Especially with other soldiers around

for me as the entire day had been. Especially with other soldiers around at the meal, I found it was best to keep my mouth shut. Most of them didn't like me much, and the ones who didn't seem to care were too put off by the others' abhorrence to even acknowledge me.

At eight it was finally time for my first twelve-hour night patrol. I was in the tent with Genevieve, getting our sweaters to keep warm, when she didn't hand me my glow in the dark knife like I'd been expecting. I waited patiently until she reached the exit, ready to go to our post, but she still didn't give it to me.

"I don't get a weapon?" I asked, giving a specifying glance toward the trunk on the floor where she kept my things. She just shook her head and held the door open, motioning for me to come. "What if something happens?" I inquired, walking out of the tent anyway just so she wouldn't get irritated with me.

She turned the lantern off and followed me out. "We're in the middle of the woods, nothing is going to happen." Then she deliberately adjusted the rifle over her shoulder and patted the knife at her thigh. "And I'm well armed."

I stayed close as she began to lead the way to the perimeter of camp, not entirely comforted by her reassurance. "Yeah but, if I get attacked by a bear or something, are you going to shoot it or just let it eat me?"

In the dark I could hear her let out an amused huff of breath. "Depends on how annoying you are the next few hours."

"Gee, th-" My eyes weren't adjusted enough to the dark yet, so my sarcastic remark was cut off as I stumbled over a large branch on the ground. I managed to catch myself before falling, finishing my statement with as much dignity as I could. "Thanks."

Genevieve laughed mockingly, but pulled a flashlight out of her pocket and, after turning it on so it was beaming a bright blue light, she handed it to me. "Pick your feet up. We're doing this patrol even if you get hurt."

"Thank you," I said more genuinely than before, using the light to avoid

obscure obstacles in my path. In the pale blue glow I could see her nod in acknowledgement, though she didn't say anything else. But she was being more talkative now than she had been all day, and I didn't want the opportunity to pass me by. "How does patrol work?"

"You and me have first foot patrol," she answered, veering to the left as if there was some unseen signal in our trail. "Right now we're walking the perimeter of camp. We go past each watchtower once, and after making a full circle we switch with the first pair up in the trees. We keep rotating like that all night."

"Does anything ever happen?" Genevieve didn't seem to need the light, as it appeared she was either accustomed to the forest floor or she'd traversed it so many times she knew it by heart. Either way, as I asked I moved to her side instead of walking behind her, shining the light so that both of us could see.

"Aside from the occasional bear attack?" she asked with an almost teasing giggle.

I loved that laugh, especially since she'd been nothing but hostile toward me since I arrived. I couldn't help but wonder if part of it was the fact that she couldn't really see me. That's how it felt for me, at least. She was just a silhouette in the night, an expressionless presence free to regard me as my character rather than what my face reminded her of. The dark had always been a friend to me, why should it stop now?

"It's rare that something ever happens," Genevieve answered more directly, and she hadn't even finished her sentence when I heard the breaking of a stick somewhere nearby.

"What was that?" I asked suspiciously, pointing the blue beam in the direction of the noise. Whatever it was, it was too far away for the light to reach it. I wasn't as accustomed to searching for immediate hiding places in the forest as I was in the city. Right now I felt out of my element.

"Probably a deer or something," she said, pausing to listen to the crackling of leaves on the ground. Something was definitely walking, and it sounded big.

I looked at her, entirely unwilling to believe it was only an animal when I had nothing to defend myself with and felt completely vulnerable. "You know that for sure? What if it's a Biter?"

"Only one way to find out," she said with a shrug as she pulled her rifle around to hold at the ready. "Hello?" she called, loud enough that if it were a Biter it would hear and come charging at us. The footsteps stopped at the sound of her voice, and a few seconds later the thing scampered off in the opposite direction. "See, just an animal," she told me, continuing to lead the way. "Don't be so paranoid."

"Okay," I said, following along and trying to bite my tongue so I wouldn't make the snide remark that I wanted to about her not letting me have a weapon. Instead I put it as nicely as I could. "I haven't been unarmed in years, you know? It's kind of scary."

With what little moonlight there was and through the soft luminescence of the flashlight I could see Genevieve glance back at me, but she ignored my comment and mumbled to herself, "We should be coming up on the first tower soon."

Her directional accuracy was impressive, because hardly a moment after she spoke a voice carried to us from up above. "Hooah!"

It was unexpected enough that it made me jump, but Genevieve instantly responded, "Category?"

"Movie," said the deep voice from the trees.

Then the other guy up there chanted, "Attica! Attica!"

I was so confused I shined the blue beam on Genevieve's face, hoping to get some kind of answer in her expression. "A movie…" she said thoughtfully, squinting through the brightness of the light.

"Attica," I repeated, thinking how familiar the phrase sounded. "Dog Day Afternoon?" My dad used to love that movie, if that was what they were talking about.

"Dog Day Afternoon," Genevieve repeated up to the soldiers in the lookout.

"Hey, lucky guess, LT," one of the guys said with a laugh.

Genevieve chuckled, said 'hooah,' and then motioned for me to continue forward at her side. I waited a good two minutes waiting for her to explain, but when she never did I asked, "What was that all about?"

"Whoever's in the blind has thermal or night vision," she answered, and I noticed how after we'd passed the lookout we started veering in a curve again. "When they see something they call 'hooah.' So they don't shoot us, we respond with 'category.' They give us a movie quote or song lyric, and we have to guess what it is."

"Oh," I nodded in understanding even though she wasn't looking at me. "Why not just have some kind of a code word?"

"It helps keep you awake if you're trying to come up with quotes while you're up there." Genevieve paused and stopped to look around. Grabbing the flashlight from me she shined it toward a few trees nearby, and finding that one was marked with a flag she started leading us in its direction. "Besides, I think they like remembering stuff from before the outbreak."

She handed the small light back to me, and I used it to follow along and keep from tripping. "Why would you want to do that?"

"It's good to remember a time when things were better," she answered matter-of-factly. "Maybe things can get that way again." My only response was to give a slight grunt of disagreement, because I didn't want to get into an argument with her about it. It made her curious though. "You don't want to remember?"

"There's nothing worth remembering," I told her apathetically, and then, I don't know why, I added, "The only memories I don't mind are the ones with you in them."

Genevieve stopped in her tracks to look at me. She just stared for a few

moments like she was completely unsure of how to respond. It might have even made her a little bit angry judging by the hard set of her mouth. I don't know how I was expecting her to respond anyway. Wasn't sure why I'd really said it, even if it was the truth. "What about your family?" she asked finally, tearing her gaze away from me and picking up her pace again. "You *used* to be a nice kid, seemed like you had a nice family."

"Please, Genevieve," I said seriously, desperately, "Don't ever ask me about them."

"Why not?" she asked nonchalantly, like she was oblivious to the pleading tone of my voice and only saw an occasion to pick at me. "Are you that cold-hearted you completely forgot about them?"

"Just drop it," I told her with fierce impatience, shooting her a uselessly furious glare. There was a severely risky amount of boiling aggravation in my chest, and I was trying desperately to hold it back.

"Were they a bunch of assholes or something?" she asked, completely unconcerned about my irritation. It probably even encouraged her. "It's not like you killed *my* family or anything," she continued with piercing sarcasm, "But sure, we'll *never* talk about yours."

Something inside me snapped. She could attack me physically, she could even attack me verbally, but she had no right to bring them up and say those kinds of things. Not when she didn't know what the fuck she was talking about. I was so outraged I lost all control. One of my hands shot to her collarbone, pushing her back hard against the nearest tree while my other flew to the knife at her thigh.

"I said don't ever talk about them!" I snarled irately, so lost and blind in my rage I was now holding the blade against her throat.

Even though I'd pushed Genevieve and grabbed her knife so swiftly, she managed to react and bring her rifle between the two of us before I pinned her. Now it was pressed between our bodies, the cold edge of the barrel sitting comfortably under my chin.

She pushed it up to bump me with it twice, reminding me of its presence. "Unless you want a bullet in your brain, drop the knife right now."

That completely knocked me out of it, and I was instantly and painfully aware of how bad I'd just screwed up. My jaw fell with complete shock at myself, and I pulled away, dropping the knife to the dirt. "I'm so sorry. Genevieve, I-" I didn't know what to say. She used the barrel of her gun to back me up a couple feet, and then she bent down for the knife and put it back in its sheath. "Genevieve, I am so sorry. I didn't mean it- it was-" It was reactive. I wasn't really going to use the weapon. I'd never hurt her like that. But this was all I knew. The only way I'd known to defend myself from anything the last six years was to defeat it physically. Everything I did was reactive, and it was always the wrong goddamn reaction.

"If you ever pull something like that again," she said, sounding entirely too calm. But there was more pointed hatred, more incredulous distrust in her voice now than there had ever been before. "I will shoot you. Do you understand?"

All I could do was nod, and with it she turned to continue the patrol. A slew of despairing tears went streaming down my cheeks, but even though I couldn't stop them I refused to sniffle or sob, that way Genevieve wouldn't hear as I followed behind her. Nothing I ever did was going to work, especially since I couldn't keep from messing up. She hated me and she was never going to stop. She didn't say a single thing to me for the rest of the night. More than that, during our times in the blind her gun was always at more of a slant toward me than it had been before. She watched me constantly and kept her distance, wary of my every move. I just couldn't stop fucking up.

Cure

Cure For The Itch by Linkin Park

Cure

Dugan

I'd been dozing off in the dark of the attic, but a constant fluttering sound had caused me to stir. It was soft and quiet, but in the silence around me it was enough to notice. Eventually, after I'd rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and gathered the strength, I sat up. Man was I getting old. Six years ago sleeping without a soft mattress didn't make me as sore as it did now, and I leaned back until a delightful popping traveled up my spine.

"Did I wake you up?" Kara asked, and in the dim light of a lantern we'd found in the house below us I could see she was shuffling my deck of cards over and over again.

I shook my head unconcernedly. "Don't worry about it."

A glance at my watch revealed that it was seven p.m. The sun had only recently gone down, and we'd have to wait at least a few more hours before it was as safe enough for us to go out. It had only been a couple days since we'd first arrived at Kara's old house, but our food had officially run out yesterday. I'd only had two cans left when we got here, and with one can every other day between the two of us, I could say I was getting pretty damn hungry. The problem was that we couldn't quite figure out a good plan yet for getting to the food supply Kara had told me about. We'd scoped out the area, and apparently the reserves were in the basement of a house a few streets away. One way in, one way out. I wasn't looking to jump in headfirst and fight eleven Ferals. That was a good way to make sure you ended up dead.

"You want to play Go Fish?" Kara held up the cards, and then shuffled again. I'd sort of taught her how to play yesterday, when the boredom during our waking hours got bad enough that I had to keep her occupied.

She said the game seemed familiar, but it had been since before the outbreak that she'd even seen a deck of cards.

Since I couldn't exactly stand in the shallow attic, I scooted over to where she was. "Want me to teach you another game?" She nodded and handed me the deck. "It's called Rummy," I said, and seeing as she'd shuffled enough, I dealt. She got the hang of the new game pretty fast, and after only one practice round she knew the rules.

I let a few rounds pass before I tried to make conversation. It had been nice when we were at the airport with Chuck. After he got comfortable with me it seemed like he'd been as eager for a companion as I had. Kara was different, and it wasn't just the age difference. She looked her age, but she didn't act it. To be honest, I wasn't really sure how old she acted because she was so quiet most the time. Except for when she'd ask me things like if I wanted to play Go Fish. It wasn't clear to me if I should treat her like a kid or an adult, so I hadn't said much to her other than what was necessary. At the back of my mind though, I was kind of worried about her. She hadn't shed tears once that I knew of over her dead family. Some people simply weren't criers, but she'd never even given the impression that she was upset about it. Maybe it was mostly for comfort of my own, but I wanted to know she felt something.

"Kara," I said hesitantly. I had to bring it up. Another part of me felt responsible. Felt like I had to make sure she would be okay because whether it seemed like it or not, she *was* a kid, and I was taking care of her now. She put down a full set of fives with a proud smile, and then looked at me to let me know she was listening. "If you ever wanted to talk about what happened, you know I'd listen, right?"

Her hazel eyes scanned my face for a few seconds. Sometimes she looked at me like there was so much going on in her head, more than would be in the typical fifteen-year-old's mind. "There's nothing to talk about," she answered with a shrug.

I used my turn in the game as an excuse to think of something else to say. After I'd gone I spoke again. "It's okay if you're sad. Normal, even." I chewed the inside of my cheek for a thoughtful moment. It had been so long since I'd talked to someone her age that I barely remembered how

long since I'd talked to someone her age that I barely remembered how to do it. Try and relate? "I would be."

She shrugged again, squinting in the low light to see the cards sitting on the ground in front of us. "I'm fine."

I don't know why I didn't want to believe it. Would it really make her more trustworthy if I knew she was capable of feeling a full range of human emotion? That was basic knowledge wasn't it? That it wasn't healthy to shut yourself off. "You seemed kind of sad," I told her gently, trying to make sure she knew it was okay to feel that way. "When I found you in the closet at the airport."

She held her cards closer to her face and then rearranged a couple of them. At least it didn't look like my continuing to bring it up was aggravating her. "I wasn't sure if you were going to kill me or not," she answered without making eye contact.

I furrowed my eyebrows at that, trying to figure out exactly what she meant. "Are you saying that was an act?" I could specifically remember her sniffling when I found her, like she'd been crying.

She gave me that look again, like she was in such deep thought she could read my mind. "Daddy always said that there's a lot of people out there who would hurt you if you showed weakness, but then there are other people who wouldn't hurt you because of it." She pursed her lips thoughtfully, and played her next turn before continuing. "I was always pretty good at figuring out which people are which."

"You know, you don't have to do that with me." I dropped my hands from looking at my cards and focused on her, that way she'd know I was being sincere.

She avoided my gaze uncomfortably. "I know," she nodded, but it sounded like she'd only said it so she wouldn't offend me. Eventually she took a deep breath and glanced away. "I am sad," she admitted.

Even if she didn't mean it, and even if she were admitting it just so I'd stop bringing it up, I understood her better now. The apathy, the skillful playing of my emotions, that was a defense. Because she'd agreed to

playing of my emotions, that was a defense. Because she'd agreed to come along with me so easily, and mostly due to her age, it hadn't necessarily occurred to me that I'd have to earn her trust too. I guess I'd just assumed I already had it. But she'd admitted she was sad about her family dying, and until I could earn her trust, I wouldn't press the issue any further.

We were both silent for a few more rounds of Rummy, until Kara's stomach growled. I needed to get this poor girl something to eat. "Have you thought of any other ideas about getting into that basement?" I asked. We'd both been wracking our brains the past couple days, but nothing we thought of seemed to have the end result of us getting out alive *and* with food.

"Nope," Kara answered. She dropped her hands from looking at her cards like she thought of an idea, but then she raised them again as though it wasn't any good. "Well," she said a moment later, dropping the cards again. But then she sighed and resumed her thinking. I waited a little bit to see if she was going to tell me what she was thinking, and soon she lowered her hands again. "I always had this one idea, but they all said it was too dangerous to try."

I chuckled, not at all surprised Kara had a wild idea seeing as she suggested the basement for food in the first place. "What makes it dangerous?"

She mimicked my amusement, and made a guiltily unsure face. "It involves bear traps and live bait…"

"Bear traps?" I asked in shock. It already sounded wild.

"There's a house a block away with a shed in back," she started, excitedly leaning forward. "There're six bear traps in it. I always thought we could set up the traps, and I'll be the bait, and it'll get at least six of them."

"Uh huh," I mumbled thoughtfully. "And what about the other five?"

She let out a skeptical breath. "Make a net that would swoop them up?

Like in cartoons I used to watch when I was a kid." I just blinked at her, not sure exactly how to respond, and slightly put off by the fact that I was actually considering it. "That's where I used to lose them too," she murmured, taking my silence as a negative reaction.

"It is dangerous," I admitted. "And crazy." She appeared a little bit disappointed, so I added a moment later, "But sometimes crazy works."

"You want to try it?" she asked excitedly, putting her cards down and leaning forward again.

"We can't *try* it," I told her, already trying to map out the plan in my mind. "We have to *do* it."

I wasn't sure where we could get a net large enough to hold five Ferals. We weren't anywhere near the ocean where some kind of fishing net was available. Maybe one from a soccer goal might work, but if any had been left outside during the outbreak it would undoubtedly have been rendered unusable by its exposure to time and weather. Plus there was no guarantee that all the Ferals would get on the net at the same time, and I wasn't letting Kara be live bait if even one of them could get free.

"Hey," I said suddenly, the blueprints of an idea springing to mind. "What about that dog-run around the side of the yard?"

"The big cage?" She furrowed her eyebrows when I nodded. "It's big enough, but the top is fenced too. I wouldn't be able to get out after leading them in there."

"I don't want you to be the bait," I told her automatically, just so she would get that idea out of her mind. I would never let my own daughter do it, and I wasn't going to let Kara do it. "But we could find some bolt cutters, and cut a square in the top so I can climb out as they follow me in."

"They can climb too," she responded with a sigh.

My posture fell as I realized she was right, but after a moment I shook my head with resolve. We had to make this work. "We'll find a board and cover the hole before any climb up. We just have to find something heavy

to set on top of it." Kara nodded her head side to side, considering the idea. "You can be waiting on top of it. We'll attach a rope to the door. When the last one gets it you can just pull it closed, and we'll drop something heavy in front of that too until we climb down and lock it."

"I'd do anything to get some food," she shrugged, and it looked like she was trying to conceal a smile as she added, "Can you climb out of the cage fast enough? What if you break a hip or something?"

I couldn't help letting out a snort of laughter. "Did you just call me old?" I couldn't complain though about the fact that she felt comfortable enough to tease me. "I'll be fine," I reassured her, when despite her amused giggle I could tell she was genuinely concerned.

We spent the next hour waiting around so we could be sure the Ferals were settled in for the night. During that time we went over every small detail of our plan, and except for the million unforeseen things that could go wrong, it was flawless. Once enough time had passed we left the attic, ready for phase one of our plan – setup.

Our first stop was to see if the hardware store in town was overrun or not. If we had to clear it out it probably would've taken us all night to get the job done, if there weren't too many Ferals for us to clear out in the first place. Luckily the place was empty, so we grabbed everything we could in one trip. The smallest of the items on our list were locks. One for the basement door, that way we could set up our traps without the Ferals waking up and wandering outside. Another for the door of the fenced in dog-run we'd be locking the Ferals in.

Until we could jump down and secure the cage, we needed a quick solution to keep the door closed other than Kara using the rope we'd tie to it. We also needed some way to secure a piece of board over the hole I'd climb out so the Ferals couldn't come out after me. For these two steps we grabbed a flatbed cart with wheels, and loaded it up with heavy sandbags. Of course we also had to grab the board to cover the hole with, and a pair of bolt cutters to shape my exit in the roof of the cage. We also took a shovel, and last but not least was the rope.

With all of this stuff loaded up onto our cart we started for the house Kara

told me about, the one that had the bear traps in the shed. It was only about a street out of the way from our final destination, and so far everything was going smoothly. It was a good thing we took the cart with us too. Without it and having to carry all the sandbags and bear traps, it probably would've taken us too many trips to get it all done in one night.

Eventually we reached our food source, and as we got to the entrance of the backyard Kara moved behind the cart to help push, since now that we were in grass and it weighed so much I could barely pull it. It helped a little, but every uneven inconsistency we rolled the cart over in the grass caused all the metal items on it to clang together. I cringed every time, and in the silence of the dark night it only happened three times before I couldn't handle it anymore. We'd have to carry everything from here or else risk waking the Ferals before we even got a chance to lock them in the basement.

Ceasing my efforts to pull the cart, I grabbed one of the locks off of it and motioned for Kara to follow me. We tiptoed all the way to the double-door entrance of the basement. I took hold of one of the wooden doors while Kara reached for the other, and we simultaneously began to swing them closed, slowly so as not to make a sound. I had mine about halfway shut before the rusty hinge made a loud squeal. I flinched at the noise, and Kara's eyes widened at me, looking just as frightened by it as I felt. Before I could take a breath to calm myself down there was an aggravated growl from the pitch black below us. Without wasting another second and giving the Ferals a chance to wake up and come out, I slammed the door closed, immediately jamming the lock into place around the handles. The moment I had the lock on a Feral slammed into the doors from the other side, causing both Kara and I to jump back. I sighed with relief that we'd secured it just in time.

"I think they're mad," Kara chuckled as the muffled growling from the other side increased, and she tossed the axe she was holding to her other hand so that she could adjust the slinged shotgun hanging over her shoulder. I shuddered. The sound of Ferals grated on my nerves just as much now as it had the first time I'd ever heard it.

Kara followed me back to the cart, and while she picked up the shovel

we'd taken from the hardware store I grabbed all six of the bear traps. We passed the dog-run on our way into the back yard. The entire thing was a sort of 'L' shape around the house, with the basement being at the farthest corner. Kara handed me the shovel while she returned to the cart to start hauling over the sand bags, and while she did I began to strategically place the bear traps. First I dug a nicely deep hole. Inside the hole I place the chain-anchor of the trap, and after driving the spike through it so it was stuck into the ground I dropped a sand bag over it, then re-buried it. If we were just hunting, it probably wouldn't be worth all the trouble to anchor the traps so securely. But when Ferals were in pursuit of a meal they were fearsome, and I didn't doubt they had the ability to pull a simple spike straight out of the dirt with their struggling.

After all the traps were set up diagonally from the corner of the yard where the basement was to the part of the side yard where the dog-run was located, it was time to take the rest of the sandbags up on top of the cage. Kara climbed up first, and as she reached over for them I stretched to hand them up. Even though each of the sacks weighed about fifty pounds, and I could tell Kara was struggling to pull them up, she didn't complain once. I couldn't help but admire the kid. Not only for her drive, but also for the fact that she was fearless enough to risk ploys like this.

The next task was to tie the rope so Kara could pull the door of the cage closed from her spot on top of it. With the rope in hand I knotted one end to the inside of the door, and then scanned the enclosure for the best spot to loop it through another fence-wall to the outside. As I searched I could hear the consistent metallic click of Kara using the bolt cutters to clip my escape out of the roof of the cage. The rope would probably need to be looped through the back wall of the fence in order for Kara to be able to pull the door closed, but it had to be out of the way or else I'd risk running in to it while trying to evade the Ferals.

"Hey," I whispered to Kara once she'd finished removing a square piece of fence big enough for me to get through. When I had her attention I tossed the end of the rope up through my exit to her. Threading it through the top seemed like the best solution to me. "Give it a try."

She tugged on the rope from her spot above me, more slowly than she

would later so as not to make too much noise, and we both let out happy huffs of breath when the door swung shut. When we were sure that would work I strode back to the cart to grab the board, and then I handed that up to her as well.

"We ready?" I asked, squinting through the dark to double check that we hadn't missed anything.

Kara glanced around thoughtfully. "Hold on," she said, and then proceeded to rearrange the sandbags. She put a couple right next to the escape hole so they were ready when the board was put in place. The others she set at the edge of the dog-run right above the door, so that when it closed she could easily kick them over and right into place. "Okay. Ready."

I took a deep breath to prepare my nerve, and handed her my rifle since I'd be able to run faster without it. Striding over to the basement doors was when my heart finally started to pound. Now it was real. This was the dangerous part. The part where I better hope I wasn't getting too old and could still run like I used to. Hell. Old. I chuckled. I was only forty-three. If anything, life after the outbreak had made me feel younger than I used to. Lord knows I was in better shape.

When I reached the wooden doors of the basement I stomped it with the heel of my work boot, and in response there was a series of snarls. *Still angry.* I pulled the key to the lock out of my pocket, and then shook out my arms and legs to limber up and try to work out some of the lingering anxiety.

"Here we go," I mumbled under my breath, and leaned over to stick the key into the lock.

I twisted it as slowly as possible, trying to deter any Ferals from blasting through before I even had the doors open. After I'd eased the lock away from the handles, I took hold of them in each of my hands. One last, final breath. It was difficult to breathe in with how my heart was hammering away, and letting it out was even tougher. *Just do it, Dugan.* This was crazy. The moment I threw the doors open I let out a loud whistle, just to

make sure I had *all* the Ferals' attention, and then I took off running.

There were multiple roars from behind me, and then the immediately frightening sound of feet slapping up the cement basement stairs. I refused to look back as I sprinted across the yard, but I was so terrified that every second felt like an eternity. The first loud metallic 'CLAP' of a bear trap going off accompanied the next roar. Then there was another, and then four more. A steady thud pursued me through the grass, and now I was only a few feet from the entrance of the dog-run.

I practically leapt for the back wall of the fence the moment I got through the door, and I started scurrying up it toward my cut out exit. I had half my torso up before the first Feral reached the cage. It jumped after me, clamping its dirty hands around my left leg and giving a hard tug. I had a good enough hold on the roof that I didn't fall through, but all the other Ferals were barreling into the entrance, and if I didn't hurry they'd all grab me, then I wouldn't be able to hold on. In one swift motion I kicked the Feral's head with my free foot, and as I pulled myself completely out of the hole I heard the door of the gate swing shut.

There were six successive thuds as Kara kicked the sandbags over the edge, and while she immediately moved to my exit to begin covering it, I jumped back to the ground to lock the cage door. As I reached for the door the first Feral jumped at me, sticking its bony fingers through the fence and trying to grasp at whatever part of me it could. If it weren't for the sandbags Kara had kicked over, I already would've been toast, because when the rest of the Ferals noticed me they hungrily pounded their sickly bodies against the gate.

I should've just been able to slip the lock right into place, but with the Ferals leaning against the door and misaligning the spot for it, and me trying to avoid their fingers, it was a more difficult task than I'd thought it would be. Plus I couldn't even hear myself think over their furious roaring and the pained howling of the creatures caught in the bear traps.

There was finally a momentary lull in the Ferals' pushing, and I was just about to slip the lock into place when Kara made a brief and awkward noise, which my brain instantly processed as a warning. Out of instinct I

turned around, only to find there was a Feral already in mid-air, coming straight for me. At first I wasn't sure where it had come from, but then I saw the mangled spot of its ankle where a foot used to be attached. It was an emaciated female, so small and bony that it looked fragile. I was sure the bear trap and snapped straight through its bone, and with all its fierce tugging against the clamp it had pulled itself right out… minus a foot.

Before I could even react to the creature flying at me, Kara lunged from the top of the cage with her axe in hand, intercepting it mid-leap. My first thought was to rush forward and help Kara, but if I didn't secure the gate then all the other Ferals might get out, and we'd be in a worse position than we were now. Despite the horror I felt at not immediately going to Kara's aid, I turned back to the gate. This time I ignored the Ferals reaching fingers, and I slammed my shoulder against the door to close it all the way. By the time I'd slipped the lock into place and jammed it shut, Kara was already standing over the dead body of the Feral.

She didn't stop there. She strode angrily toward the rest of the creatures that were stuck, and when she swung her axe at the first one I knew what she was doing. The Ferals in the dog-run were making a raucous too, so deciding that we should kill these ones as well I climbed back up on top of it. Removing the sandbags and board that Kara had placed over the exit hole, I waited until the first Feral climbed up high enough, and then I plunged my knife through its skull.

After I'd killed the last one I glanced down at Kara, who was now standing at the bottom of the cage, looking up at me. "We get them all?"

"Shh," I said rapidly, putting my finger over my lips and straining my ears. I should have expected it. The Ferals from the basement had made so much noise that there were others on the way. I could hear their snarls and running footsteps heading our direction. "Get to the basement," I murmured in a panic, and then I hopped off the roof, running right behind Kara.

We threw ourselves into the basement, and I hurriedly pulled the doors shut behind us. We both scrambled back, as if the Ferals were already here and they come bursting in. With the doors shutting out the

here and they come bursting in. With the doors shutting out the moonlight, everything in here was pitch black, but I didn't want to risk turning on a flashlight yet in case a Feral could see it from the outside.

Both Kara and I were panting for air, though I was sure it was more from alarm than fatigue. Still, neither of us said a word as we listened intently to the sound of searching footsteps coming from above us. It was hard to determine how many were in the yard now, but it sounded like more than we'd be able to fight off if they discovered our hiding spot. After a few agonizing minutes I calmed enough to sit on the floor. While the Ferals were still looking for us, or possibly feasting on the remains of the ones we'd killed, I was sure they wouldn't find us as long as we stayed quiet.

In the dark I heard Kara shuffle around a bit, and a few moments later a searching hand fell on my shoulder. Once she'd located me I could tell that she plopped down at my side. She must've still been a little bit afraid, because when she stretched out to lie on the ground she did it close enough that her back was nuzzled up against me. It wasn't long after that that her breathing slowed, and in our wait for peace I knew she'd fallen asleep. It made me smile, and there was a dim, vaguely familiar warmth that seated itself in my chest. The last six years I'd been so lonely. I missed my wife. I missed my daughter. But here was this kid who I could tell was starting to trust me, and I already knew that if anything ever happened to her, I'd miss her too. I was most definitely responsible for her, but despite that feeling of responsibility, Kara had saved me now more times than I'd saved her. This kid was my guardian angel, and because of that I'd do everything I could to make sure she got through this world alive, just like I knew she'd do for me.

Eventually the sounds from outside died down, and we were alone in the dark silence. "Kara," I said softly, gently nudging her shoulder to wake her up. "You hungry?" Now I clicked on my flashlight, and I shined it down at my watch. It was almost three in the morning.

"Starving," Kara answered, stretching as she sat up.

For a second, I was nervous to move the beam of my light around the basement. Part of me was worried Kara had been mistaken, and that there wasn't really any food down here. Ignoring the doubt, I shone my

light in a complete circle, and I'd barely started when both Kara and I's mouths turned up in huge grins. Every wall of the basement was lined with cans and airtight packages of food and water, and there were more shelves that stuck out into the middle of the floor. Not only that, but other than the items that had been knocked to the floor by Ferals, everything was labeled and stacked in categories so neat and survival-ready it was a wonder to me that the owner of the house didn't make it through the outbreak.

"Oh my God," Kara breathed, rushing forward and grabbing a sixteen ounce can. She hugged it close, and then raised it above her head triumphantly. I shined my light on her, trying to read the label on the can, and when she realized she giggled and grinned. "SpaghettiO's!"

I laughed, though it was a slightly sad and reminiscent one. My daughter had always loved SpaghettiO's too, and I could only imagine that it'd been years since Kara had eaten any. "How about we have a feast?" There was enough food in here to last us weeks, and that was if we ate solidly and regularly. If we rationed off everything as if food was scarce, I didn't doubt that the stuff in here could last us months.

"Yes!" Kara groaned ecstatically, instantly reaching for two more cans of SpaghettiO's.

Another chuckle escaped my throat, and while she plopped down in the middle of the floor with her cans I went around the room to pick a couple of my own. I'd want to stay here in the basement for at least a day, just to make sure all the Ferals that had come because of the noise we'd made had wandered off before we came out. We couldn't exactly light a fire in here either to heat up our food. But even with the food being cold, this was the best meal I'd had in a long, long time. I could tell the same was true for Kara, because she talked to me more than she had yet, chattering excitedly late into the morning. And even though I was exhausted, I stayed up to listen to her.

Chasing Visions

Youth by Daughter

Chasing Visions

Genevieve

"Last lap ladies, then grab some water!" I heard my coach yell from the bleachers at the side of the soccer field.

I glanced over at Ester running beside me, and at the mischievous glimmer in her eyes I laughed. Then I picked up my pace to a full on sprint, knowing she'd be right behind trying to finally get a faster lap than me. Her hard footsteps sounded behind me, only making me push harder for the final leg of the lap, making me dig my cleats deeper into the grass to get a more powerful push with every stride. Thirty seconds later I was at the bleachers, finished ahead of her and all the other girls on the team, just like always even though I was a freshman on the varsity team.

"You got to," Ester started when she reached the bleachers, stopping to pant with her hands on her knees. Ester was a junior. "Slow down."

I pulled repeatedly at the sweat-soaked jersey sticking to my chest, to get some cool air flowing through it while I chuckled. "And let you beat me?" I asked teasingly. "No thanks." To add a bit more teasing to my remark I grabbed my water bottle, and I squirted a little bit at her before taking a giant swig. I was about to jog off to the middle of the field where some of the other girls were messing around with a ball, just to keep my muscles warm before we started the next half of practice, but then I caught a sight of something across the field. "I'll be right back," I told Ester, already jogging away.

It was Miss Shy Genius walking home, which was nothing new seeing as I always saw her walking home from school, but this time there was a boy at her side. I knew the guy well. He was athletic and popular, not the type to be making sure she got home safely, and I also knew he had a bit of a

'playful' personality. Playful in the kind of way that I might ruin him for being too playful with her.

"Hey," I greeted friendlily as I ran up, trying not to be aggressive toward him before I heard the whole story.

He simply nodded at me in acknowledgement, but her smoky gray eyes lit up excitedly, just like they always did when she saw me, and just like always it put an instant smile on my face. "Hi, Genevieve," she grinned, drawing my gaze to that single laugh line. She could be so popular if she wanted, and it wasn't just her looks. From the glimpses I'd seen it seemed like she had the personality for it too, she was just too timid to let it shine.

I nodded hello, and then tossed my head toward Chad. "He's not giving you trouble, is he?"

"*Genevieve," Chad whined in feigned disappointment. "I'm an angel." He gave me an exaggeratedly innocent smile, and then waved at her. "I'll see you later. Thanks again."*

Once he'd hurried away I looked back at her, raising a questioning eyebrow so she knew she could tell me honestly now if he was bullying her. She just chuckled and shook her head. "He was asking if I could help him study for the math test at lunch tomorrow." And when I furrowed my eyebrows she tilted her head shyly and added, "He asked nicely."

"*Good," I laughed, satisfied that he was being nice. "Don't let him flirt with you either," I told her a moment later, still not entirely trusting in Chad's intentions. "He's trouble."*

Her cheeks tinted a dark red as she gave an embarrassed giggle, which caused her to almost drop the books she was holding in her arms. I reached out to catch any that fell, but she managed to keep a hold on them with a grateful smile. "A staunch jaw and tenacious biceps don't really do it for me," she said, and when I just stared at her blankly for a few seconds she clarified with that alluring smirk, "He's not my type."

"*Moretti!" I heard someone shout my last name from back on the field, and glanced over my shoulder to see the coach motioning me back.*

"*You're too smart for your own good," I told my companion playfully as I turned back toward practice, waving as I jogged away. "Bye."*

When I reached the field my teammates had already lined up single file to take turns shooting on goal. I took my place behind Naomi, the only other freshman on the team, and she twisted to face me as we moved up in the line. "What's your obsession with her?" she asked snidely.

"*It's not an obsession," I told her in a clipped breath. She was only upset because I'd embarrassed her the other day when I caught her trying to intimidate my shy acquaintance out of homework answers.*

Naomi took a few steps forward as we got closer to the front of the line. "You watch her like a possessive Doberman."

I clenched my jaw so I wouldn't make a remark too severe, and pictured the gold bracelet waiting for me in my locker. She'd done me a priceless favor years ago. As far as I was concerned, I was eternally indebted to her. "So assholes like you can't take advantage of her," I said to Naomi as she reached the front of the line, grateful the verbal argument wouldn't get out of hand because it was her turn to shoot.

Maybe my sense of gratitude toward her did border on the obsessive, but I was completely okay with that.

…

"Genevieve." There was a soft glow of light that flowed in through the partially open flap as Blake poked his head into my tent. It took me a moment to wake up enough to tilt my head and look at him. "Second Platoon is leaving early for the supply run. I guess they're going clear out to Scranton to look for survivors too."

"Scranton?" I repeated curiously, putting a hand over my eyes to shield it from the light he was still letting in.

"Pennsylvania," he answered. "If you wanted anything from them you should tell them before they leave." I nodded tiredly to let him know I'd be getting up. "Morning, Echo," he said before leaving. From my spot on the cot I could see her raise a tired hand to wave at him. I immediately shot her a glare, because she'd practically already won Blake over. Of course I couldn't force him to hate her, and I didn't expect him to since he was always such a positive guy that he rarely disliked anybody, but it made me irritated.

"I didn't even say anything," Echo said in exasperation when I gave her that look.

I ignored her and laid my head back again, willing myself to wake up completely. During my slow process of waking there was the tiniest of successive metallic clicks, first once, and then again. It took me a nearly a minute to even realize what the sound was, but then I remembered Echo waving at Blake, and I hadn't undone her cuffs yet.

"Did you seriously just-" I started angrily as I turned in my cot to face her, stopping short when she held up her cuffed hands to show me. But I knew she'd picked them last night, and had just put them back on so I couldn't really say anything about it. "I'm going to find it eventually." I pushed myself up into a sitting position and leaned over to slide into my boots. "What is it? A spare handcuff key? A bobby pin?"

The laugh line in one corner of her mouth deepened with a smirk, and she squinted her eyes happily as she pushed her hips up and raised her arms above her head to stretch her whole body. "Wouldn't you like to know," she sighed cheerfully, relaxing back onto her blankets. When I rolled my eyes, trying my hardest to start the morning off in a good mood, and knelt at her side to undo the cuffs properly, she added in a mysterious whisper, "It's magic."

"There's no such thing as magic." Once I'd undone the handcuffs I straightened and threw my rifle over my shoulder, ready to leave.

Echo pushed herself onto her feet and slid into her shoes, then went through her routine of pulling up her hair and stretching a little more. "And there's no such thing as zombies either, right?"

there's no such thing as zombies either, right?"

"No," I said sternly. I didn't like the sarcasm in her voice. "They're not dead. They're sick."

She scoffed like that was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. "Uh huh, and I bet you're one of those whackos who thinks there's a cure."

I glared at her again, more fiercely now than I did the first time, and went through the exit of the tent without saying anything. She shuffled around inside for a second before rushing out and hurrying after me. When she caught up she strode at my right shoulder, close enough that every couple seconds I could feel her brush against me. Out of instinct my hand instantly felt for the knife at my thigh, making sure it was still there and she hadn't stolen it. I didn't think she'd ever try to take it from me again, but she was pickpocket-quick with her hands, and when she wasn't in a good mood she had something of a temper. Put simply, I didn't trust her, and after I'd confirmed the knife at my thigh I scooted over a few steps so she wasn't as close. We passed the edges of camp and made our way to the motor pool in silence. It was a good thing Blake had come and woken us, because Second Platoon was loading fuel into the vehicles and doing their last minute safety checks.

"Barns," I called to Second's lieutenant when we were close enough that he'd hear me over the sound of a diesel engine. He glanced our direction, and when he saw us he jogged over to meet me halfway.

"What's up, Gen?" he greeted with a smile, which faded slightly when his eyes wandered to my shadow.

"I need a few things," I told him. "If you guys got room." He nodded and pulled a small notepad and pencil out of his pocket to write the items down. "You doing a clothing run?" Again he nodded. "I need a new pair of socks, and a long sleeve shirt if you can find one my size." Then I turned to Echo. "What size shoe do you wear?" I asked her.

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and she glanced down at her sneakers. "What's wrong with these?"

"Besides the fact that they're old as dirt?" I asked, and barely heard her

"Besides the fact that they're old as dirt?" I asked, and barely heard her mumble 'they're comfortable' under her breath. "If you break your ankle on a mission because they offer no support, I will leave you behind."

Barns chuckled, which made Echo struggle to hide a scowl. "Six," she sighed.

"A pair of boots," I told Barns. "Size six. She needs some eating utensils too."

"You got it."

"Thanks." I shook Barns' hand gratefully and started to walk away, but then I heard Echo's footsteps pick up in the opposite direction.

She'd hurried after him, and now was talking to him quietly enough that I couldn't hear over the roar of engines. He didn't look entirely pleased that she was even conversing with him in the first place, but then she looked around stealthily and pulled something out of her cargo pants' pocket to hand to him. I couldn't tell what it was because Echo had her back to me, but after glancing down at it for a few seconds Barns nodded.

"What was that about?" I asked when she scurried back to me.

"Nothing," she said nonchalantly, and then as if she didn't want me asking any questions added quickly, "You don't want me to get hurt."

"Where would you get an idea like that?" I asked seriously, crinkling my eyebrows at her. That couldn't be further from the truth. She could drop dead for all I cared.

"You asked him to get boots for me." She nudged me with her elbow, and I could tell she was purposefully doing it to be annoying. "You care if I get hu-" She stopped as she almost tripped over a root, and I couldn't help but snort. "Hurt," she finished.

"No, I care if I get bit trying to save your clumsy ass," I laughed. Clumsy didn't even begin to describe it. "Seriously, this isn't concrete. Pick up your feet when you walk." I know that wasn't the first time I'd told her, and next time I was seriously going to ignore it.

next time I was seriously going to ignore it.

"Say what you want," she mumbled playfully, and I sped up to keep from scowling at her. Maybe it was funny the first time she said it, when she almost tripped and it sounded ridiculous. But now she was being too lighthearted with me. I still hated her.

I strode all the way across camp to the meeting tent to see Cap. While I didn't go to meet with him every day, I went most days because sometimes things came up. But he wasn't in there when we reached it, so I sat down on the fold up chair in front of his table and kicked my feet up onto it. Echo took a seat on the floor in the corner, where she usually waited when she came with me, and I could hear her tapping her foot on the ground out of boredom, humming lightly to herself. I let it slide for the first couple minutes because the song sounded familiar, but after that I shot her an annoyed look.

"Sorry," she said, giving an apologetic smile and kicking her feet out to stretch her legs. A minute later she asked, "What do you do for fun around here?"

"What do you mean?" I twisted the upper half of my body so I could turn around and look at her.

"You work all day, even when you have night patrols," she said, and lifted a hand to absentmindedly run her fingers over the stitches on her forehead. "As long as I've been here you even find stuff to do at night when you don't have night patrols."

I pulled my knife out of its sheath and set the tip of it on the table while I rested my index finger on the butt end, busying myself with spinning it in circles while we waited. "I've got a job to do," I shrugged.

"When was the last time you had a day off?" She stood, and after making her way to the table I was at she sat on the edge and pulled a box of cigarettes out of one of her pockets.

I instantly put the knife back in its sheath. She'd gotten too close, too fast. "Sophomore year of high school."

She let out a breath of smoke, and when she saw me eyeing the red cherry at the end of her fingers she sighed. "Are you going to tell me I can't smoke?" I opened my mouth to say 'no', but she didn't wait for an answer, and instead responded to my previous statement. "You're just so tense all the time. When was the last time you played soccer?" I resented that, and just to show her I wasn't always wound tight I reached up and took her cigarette. I didn't always smoke. Usually I just took a puff from Blake's every once in a while, but she looked genuinely shocked when I did. "You used to love soccer," she said as I handed it back to her.

All I could do was look up at her. She'd done it before since she'd been here, brought up something from before the outbreak. But it wasn't what she said so much as how she said it. She sounded so sincere, like it broke her heart that she knew I hadn't played soccer since high school, and I hated it. I didn't want her caring about anything I did. It was all a lie anyway. She wasn't that girl anymore, she was a con artist, and she was just trying to trick me.

"Well," I started indifferently, "Now I get to play babysitter to a murderer. No more time for games."

"Genevieve," she said softly, "I'm-"

"Morning," Cap interrupted, strolling through the entrance of the tent. I don't know what exactly Echo was about to say, but those pearly gray eyes lingered on me for a few seconds before she got off the table and lumbered back to her spot. I couldn't help but follow her curiously with my own eyes, wondering just what she was going say, until Cap tapped my boots with his hand. "Feet," he reminded as he took a seat in the chair across from mine.

While I pulled my boots off the table I glanced back at Echo one more time, and she swiftly looked away as if she'd been staring at me. It was probably best I didn't hear what she'd been about to say. It would've only made me mad, like if she'd been about to say 'sorry' again. "Morning, Cap," I finally greeted the old man.

"You got any big plans today?" he asked, and when I shook my head he gave a tiny smile. "Good. I need you to start preparing. I'm sending Alpha

gave a tiny smile. "Good, I need you to start preparing. I'm sending Alpha Squad on special assignment."

I knew exactly what he meant right away, especially since he'd only said Alpha Squad was going, but I wasn't sure I'd heard right seeing as it had been almost seven months since we'd been sent on one of these missions. "*Special* assignment, special assignment?"

Cap nodded and adjusted the dark green hat on his head. "You'll have to go see April for more details though. I don't think she's entirely ready yet. She was talking about sending you next week. Plus, you'll have to wait until Second Platoon gets back, and with them going all the way to Pennsylvania..."

"Okay," I said, and then waited patiently for him to say anything else. "Is that it?" I asked when he made no move to give further instructions.

"That's it," he repeated in confirmation. "You can go see her now." I nodded in parting, and then got up to leave with Echo following close behind.

"What's special assignment?" she asked, moving to my shoulder again. This time, since she wasn't on the same side as my knife, I didn't shy away from her.

"Don't worry about it," I answered casually, not ready to explain because I didn't have any of the specifics yet. Upon reaching the medical cabin I could see Blake standing outside with Casey, and the sight almost made me laugh. Blake would swear on his life he didn't want a girlfriend, but I could tell Casey was growing on him. He always smiled when she was around. "Hey guys," I greeted them, and after they both said 'hi' I waved for Blake to follow us in. "We're going on special assignment."

"Seriously?" he asked in disbelief, to which I nodded.

Then I heard Echo whisper behind us, "What's special assignment?"

April grinned when we all entered, and pulled a thermometer out of a young child's mouth. "You look healthy," she told him as she lifted him off the steel table. Then she gave him a pat on the back as she gently

the steel table. Then she gave him a pat on the back as she gently pushed him toward the door. "Go help Mom with chores." The first person she looked at after the kid left was Echo. "Come here," she instructed kindly, patting the table for Echo to sit. "Let me look at your stitches."

"Cap said you wanted us to go on special assignment again," I mentioned as April examined Echo's forehead. She nodded while she turned to rummage through a small box in one of the large trunks, and pulling out a pair of scissors and forceps she moved back to Echo. "What are you testing this time?"

"I wanted to try a version of a tetanus vaccine. I have my doubts about its success, but I want to make sure we've tried everything." April snipped the first of the stitches, and after gripping it with the forceps she began to pull it out. I mirrored Echo's cringe and averted my eyes from the procedure. "It will have to be next week though. I've still got to finish the vaccine."

"Okay," I nodded in agreement and glanced over to see a similar acceptance on Blake's face. It would probably be at least two weeks anyway until Second Platoon got back. "Any specific type you want us to bring back?"

"No." April shook her head as she removed the last of Echo's sutures. "If we get anywhere with the first subject then I'll have you bring back another with a different set of criteria." She'd been wiping Echo's nearly healed wound with an alcohol pad when she paused and turned toward Blake and I. "If you want to get specific, you could bring me the most sickly specimen you can find. If we're successful with that, I imagine we'd be successful with a healthier one." She shifted back toward Echo with a soothing smile. "Your wound is healing nicely. The scar will hardly be noticeable." And then back to us, "Also, try to be more delicate. Last time the thing almost bled out before we finished the test."

I nodded again to show that I understood, and from behind April I could see Echo's eyebrows furrow. "You're not serious." She gave a disbelievingly dry laugh, then hopped off the table, looking almost furious. "*That's* special assignment? We're going to go catch a Feral so you idiots

can test vaccinations on it?" She shook her head and strode swiftly past Blake and I, angrily pushing open the door to the medical cabin. "No way. I'm out."

I just stood there for a second in shock, not sure why she'd had such a dramatic reaction. Then I hurried out the door after her. She didn't get to choose. "Hey!" I hollered, hurrying to catch up with her as she paced back in the direction of my tent. "Where do you think you're going?"

When I caught up I grabbed her arm to stop her, but she turned instantly and wrenched it away. "Are you insane!" she yelled. "You want me to go with you to catch a Biter and bring it back *here*?" I glared, and then looked around worriedly in case anyone was near enough to hear her shouting, because none of the citizens knew. She caught on, and thankfully decided to lower her voice. "You *actually* think there's a cure? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. You're all delusional." She stormed off furiously without looking back.

Now I was getting angry. Not only was she overreacting and being unreasonable without hearing our side, but she was also insulting the one thing all of us had found to live for. "Stop!" I commanded, catching up and gripping her arm again.

"There's no cure!" she turned on me once more, this time going so far as to push me back. "I'm not risking my life for whatever stupid dream you lunatics think you might accomplish."

"You don't have a choice," I said bitterly, growing more irritated by the second. She was the one who wanted to stay here. She was the one who'd agreed to do whatever was necessary for us to make her a soldier instead of killing her.

"Screw you, Genevieve." She started to walk away again, saying as she did, "Like hell I don't have a choice."

I grabbed her arm more roughly now before she got out of reach, and this time she swiveled around and pushed me hard enough that I stumbled back. That was it. Now I was furious. When she turned her back I rushed forward, wrapping my arms around her neck with the intention of putting

forward, wrapping my arms around her neck with the intention of putting her in a headlock so she'd have to calm down and listen to me.

Instead, she managed to slip out of it before I could even tighten my grip. "Don't touch me!" she yelled, grabbing my left arm as she slipped out and moving behind my back, pulling my arm painfully far behind me.

Afraid she was going to retaliate further and attack me like she'd done before, I instantly grabbed my knife from my thigh so she couldn't. Ignoring the pain in my other arm I spun around, putting the blade against her throat to finally get a threat on her big enough that she'd stop fighting me. Only, my attempt was unsuccessful. I'd underestimated her. She reached over my elbow and grabbed my wrist, leaning her head back and pulling my knifed arm away from her. She'd stretched my arm out in pulling it away, and since that left me momentarily unguarded she threw her other fist at my face. It caught me in the nose so hard I hit the ground on my back, and the edges of my rifle digging into my spine hurt just as much as my nose did, but I was angry enough that I was going to get right back up and tackle her.

"That's enough!" Blake shouted before I could, and I knew him well enough to hear just by his volume that he was severely aggravated. He rarely raised his voice. Echo's footsteps stormed off in the direction of my tent again, and a moment later Blake's face appeared above mine. "Are you okay?"

I pursed my lips to keep from yelling at him, because it wasn't him I was angry with. "I'm pissed."

He offered a hand to help me up, and easily pulled me to my feet. "Your nose is bleeding."

I nodded knowingly. I could taste the blood when I licked my lips. "Do you have a tissue or something?" He rummaged around in his pockets for a moment before finding one and handing it to me. "Thanks." I wiped the blood off my chin and upper lip before holding it directly under my nose. "I can't do it, Blake. I can't live with her." I was so frustrated, felt so helpless that now that my fury was dulling there were tears stinging my eyes. This was too much for me. I hadn't felt emotions like these in years,

and I didn't know how to deal.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged, speaking low enough that I could tell he was trying not to upset me more. "Seems to me like you have less of a choice than she does."

It was all Cap's fault. He was doing this to me. "I'll shoot her," I told Blake as I picked up the knife I'd dropped and put it back against my thigh. "I can't talk to her right now if she's going to be this goddamn stubborn. I'll seriously shoot her." He chuckled and ruffled my hair endearingly. "And I can't leave her here without me while we go. I'm the only one who's supposed to watch her. Can you convince her for me? She likes you."

Blake sighed and glanced in the direction of our tents, thinking about it for a minute. "I think you should do it." I groaned my dissatisfaction at his answer. "Just calm down, breathe," he said, turning me around so he could massage his fingers into my shoulders. "You might not see it yet, but she cares about what you think more than anything. I think she'd do whatever you wanted if you just asked," he said, and then added for emphasis, "Nicely."

"How do you know that?" I asked, unwilling to believe I could have any such effect on Echo so easily.

"She told me," he shrugged. "Sort of."

"I should just be able to pull rank on her," I grumbled unhappily.

Blake laughed. "I don't think that means much to her."

I groaned again, stomping my feet to try and calm myself down. "I hate this." Then I took a deep breath and handed him my rifle and knife. "Hold those so I don't kill her."

"Try to be understanding," he called after me as I walked away, sounding somewhat amused.

I strode as calmly as possible to our campsite, and when I reached it I found Echo sitting on the logs in front of the cold fire pit. There was plenty

of room on the long plank beside her, so I sat down next to her, taking one final deep breath to bottle up all those emotions that made me unsure of whether to murder her or just curl up into a ball and break down. But when I sat at her side she sniffled and wiped at her cheek, like she'd been the one who was in tears.

"Why are *you* crying?" I asked, and in my confusion the question came out surlier than I'd meant it to.

Her eyes narrowed at me, her shiny, moist, raincloud eyes. "I'm not crying." But once she focused on me her gaze dropped to the tissue I was still holding above my upper lip, and her look softened. "I'm sorry I hit you." Every time I heard her say the word 'sorry' it made me seethe. She shouldn't have to say it in the first place, especially not as often as she did. That's why I'd given Blake my weapons, and I repeated his words in my mind, *try to be understanding*. It was hard when I didn't care how she felt, when all I wanted was to never see her again.

"Echo," I said as softly as I could manage. Even her name annoyed me. It wasn't her real name, just some stupid nickname the raiders had given her, but she preferred it. Preferred the raider. "Sometimes we have to go on missions whether we want to or not. That's part of being a soldier."

"There's no cure, Genevieve," she said pointedly. "I'm not going."

I clenched my fist at my side, hoping she wouldn't see it and realize how desperate I was to punch her. *Understanding*. "How do you know there isn't a cure?"

She sniffled again, and when I looked over at her she instantly wiped another tear off her cheek. "We've all lost too much for it to be that simple," she whispered, her voice sounding wet. I'd never really thought about the things she might've lost, and if she wasn't being so emotional I probably still wouldn't have cared. But right now she wasn't acting like the raider we'd picked out of the city. She was acting like a human being, and I was feeling that tiny itch of sympathy again.

"If we could find a cure," I started, pressing my finger beneath my nose and finding that the bleeding had stopped, "Then maybe we wouldn't

have to lose any more than we already have. Things can go back to the way they were."

Echo leaned forward to put her elbows on her knees, and then buried her face in her hands. "What if things can never go back to the way they were for me?"

I knew what she meant instantly, because she was a killer now, and who knows what other kinds of things she'd done, and I had to turn away so she wouldn't see the immediate flash of rage it put on my face. I was so close to getting her to comply. Getting upset now would ruin everything, and I knew it. "Then do it for everyone else," I said, forcing back the anger so I could look at her desperately. Blake had said he thought she'd do anything I wanted if I asked nice enough, so I added sincerely, "Please."

Her eyes locked onto mine, and in that narrow window I caught the slightest glimpse of a girl I used to know. Then she was gone. "Can I have a gun?"

"Yes," I answered surely, because I already knew I'd have to give her a gun when we went on mission.

"Permanently?" she clarified.

I immediately shook my head. "No."

She didn't look entirely pleased, but she pressed on. "What about the knife?"

"I can't let you walk around with a weapon," I told her seriously, trying to keep my temper at bay since she hadn't necessarily agreed to go yet. "You keep picking the cuffs and you've already attacked me multiple times." And just to prove my point I motioned to my nose.

"I was provoked," she said, squinting her eyes indignantly, but it seemed like she was trying to control herself as much as I was. Then she added in an almost pleading whine, "Besides, if I was going to kill someone I could've done it already."

I cocked my head at her in disbelief. "Is that really supposed to help your case?"

That laugh line deepened when she chuckled, "Does it?"

"Can't say it does," I answered, and to my surprise, I felt a smile tug at my own lips.

Despite the inappropriate moment of lightheartedness, she shook her head and stood. "Then I won't go."

I growled my regained frustration, standing and trying to refrain from starting a fight with her again. "Fine." She raised her eyebrows expectantly. "I'll let you have your knife back. But you have to stop taking off the cuffs at night." Her shoulders slumped with complaint, so I interrupted before she could say anything. "That's the deal. No exceptions."

Echo let out a thoughtful breath before nodding and sticking out her hand. "Deal."

I shook with her, and then strode past her and into the tent to fulfill my part of the agreement. Along with the knife that I pulled out of the trunk I grabbed her pistol, making sure the magazine was full before sticking it in the back of my jeans. Echo was standing at the entrance of the tent watching me, and after I'd reclosed the trunk I handed her the pocketknife.

"Don't make me regret this," I told her as she clipped the item to her pocket.

"I won't," she assured me enthusiastically, "I promise." Then as she began to follow me back toward the medical cabin she asked, "What's my gun for?"

"I'll show you later." Thankfully Blake had returned to the medical cabin after I'd left him, and he gladly handed back my weapons.

After that I had Echo to the DEAC [illegible]

After that I led Echo to the DFAC so we could have breakfast. Aminah let her borrow some eating utensils again, and when we sat down at a table I was relieved Echo seemed comfortable with letting me eat in peace. Usually she tried to talk to me until I gave her a harsh look to shut her up, but now she didn't say a word. It seemed she was in deep thought about something, but I wasn't about to complain that she was being silent. My meal was practically gone by the time Kellan sat down across from me and next to Echo.

"Hello, Sunshine," he said, giving me his usual flirtatious smile.

I laughed like I normally did at his antics, but I couldn't miss the fact that Echo looked disgusted the moment he sat down, and she deliberately scooted over a few inches so he wasn't as close. "Hi, Kellan," I greeted him, but I blame my satisfaction at Echo's displeasure for my greeting coming out more sportive than I'd meant it to.

He immediately looked pleased that I seemed more accepting than usual of his flirtation, so he carried on the conversation with a massive grin. "The stew's really good today, isn't it?" I took another bite from my bowl and nodded in agreement. "Hey, what happened to your nose?"

"It's not important." When I glanced over at Echo she scooted another inch away from him, like he'd figure out she did it even if I didn't say anything. To spare her some distress I changed the subject. "What are you doing today?"

"I've got day patrols in about twenty minutes actually," he answered, and his lips curled into a smug grin. "Might go by faster with the company of a beautiful girl such as yourself."

At that I could see Echo roll her eyes and put down her food bowl like she'd lost her appetite. Kellan didn't notice, but I *almost* wanted to laugh at how dramatic she was being. "As tempting as that sounds, I've got to watch her," and I nodded toward Echo.

"Oh, yeah." For the first time Kellan glanced over at the raider, as if he hadn't noticed her until now, and it appeared the dislike between them was mutual. "That sucks."

Echo stood and picked up her empty cup, grumbling as she walked away, "I'm going to get more water."

"Hey," I said, leaning in toward Kellan so anyone else around wouldn't hear. "April's sending Alpha on special assignment soon. Blake knows to pass it along, but I figured I'd tell you since you're here." He looked a little surprised, but nodded. "You know the drill, keep it quiet."

"You got it," he agreed, looking up when Echo came back and sat down again, then standing himself. "I'll see you later, LT."

Echo stared somewhat defiantly when Kellan passed her a callous scowl as he left. Once he was gone she took an indifferent bite of her stew, saying sarcastically to herself, "Ain't he a peach."

Despite the fact that I wanted to chuckle at her remark, I refrained. Seeing as she clearly didn't like him, it sort of brought me satisfaction that she'd think I did. "You almost ready?"

At the question she peered into her bowl and slurped down the rest of the fluid. "I just have to rinse these real quick and give them back to Aminah." I waited patiently while she did just that, and once she was finished I returned my own utensils to my tent. "Are we building more cabins today?" she asked as I led the way back toward Cap's meeting tent.

"Nope," I answered simply, adjusting the rifle over my shoulder because it kept clanging into Echo's pistol, which was still set in the back of my jeans.

"Going hunting?" she guessed.

"No."

"Are we," and she dragged out 'we' like we were playing a guessing game, "Doing day patrols?"

"You'll find out if you shut up for like two seconds," I griped in exasperation. "Since when do you talk this much?" She didn't answer, but

I looked back at her just in time to see her make an exaggeratedly mocking face at me. At least she didn't say anything else, and soon enough we'd passed the meeting tent and reached our destination – the armory tent. "Hey," I greeted the soldier standing guard outside, because Cap liked to keep a tight watch on ammunitions, and after he saluted me I went through the standard procedure of telling him what I needed and why. "I need fifty rounds for a nine millimeter, and twenty five-fifty-six for my rifle. Training."

The man disappeared into the tent to grab what I'd asked for, and I glanced at Echo right as it looked like she was about to ask a question. "Yes, we're going shooting," I answered what I thought she was going to ask before she could, and her lips instantly curled into a grin. "Once I give you your gun, don't get cute. If you pull any funny business even once while you have that pistol in your hands you'll wake up a year from now in the medical cabin. Got it?"

She nodded vigorously as the soldier came back out and handed me a small paper bag of ammunition. I motioned for Echo to follow, and then led her farther past the armory tent into the forest. The spot we used for target practice was about two miles into the woods, that way it wouldn't panic our civilians every time we went out for training, which was infrequent enough that it might sound like some kind of emergency.

"Genevieve," Echo said a few minutes into our walk. She just couldn't leave me alone for an extended period of time. "When you guys catch Ferals and bring them back, don't you worry about the safety of all the people here?" I just shook my head, hoping she'd get the hint like she usually did and let me ignore her for a while. "Seemed like safety was really important to you."

I wasn't keen on answering, but there was a genuine amount of concern in her voice. "We don't put them in camp. There's a special tent in the woods that we drive to. If one ever escaped it either wouldn't find camp or wouldn't make it here before we caught it."

She didn't say anything else before we reached the makeshift shooting range, and I'd been enjoying the silence so much I'd almost forgotten she was with me. The only things I could hear were birds overhead, wind

was with me. The only things I could hear were birds overhead, wind rustling in the trees above us, and our feet crunching over fallen leaves. There were more leaves on the ground than usual. It was the end of August, and before we knew it it'd be winter. The sight of the foliage gave me the urge to gather it into a pile like I used to do in the yard when I was a kid, and then jump from a low hanging branch into the thick pile. Maybe Echo was right about me being tense all the time, because I wouldn't. If it wasn't for her presence I might have been more tempted to give in to the urge, but she was there, and it kept me from feeling at ease.

Eventually the bright red and white circles painted on tree trunks came into view, and I stopped fifty meters away from the nearest of them. "Here," I said, handing Echo her pistol.

"Why are we doing this anyway?" she asked, taking it in her hand and dropping it to her side.

I set the paper bag on the ground and then double-checked the amount of ammunition in my rifle. "It's one thing for me to even trust you with a gun in your hand." I motioned for her to come to me, and then positioned her in front of all the targets while I moved behind her. "It's another for me to trust in your ability when we're being chased."

She swiveled her head just long enough to look at me and ask, "Do you trust me with a gun in my hand?"

"I wouldn't turn my back on you." After I'd paused for a few moments she looked back at me again, disappointedly this time, but I ignored it and nodded for her to shoot. "Go ahead." She clicked the safety off and aimed her weapon, and I felt slightly relieved she at least knew how to do that much. Then she got her first shot off at the nearest target fifty meters away, and I couldn't help but snicker. "We're all going to die."

"I hit the target," she said, sounding mildly offended as she dropped the gun to her side and turned to face me.

"You hit the *tree*." I was trying desperately hard not to laugh again, due in large part to her short temper and the fact that I'd given her a gun. "Most Ferals aren't ten feet tall."

She pivoted back toward the targets and raised her weapon again. "I just need to warm up." I shrugged indifferently and waited from my same spot behind her, this time while she emptied her entire magazine into the same tree. She managed to hit the target a couple times, but it was still nowhere near the bull's-eye. "Shut up," she scowled when she was done, pulling out the clip to refill it with bullets from the bag.

"I didn't say anything," I chuckled.

"You didn't have to." She was still a bit defensive about it. "I didn't have a war vet teach me how to shoot."

I didn't respond, and while she was refilling the magazine I took her place in front of the targets to do some shooting of my own. I didn't empty my entire clip since my weapon was semi-automatic and had thirty bullets in it, but after five shots I stopped and turned to Echo to see if she was done. She was, and she was gawking at me because I'd hit the center of the four hundred meter target every time.

"You've got a scope on yours," she said when she realized I'd caught her staring. Just to prove a point I turned back to the targets and shot from the hip. I only aimed at the closest one, and while I didn't manage to hit the center, I still managed to get the target. Now when I looked back at Echo the only evidence of an approving smirk on her face was the deepening of her laugh line. "Seriously?" she asked in disbelief.

"This thing is like a fifth limb." I shrugged, though I couldn't suppress a proud smile. "You just need practice."

She nodded knowingly and shoved her now full magazine into her pistol. "So, did you bring me here to show off? Or are you actually going to teach me something?"

"I'll teach you," I assured her, and motioned for her to take her place again. "I need to figure out what you're doing wrong." She began to stride over, and before she raised her weapon to fire I stopped her. "This is what I'd do for fun, by the way." And when she glanced over her shoulder at me I gave an almost shy shrug. "If ammo wasn't such a critical resource."

resource.

She turned back to shoot off her rounds, but not before I caught a glimpse of an approving smile on her face. I watched as she fired, studying her stance, her aim, and her focus. It took me a while to spot what might've been the problem, but halfway through the third clip I thought I'd figured it out.

"Hold on," I said in between shots so she'd be able to hear me. She stopped, and when I'd made my way to her side I lifted her arms again with my hand. "Aim at the center of the target, but don't shoot." She did as I instructed, and then I moved behind her to try and see exactly what she was seeing. Yep, that was definitely the problem. "Okay," I started, striding to her side again and pointing at the front sights of her pistol. "You're lining up the sights horizontally, but not vertically. See?"

I watched her squint one eye, open it, and then glance over at me. "That makes a difference?"

"How are you even alive right now?" I asked teasingly.

"Luck, because obviously nobody gave a shit if I knew how to take care of myself," she quipped angrily. She must've seen by the look on my face that it didn't really do much for me in the excuse department, because then she lowered her gun and clicked the safety back on. "You know what, forget it." And she shoved the pistol into my hands. "You don't have to act like you give a shit either."

"Wait, Echo," I said quickly, and reluctant to say she was wrong, because I really didn't give a shit, I promised something else. "I won't make fun of you anymore. I swear." Normally I'd just let her walk away, but it was important for everyone that she learned how to shoot properly. She studied me for a few seconds like she was trying to judge if I was serious or not, and then eventually wandered back to her spot. "It makes all the difference," I told her, clicking off the safety and putting the gun back into her hands. "The tops of your rear sights need to be lined up with the top of your front sights. They have to be level."

She fired again according to my instructions, and when some small

splinters exploded at the center of the target she laughed happily. "That's all there was to it." Then she looked back at me. "Thanks." Even though I wasn't necessarily doing it for her benefit, I nodded in acknowledgement. The next shot she fired hit almost the same exact spot, and I saw her shoulders rise and fall with another happy chuckle.

"It seems like somebody gave a shit," I mused eventually, after she'd fired a couple more rounds and because I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said. Today she'd given me a bloody nose, and a few days ago she'd managed to pin me even though she had a severe concussion. The girl I used to know could've never taught herself that. "Enough to teach you how to fight like you do."

Her eyes met mine, and she stared for a couple seconds before shaking her head. "No," and she turned back to the targets to continue practicing, "He didn't care either."

Let The Dead Bury The Dead

Thistle and Weeds by Mumford & Sons

Let The Dead Bury The Dead

Echo

"Oh!"

I'd been dozing off on the sofa until the triumphant shout scared me into a half-sitting position. The rhythmic whoosh and thump of a couple of the guys behind the couch throwing knives at the wall had lulled me into the most calm state I'd been in since the outbreak started. It only took a year, and I couldn't help but find it strange that lately it was the sound of weapons that was comforting to me.

"Let's see it Victor," the guy who'd shouted challenged. "Beat that."

I glanced over to see Victor pulling throwing knives out of an enormous, painted target on the wall. For the last year our now thirteen-member group had been, for the most part, nomadic. A week ago we'd wandered into the upper class neighborhoods of Rochester, and managed to find an empty house that was practically a mansion. The houses in this area were on massive plots of land, and the neighboring ones were far enough away that we didn't have to whisper every time we said something. That might've also partly accounted for my ability to relax. This was the safest I'd felt in a while. Plus the silky fabric of the couch I was laying on was soft to the touch, and the cushions cradled my body comfortingly.

Once I'd calmed down from starting up at the yell, I lay back on the couch and folded my hands behind my head. I almost managed to fall asleep once more when the guys started yelling again and woke me up. This time I sat all the way up, not bothering to hope for a nap anymore. Taking a look at the targeted wall, it appeared Victor had very nearly beaten his challenger, but since he'd lost the game was over. Deciding maybe I'd get a little more peace in one of the many rooms of the house I stood, but

the second I did the guys noticed me.

"Echo!" Victor grinned, "How about a high five for almost kicking Remy's ass?"

I strode over, refraining from sighing unhappily. "You only get high fives for actually kicking Remy's ass," I said, holding my hand up to Remy so he could slap his own against it. Over the past year I'd decided that I didn't like Victor one bit, but I had to pretend like my teasing was all in good fun, even if the reason I'd really high-fived Remy was because I'd do anything to avoid touching Victor.

"Baby, you're breaking my heart," Victor laughed, and I was close enough that I could smell the alcohol emanating from all four of the men around me.

To confirm it, another guy named Matt turned to a nearby end table, where there was a bottle of expensive scotch left over from the owners of the house. He poured five glasses, passing them out to everyone, including me. "Do these, then we'll see who wins the next round." I had no intention of participating, but I gulped down the drink anyway, hoping when I finally managed to get away from them it would help me fall asleep.

The second I put the glass back down on the table Decker moved behind me. "Hey, Echo," he chuckled, stretching an arm across my chest to grip my opposite shoulder while pressing a knife against my throat. "You're robbing someone when you get attacked. What do you do?"

He was being playful, and the rest of the guys were laughing in amusement, but it scared me. I hated it. I didn't think Decker would really cut me, but I still started to panic a little. Trying to pull away the massive arm that was wrapped around my chest was useless because he was too strong. Nor did I want to struggle too much and cause him to cut me on accident. Forcing myself not to panic further I shuffled my feet to the side a little, and then I brought my foot up and back as hard as I could. My heel got Decker right in the groin, and as the rest of the guys burst into hysterical laughter he buckled over enough that I could slip out of his

grip.

"You guys are assholes," I said, giving Decker's shoulders an angry push and then storming away.

Still upset, I wandered through the house until I reached one of the bedrooms at the farthest corner of the home, the one that I always escaped to. It was on the second floor, and had an outdoor balcony that overlooked the grassy expanse of backyard. When I got there I threw open the balcony doors and plopped onto the cushioned bench, spreading out and taking a deep breath of cool night air to calm myself.

"Jerks," I grumbled, tossing an arm over my eyes even though there was no bright light to shield them from.

I lay like that for a good thirty minutes, and managed to relax once more before I heard a soft call from back inside the room. "Echo?"

"Outside," I said, and sat up to greet whoever was coming for me.

"I thought you might be up here." In what little moonlight allowed me to make out her features, I could see Valerie's teeth glow behind her grin as she reached the balcony. She sat down on the bench beside me and leaned her back against the wall. Ever since she'd stood up for me the first night I met the group, I liked her. She was the nicest one here, and even though she was five years older than me I knew she liked me the most too.

"Did you just get back from scavenging?" I asked, turning on the bench so that I was facing her. Her hair had grown out since that first night, and now the blue stripe was nothing but colored tips at the ends of it.

"Yeah." She sat forward excitedly, and pulled her backpack off her shoulders to set it in her lap. "I got something for you." I watched on curiously as she rummaged through her bag, and a moment later she pulled out something dark and shiny. "Here," she said, rapidly dropping the pistol into my lap as if it might burn her.

"Wow," I said, genuinely grateful while I turned it over in my hands. I

hadn't the slightest clue how to use it, but it was better than the pocketknife I'd found a while ago. "You sure you don't want it?"

She instantly shook her head. "I've never really liked guns." I knew she wasn't kidding about that, because since I'd known her the only weapon she'd ever carried around was a heavy wrench, and I'd never even seen her use it other than to look intimidating when robbing someone.

"I'll have to figure out how to work it," I mused, running a single finger down the rough metallic grip.

"If anyone asks," Val started, and her voice grew somewhat shy. "Don't tell them you got it from me. You don't need 'em thinking I have a crush on you or something. They'll just start picking on you too."

"I won't, I promise," I assured her hastily. None of the guys really liked her much because she was a lesbian, and with potential partners being scarce they'd have preferred it if all the girls were fair game. So they bullied her, and every time during it that Valerie noticed I was about to come to her aid she'd shake her head at me, telling me not to. "It wouldn't be the worst thing, you know."

"If I had a crush on you?" she chuckled. "Or if they started picking on you because of it?"

"I don't know," I said slowly, unsurely, because for some reason the way she asked that put the slightest flurry of butterflies in my stomach. "Both?"

"You're cute," Valerie laughed, and when she pecked me on the cheek I was glad it was too dark out for her to see my face flush red. Then she stood and threw her backpack over her shoulders. "I'm used to the abuse, and you're too sweet for that. Just let me handle it."

Even though I didn't entirely like that she took the bullying in silence, I nodded compliantly. After she smiled goodbye and walked away I sprawled back out on the cushion and set the pistol on my stomach. Raising my arm, I touched my fingertips to the spot on my cheek that

Valerie had kissed. I wasn't sure if it had just been a friendly peck, or if she even considered me old enough for it to mean more. But it wouldn't be the worst thing if she had a crush on me.

…

I heard Genevieve shift in her cot, and knowing she was probably going to wake up soon I slipped one side of the handcuffs back onto my wrist while I clipped the other to the frame of my brand new cot. Part of the deal for her giving me my pocketknife back was that I stopped taking off the cuffs at night. I'd tried to deal with it as long as I could, but it only lasted a week before I couldn't put up with it any more. So I took them off every night and woke up early in the morning before she did so that I could put them back on and she'd never know.

I managed to doze back off until Genevieve shifting once more woke me again, and this time when I opened my eyes she was pushing herself up. "Morning," I greeted cheerfully. Her only response was to shoot me an apathetic look as she slipped her feet into her boots. She hadn't been entirely happy about Second Platoon bringing a cot back for me, and I think she was still a little bitter about it. If I had to guess, it was just another reminder for her that my staying here was permanent.

I sat up, and with my right hand still cuffed to the cot I used my left to put on my own boots. They weren't at all comfortable compared to my old sneakers seeing as they weren't broken in yet, but the dull black leather looked more durable than the raggedy canvas of my old shoes, and I was sure I'd grow to like them.

"Could you maybe…" I hinted, passing a deliberate glance at my locked hand because I needed both of them to tie my boots.

Genevieve appeared to be in an especially grumpy mood this morning, or she didn't sleep well last night. She just stared at me, like she couldn't even figure out what I was asking. Then she lazily patted the pockets of her jeans, the pouch of her gray pullover hoodie, and then she glanced around her cot searchingly. "I can't find the key."

"What?" I asked in disbelief as she lifted one of her blankets to look

"What?" I asked in disbelief as she lifted one of her blankets to look beneath it. But before she lifted her face to meet my gaze again I caught the smallest of smirks on her lips. "Liar," I chuckled, even though I knew she wasn't pretending in order to be playful with me. She was probably hoping I'd finally give away the location of my bobby pins, too bad for her she was a terrible liar.

After rolling her eyes she reached into her pocket and pulled out the key, then she tossed it into my lap and returned to tying her own boots. I undid the cuff around my wrist, and once I'd given the key back to Genevieve I did my laces. As I pulled my hair up I stuck my head out the entrance of the tent and took a deep breath of the crisp morning air, trying to decide whether or not I wanted to keep my black sweater on. I wasn't sure what month it was, but it was definitely fall now. Colorful leaves littered the forest floor, nights were getting colder, and the past week there had been an almost chilly breeze throughout the day. Judging by the temperature of the morning it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep my sweater on.

"You just going to stand there?" Genevieve asked flatly, and I pulled my head back in to find that she was ready to leave.

I moved aside so she could go out, and seeing that she had her eating utensils in her hands I grabbed my own and followed after her. I didn't say anything to her the whole way there, remaining silent even after we'd sat down since it seemed like she especially wanted to be left alone this morning. Breakfast was a mixture of raw fruits and vegetables. After being stuck with old canned food the six years I spent in the city, it was one of my favorite meals we got here at camp. Except for the strawberries, which I pushed to the edge of my bowl. Usually Aminah knew to leave them off my dish, but she hadn't been at the serving table today. Summer was over though, and a couple of these were probably some of the last fruits we'd see for a while.

"Genevieve!" A young girl jumped onto the bench beside Genevieve and wrapped her in a hug.

Genevieve's face lit up before she even turned to catch a glimpse of the curly blonde. "Shirley! Where have you been?"

The child's big blue eyes narrowed at Genevieve, but she giggled, "My name's Madison." Then she plopped down on the bench, so small compared to it the table was at her shoulders. "Mommy wouldn't let me come see you because of a raider. What's a raider?" My eyes dropped the moment Genevieve involuntarily looked at me.

"That's nothing you need to worry your pretty little head over," Genevieve told her, making the girl squirm and giggle when she poked the kid in the ribs.

Madison wiggled away from Genevieve a little bit, and then she noticed me sitting across from them. "Who are you?"

"Echo," I answered as friendlily as I could, trying to ignore the disdainful look Genevieve gave as I extended my hand to the kid. "Nice to meet you."

"Echo, echo, echo," Madison said, softer each time she repeated the word. "Like that?" I nodded. "That's a funny name," she laughed, placing her tiny hand in mine and giving it a youthfully enthusiastic shake.

I couldn't help but smile, and as she let go of my hand I noticed some pink fruit stains down the front of her dirty blue shirt. "Do you like strawberries, Madison?"

She bounced excitedly and licked her lips. "They're my favorite!"

"That's perfect," I grinned happily, glad I could finally make someone around here smile. "It just so happens that I'm allergic. Do you want mine?"

When her face lit up I pushed my nearly empty bowl across the table to her, and she immediately reached in for the few strawberries in it. While she munched on them I noticed Genevieve was staring at me thoughtfully, like this was the first time she realized since I'd been here that I'd never had any strawberries in my bowl.

"I didn't know you were allergic," she said, though it was more a defensive response to my having caught her looking at me than it was a

genuine interest.

I shrugged, and hoping it might encourage her to start seeing there was more to me than a killer I said, "There's a lot you don't know about me."

After smacking her lips and sighing happily, Madison pushed the bowl back to me. "Thanks."

I smiled in acknowledgment, but before I could respond Genevieve lifted her off the bench and set her on her feet. "Alright, kiddo, we have to go." She used the edge of Madison's shirt to wipe off a smear of fruit juice on her chin. "Say 'hi' to Mom for me, okay?"

"Okay," Madison nodded and gave Genevieve a parting hug. Then she waved at me, "Bye, Echo."

Once the girl had skipped away Genevieve stood, and with her utensils in hand she started back in the direction of the tent without so much as looking at me. It was obvious I'd done something to upset her. She only ever walked off without waiting for me when I'd annoyed her. So I grabbed my stuff and hurried after her once more.

"Stay away from the kid," she said when I reached her.

That was it. That's what I'd done. "Sorry," I started sarcastically, "I didn't realize giving her some fruit was a punishable offense."

She was walking so fast we were almost at the campsite already, but my concussion was long gone, and keeping up was nothing difficult now. "Don't be a smartass," she growled angrily. "I'm serious."

"So am I." Now I was getting annoyed, and I grabbed her arm to stop her from storming away and turned her toward me. "When are you going to realize I'm not dangerous?"

"Never." She wrenched her arm out of my grasp. "Because you *are* dangerous."

"I'm not going to hurt anyone, especially not a kid," I told her, my voice rising slightly out of aggravation.

rising slightly out of aggravation.

Her eyebrows scrunched furiously, and I almost winced because I could practically read her mind. Her brother was just a kid when I got him killed, and the fact that it was an accident didn't matter to her. "Except for me right?" she asked pointedly. "Because you have no problem fighting with me, and punching me, and pulling a goddamn knife on me."

"You provoke me constantly! On purpose!" I hollered in exasperation. "You're the only person here who won't give me a chance." That wasn't entirely true, but she was the only person I cared about who wouldn't give me a chance.

Before Genevieve could get out whatever bitter remark I could see on her face, Blake found us. "Are you two at it again?" We both just turned irritated gazes on him, and in response he rolled his eyes. "We're about ready to leave for special assignment, and we need both of your heads clear. So whatever this little argument is about, let it go."

It had occurred to me over the past weeks that whenever Blake cared or got annoyed enough to come between us, Genevieve took him seriously. So she shot me one last hard scowl before continuing to the tent. The moment I strode in the entrance after her she practically shoved my pistol into my hands, and while I put it into the back of my pants I watched her throw things into her backpack with more force than necessary, silently letting me know she was still mad.

"I'll stay away from the kid," I told her quietly, and reached for my own backpack. "Happy?"

She took the clip out of her rifle to check the ammunition before roughly jamming it back in. I got to admit she was being a little bit intimidating, especially the way she looked at me after she did. "Not even remotely." Then she left me to hurry after her once more.

"Load up!" she shouted over the roar of the military vehicles when we arrived at the motor pool, and as the four other soldiers riding along in the same one as us got in she knelt by a small stack of supplies near the rear of it. It was food and ammunition, half of which was mine, and after we

both stored the supplies in our packs she motioned me into the vehicle ahead of her.

Once I took my seat across from Blake, Genevieve passed us and sat at a seat in front of a bunch of computer buttons. I said goodbye to the warming sunlight as Kellan and Garcia pulled the massive door closed, shutting us up inside the dark vehicle. Genevieve called it a Stryker, and the inside made me feel like I was in some old war movie. The rumble of the diesel engine echoed off the metal surroundings and vibrated the seats like an earthquake.

It was all so new that when Genevieve picked up the radio to talk to the other vehicle I paid close attention out of interest. "Alpha to Bravo command. Come in Bravo command. Over." There was a sound from the speaker that I couldn't understand over the noise, but then Genevieve responded. "Relay when ready for commute. Over." At the next sound from the speaker Genevieve patted the driver, I think his name was Jarvis, on the back. "Move out," she told him, and the vehicle lurched into motion.

We were on our way to complete that special assignment. I still wasn't happy about it. The thought of risking my life to capture a live Feral for the sake of medical testing sounded completely insane. It didn't make sense that there'd be a cure out there anyway, because wouldn't whoever started the infection in the first place have developed one? I liked to think the whole outbreak was an accident. Either way, Genevieve wanted me to go, and seeing as I was still trying to make it up to her and she'd agreed to give me my gun back, I had to comply. Apparently they'd pegged some small town called Margaretville as the destination, figuring it would be easier to catch a Feral in a small town than in a big city. Once again, I couldn't say I agreed. I personally preferred all the nooks and crannies you could find to hide in in a big city, but I didn't get much say in anything these days.

My curiosity for everything that went into operating the vehicle had me staring in Genevieve's direction for the first ten minutes of the drive. It looked like she had no interest in one of the screens. The monitor had gridlines on it, and I imagined it needed some sort of satellite GPS to

make it work. The screen she was interested in was one that I eventually noticed gave her a three-sixty view of our surroundings. I figured she was making sure we weren't going to get any sides of the vehicle stuck against a tree or something on our drive along the narrow path that led out of the forest. Once we reached a bigger, worn dirt road she turned away from the screen to face those of us in the cabin. She caught me looking at her then, and when my eyes immediately darted away I realized Kellan had apparently caught me minutes ago, because he was practically scowling at me when I stopped staring at Genevieve.

I tried to make myself invisible after that, which wasn't too difficult seeing as the interior was dark and nobody was saying much. They'd talk to each other a little, but it was too exhausting having to yell over the sound of the engine, so the conversations were brief. There was almost enough space between Garcia and I on the seat that I could lie down and try to doze off, but it seemed like hardly five minutes later the vehicle started slowing. The change in speed didn't seem planned, because Genevieve turned back to her screen, and hardly a moment later there was a series of clunks coming from the front of the vehicle.

"Oh, come on," Genevieve grumbled when Jarvis stopped and turned off the engine. She continued to mumble to herself, or rather to the vehicle, "You'll run fine clear to Rochester but you're going to break down on less than an hour?" Then she picked up her radio. "Bravo command, we might be having engine trouble. I need you to check surroundings for hostiles. I repeat, check surroundings for hostiles. Over." At the screen Genevieve pushed a button, and the image of the outside world rotated completely around the outside of the vehicle. She must've been satisfied with what was on it, because then she picked up the radio again. "Bravo, what's your status? Over."

"All clear ma'am," the voice said from the speaker. "No hostiles detected. Over."

"Okay, Bravo, cleared for exit. Out." Genevieve put down the radio and motioned to Kellan and Garcia. "Can you guys open this thing?"

They did as she asked, and when they released the hatch to the outside world I was temporarily blinded by the brightness of the sun. Not long

world I was temporarily blinded by the brightness of the sun. Not long after the door was opened the only two passengers of the other vehicle, Hunt and Lee, appeared at the opening. From what little I could make out through squinting, it looked like there was a long road about fifty feet from the vehicles. We must've been driving alongside the car-laden freeway because the Strykers wouldn't have fit on the actual road, there being too many vehicles left over from before. It seemed like Hunt and Lee were the mechanics of the group, along with our driver, Jarvis, because after asking what happened the three of them strode to the front of the vehicle and left the rest of us to wait.

"These things are a pain in the ass," Garcia complained a minute later.

I glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow, "They break down a lot?" I understood the desire for an armored vehicle, but Ferals didn't use guns. I would've thought a large civilian vehicle like a Hummer would've sufficed, especially if these things broke down enough for someone to complain about it.

"Often enough to be a pain in the ass," Blake answered with a chuckle.

"I just hope no Ferals are close enough to have heard us drive up," Kellan said, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Genevieve nod in concurrence.

There was a short silence after that, and after a thoughtful pause Garcia mused, "I wonder if the rest of the world is infected."

"It can't just be the U.S.," Kellan agreed.

Blake stretched his legs out across the gap and set them on the empty spot of seat next to me. "It at least had to have spread to Mexico and Canada. Probably South America too."

Until now, I hadn't really tried to engage in friendly conversation with anyone but Blake. My attempts with Genevieve didn't count since she hated me. Kellan clearly wasn't my biggest fan either, but Garcia seemed like a nice guy thus far. So I tried to input. "I heard in Canada the Ferals at least ask before they bite you." Blake immediately burst into laughter while Garcia snorted, and even though Kellan didn't look entirely

while Garcia snorted, and even though Kellan didn't look entirely amused, I was pleased to see Genevieve crack a smile.

"Yeah," Garcia added through another chuckle, "And they say 'sorry' after."

Blake was still chortling, admittedly a little harder than I thought the joke deserved and well after Garcia stopped, but a moment later he pointed at Kellan. "He's Canadian!"

I couldn't help but laugh at that, especially when Garcia leaned forward to pinch one of Kellan's cheeks. "Of course he is. Look at his cute little Mountie face."

"Laugh it up," Kellan grumbled, but even he couldn't keep his lips from curling into a small smile. "I ever get bit and I'm coming straight for you, Garcia."

"Alright, alright," Blake interrupted, still chuckling softly. "If there was one thing you could've done before the outbreak, what would it be?"

"Easy!" Garcia grinned, and then nodding his head matter-of-factly he added, "Hooked up with that Brazilian super model from those lingerie commercials."

Blake lowered his chin to look at Garcia teasingly serious. "We're talking realistically here, bud."

Garcia furrowed his eyebrows. "Yeah, I could've scored that."

"It has obviously been way too long since you've seen your ugly mug in a mirror," Kellan smirked, and even though I didn't like him I smiled amusedly.

"Gen?" Blake asked, glancing over at her, and when she responded with 'sky diving' he turned back to Garcia. "See man, now that's realistic."

"Whatever," Garcia protested cheerfully. "What would you do then?" he asked Blake.

I could tell it was just to tease Garcia, but Blake answered seriously, "Hook up with the Brazilian super model from the lingerie commercials."

"You ass," Garcia laughed, passing lighthearted glares to the rest of us, because we were snickering too. "Okay, Kellan, you go."

"I would've flown out to California and gotten all the sun-kissed tail I could find in a hundred mile radius," he answered with a smug grin.

"You're all whores," Genevieve told them playfully.

"Not Echo," Blake chuckled. "She didn't answer yet."

They all looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to answer. For some reason, maybe I could blame it on the theme the guys had established, my eyes wandered to Genevieve, only to find that she was watching me intently. She wasn't looking at me in a particularly new way other than letting her curiosity show, nor was her expression any less hateful, but just like that the reminder of old emotions made my stomach flutter. Even before high school my gratitude for Genevieve's care developed beyond simple appreciation. Seeing as I was practically the devil to her, renewing that interest hadn't even crossed my mind until now. I didn't want it. Didn't want any kind of feelings for anyone because everyone I cared about ended up dead. But even back then it had never really been voluntary.

"Well?" Kellan said impatiently, and when I glanced at him he had a hard, displeased look on his face. It sort of made me wonder if he'd been the only one to understand the turn of my gaze.

Thankfully I didn't have to try and come up with some other answer, because Jarvis hopped back into the vehicle and strode past us to the driver's seat. He turned the key, and when the engine fired up I heard him say happily, "There we go." Then he shifted toward Genevieve, "Just a loose belt, ma'am."

She nodded, and after Kellan and Garcia resealed the door it seemed like we were all waiting, though I wasn't sure what for. I could feel Kellan watching me still, and the more he was around the less I liked him. He gave me the creeps, especially the way he constantly flirted with

Genevieve. Eventually a voice came over the radio, and after Genevieve patted Jarvis on the back the vehicles started rolling again. The rest of the drive was short, even though we were driving pretty slowly. During one of her good moods, Genevieve had explained that they usually waited until sunset to go on normal missions. Special assignment was different. We went out when the Ferals were active, that way we could better see what we were up against, plus with clear sight mistakes would be less likely while handling the creature. Part of me was hoping we'd get lucky and find a straggler on the road along the way. Another part of me, the part that was regularly irritated but knew I shouldn't take it out on Genevieve, that part was itching for some action.

There was a slight tension as we reached Margaretville, each of us waiting to see just how many Ferals we'd be dealing with. I was also curious to see how they dealt with these kinds of situations, seeing as I'd always avoided the beasts at all costs. But as we got to the small town Genevieve scooted forward, bringing her face within inches of the screen she was looking at.

"What the?" At her remark every one of us inched in, practically leaning over her shoulder to see what she saw. But I couldn't see anything.

"Where are all the Ferals?" Blake asked, squinting at the monitor.

Genevieve's shoulders rose with a shrug. "This place is a ghost town." She patted Jarvis' shoulder again, "Stop the vehicle."

"Come in Alpha command," a voice sounded over the radio. "Ma'am, are you seeing this? Over."

Genevieve's eyes never left the screen as she picked up the speaker. "Roger. Hold for instruction. Over."

"You think somebody cleared this place out?" Garcia asked, leaning further over my shoulder to get a better look. "You think they're watching us right now?"

That thought gave me the chills. I knew the minds of bandits, and if there were any out there, they were definitely watching us right now. At

were any out there, they were definitely watching us right now. At Garcia's question, Genevieve clicked a button beside the screen, and it switched to what appeared to be thermal imaging. From here this place looked lifeless. The whole three hundred and sixty degrees around the vehicle was nothing but cold, eerie shades of blue. Nobody was watching us. Nobody was around. Even after the camera finished a complete rotation around the vehicle we all continued to stare at the screen.

"What's the verdict, LT?" Kellan said finally, sitting back into his original seat.

The rest of us sat back too, and Genevieve turned to face us. She stared at her hands in her lap, and thought about it for another minute before looking up at us. "Something's going on here, and I don't like it. I say we get out and take a look around."

"Aye," Blake agreed, followed by a couple 'aye's and a 'hooah' from the other three in the vehicle.

I didn't like it one bit. This might be some kind of trap, or something entirely weird had happened here. Either way, my interest these last six years had been self-preservation. That meant not getting curious in creepy ghost towns. But I was here, I still owed Genevieve my life, and she was giving me a look that said she knew I didn't like it, and she might try to beat the shit out of me if I gave her trouble right now. Plus, I *was* itching for action, and nothing got your adrenaline pumping like not knowing what you were walking into.

"Whatever," I said in reluctant agreement.

At my consent Genevieve turned back to the radio. "Come in, Bravo command. Over." There was a response from the other side. "You're cleared for exit, but something isn't right here. Stay frosty. Over."

"Roger. Out," came the voice, and then Genevieve motioned for the doors to be opened.

While the guys exited the vehicle and my eyes adjusted to the blinding sunlight, I pulled my pistol out of my waistband and inched toward the door. Everyone else had their weapons at the ready too, including Lee

door. Everyone else had their weapons at the ready too, including Lee and Hunt, who had strode over to our Stryker. Once my eyes adjusted enough to the daylight I spun in a slow circle, studying every inch of this town intently, looking for anything I might recognize as a trap. There was literally nothing here. Aside from the age old, countrywide stains that marked the past violence in every city, it was like everyone in this town had been emptied. Like everyone had been turned and all the Ferals just up and decided they didn't like this place anymore. The only sign of life was a fall breeze, which rustled the leaves of the plentiful trees and made everything else around us feel surreally still and dead.

"Don't leave my sight," Genevieve whispered to me as Kellan and Garcia closed the door of the vehicle. "Stay one step behind me at all times. I move, you move. Pay close attention for instructions."

It had been obvious to me from day one that they ran things strictly military style, especially on missions, but I didn't know the first thing about formation or protocol. So I nodded, and when Genevieve took a step forward to start leading the guys wherever she wanted, I was right there with her, copying every movement and footstep. One thing I noticed was that she wasn't holding her rifle, it was still hanging at her side. Instead, she had her knife out, prepared for action, but of the quiet kind. It prompted me to glance back at the soldiers behind us. Three out of the six had put their rifles back at their sides just like Genevieve, knives at the ready. The other three were equipped with pistols, but while those were held in their dominant hands, I could see each was holding a knife in the other. Lesson one: tactical silence was preferred, and I immediately pulled out my own pocketknife to hold in my left hand at the side of my pistol.

Genevieve was leading the way to the nearest building on our right, which looked like some kind of store at the start of an outdoor shopping center. I followed one step behind her, just like she'd told me to, until we were within twenty feet of the shop. At that point she bent her elbow and put her balled up fist in the air. It was some sort of signal, which I didn't understand until she continued toward the shop, and when she realized I was still following she turned around and put her hand on my chest to stop me. I glanced back to find that the others hadn't moved, and figured the signal must have meant something along the lines of 'stop.' After I

the signal must have meant something along the lines of "stop." After I nodded at Genevieve that I'd stay put she continued forward to the door, and when she reached it she peeked into one of the windows and tested the handle. It was unlocked, but before opening the door she made another signal. She flattened her hand and pushed her palm toward the ground. The rest of the guys seemed to understand, because they silently moved behind some of the closest cars in the parking lot and crouched down, aiming at the entrance. I followed their lead, assuming I was supposed to follow instructions instead of just tailing Genevieve the whole time.

After checking to make sure we'd all done what she instructed, she used the index and middle finger of one hand to point at her eyes, and then she reached for the handle again. The door swung open, making a loud thud in the silence around us when it hit the wall of the shop, and I was practically holding my breath as Genevieve pressed her back to the outside of the store and we all waited to see if anything would come out of the darkness inside. We waited about thirty seconds, and when nothing came she bent her elbow to put her hand in the air beside her shoulder, and after moving it side-to-side she waved us forward. Of course I wasn't sure what that signal meant either, so I waited until the guys got into some kind of formation and then followed at the back as they began to file through the entrance of the building. I was about to go through behind them, but as I reached the door Genevieve put her hand on my arm and motioned me to her side.

"We guard the outside while they clear the inside," she whispered when I had my back against the wall and my shoulder pressed against hers.

I was actually kind of impressed with her. She hadn't mentioned how long she'd been in charge of this group of soldiers, but it was obvious she knew exactly what she was doing. It was also obvious by how well they responded to her instruction that they trusted her. After living under Leon's uninterested thumb at the complex, where anything was okay because he was too much of a coward to try and control anyone, I had to admit it was kind of a relief to know Genevieve was a strong leader.

My fascination had been causing me to stare at her, and when she finally noticed she raised one eyebrow at me. "What?"

noticed she raised one eyebrow at me. "What?"

"You're really good at this lieutenant thing," I complimented in a whisper.

Her eyes scanned my entire face, just like they did every time I said something. It was constantly as though she were trying to find some ulterior motive in my actions. Waiting for me to mess up so she'd have just another reason to hate me. "I'm not in charge because I'm bad at it," she answered brusquely, turning back to glance through the door of the building. Her shoulders rose and fell with an inaudible sigh, and a moment later she looked at me again. "Thanks," she said, more nicely than she'd spoken before.

It sounded like she was actively trying not to be mean, and it made me want to say something else to her, since usually when she got into these kinds of moods was when she *almost* talked to me like a normal person. Before I could figure out something else to ask or say, the guys appeared at the doorway.

"Building's clear," Blake told her quietly. "It's a hardware store. We might be able to take back some supplies."

Genevieve nodded, looking over her soldiers while she considered something. "Blake, Lee, and Jarvis, I want a filed lookout while the rest of us carry supplies back to the vehicles. Load up Bravo Stryker."

We spent a good half an hour clearing supplies out of the hardware store, and then moved on to every other building in the shopping center in the same way. Some places it was obvious had been previously ransacked for supplies, and the fact that people had been here before made the lifelessness of the town even more suspicious. I'd be the first to stay at a place like this if it were truly empty. Yet, despite it's apparent emptiness, there was no one who called it home. It seemed to intrigue the rest of the group too, because after getting as many supplies as we could while leaving room in Bravo for a Feral, we all agreed to explore the rest of town.

We cleared house after house, building after building, and it wasn't until we reached a clustered business section of town that the hair on the back

of my neck started to rise. But it wasn't the business buildings. It was the single, nearly empty expanse of land, overgrown with dry brown grass and at the center of which was a church and the town cemetery.

"Anybody else just get the creeps?" Garcia asked as we all stood on the sidewalk across the street from the church.

"Here, here," Lee agreed.

"LT?" Kellan prompted, dropping his rifle because he'd been looking through his scope at the chapel. "I'm not the only one who sees 'help us' written on the bell tower, right?"

Self-preservation. "I vote we head back to the vehicles and find a Feral somewhere else," I suggested, hoping at least one person would agree with me.

Apparently their motif differed from mine, because Genevieve instantly shook her head. "If there are people in there they could need our help."

"Or they're dead," I argued pleadingly. "Or infected. Why else would this place be deserted?"

"Wedge formation," she instructed, deliberately ignoring me and turning to the rest of the guys. "We go in locked and loaded. I think it's safe to say silence isn't an issue at this point." I opened my mouth to ask what wedge formation was, but she caught my eye right as I did. "Just stay at my side," she answered before I could express my curiosity.

She started toward the church right after she finished, and as per her directions, I walked with her shoulder to shoulder, holding my pistol up and ready to start regretting my desire for action. The doors of the church were shut from the outside, with a two by four plank shoved through the handles, and it was impossible to see through the decoratively colored windows. I shivered so hard it visibly shook my body, and when Genevieve noticed she took a deep breath to let me know she was nervous too. Then she silently pulled the plank away, set it on the ground, and put each of her hands on a handle. It was as if I could hear her counting to three in her head, and on three she swung the doors

outward. The interior was dark, and it took a moment of adjusting and squinting from the outside for us to be able to see inside the chapel. But there was a smell that whooshed out the moment the doors opened and that made my heart drop before I was even able to make out what I was seeing.

Then I could see the source of the smell. Plenty had already died and been fed off of, a lot of them had already been standing when we opened the doors, and the light that filtered into the church from outside caused more heads to pop up from behind the pews. Ferals. There had to be at least sixty of them even though the smell indicated some had already died. This place was a ghost town because somebody had locked them all in here. But I didn't think whoever had locked them in was the same person who wrote 'help us' on the tower. My guess, educated after having lived with raiders for years, whoever locked the Ferals in here had used the writer as bait. My question wasn't what became of the lockee, but what became of the locker. Why didn't they stay to enjoy the empty town they created?

I didn't get to ponder my question, because Genevieve took a step back, the first movement from any of us since the doors had been opened. "Run for the nearest building," she said quietly. And at a starving roar from one of the Ferals she took another step back. "Run!"

At her shout we all turned and took off across the large plot of land toward the buildings across the street, hearing the thunder of hungry feet filtering out of the church behind us. I'd never been the fastest girl on the soccer team, and all of the guys had longer legs than I did. The only thing that came to mind was that to survive you didn't have to be the fastest, you just had to be faster than the slowest one in the group. But I *was* the slowest one in the group. I fell behind immediately, and the brand new, stiff, and heavy boots I was wearing didn't help one bit. This was such a bad idea. It might have just been my imagination, but I could practically feel the breath of every Feral on the back of my neck.

"Come on!" Genevieve yelled when she glanced back and noticed I was falling behind. But I was pushing myself, and she knew it, because she slowed down enough to grab my wrist and then sped up again, practically

dragging me behind her.

I could see Blake gain a burst of speed and sprint ahead of us. He reached the door of the closest building before anyone else, and after pulling on it he waved toward the adjacent alley. "Try the side!"

Genevieve and I flew into the alley behind the other five, with Blake coming in right after us and shoving the large dumpster over to block the entrance of it. It was just big enough that only about one Feral could squeeze through the side at a time, but they were starving, and in no time at all they were climbing over the top of it.

"It's locked!" Hunt shouted over the sound of each of our guns, dispatching every Feral that lunged over the trash bin as quickly as we could.

Genevieve looked over her shoulder just long enough to scan our surroundings, and after looking up she yelled, "Try the fire escape!"

One of the Ferals managed to escape the bullets, and when it reached Genevieve she smashed the butt of her rifle across its face, shooting it the moment it hit the ground. But I wasn't going to wait just so we could climb one by one up the fire escape. I sacrificed my own gunfire and shot to the door. Still firing ahead of her, Genevieve glanced over at me, looking both curious and mad that I'd abandoned my post right as I pulled the bobby pin halves out of my bracelet.

"The fire escape is jammed!" Hunt yelled in a panic as he joined in trying to keep the barrage of Ferals from reaching us at the end of the alley.

"Echo, hurry!" Genevieve hollered, once more hitting a Feral that was about to take a chunk out of Jarvis and getting off a couple more rounds.

"I'm trying!" I said, furiously jimmying the lock as rapidly as I could. But lock picking was a skill of patience and dexterity, rushing only made it more difficult. "Hold them off a little longer!"

I got five more seconds of restraint before Genevieve's voice sounded over the gunshots again. "Echo!"

I grinned and pushed open the now unlocked door. "Got it!"

"Everyone inside!" she shouted, still firing to hold off the Ferals as each of the guys jumped through the door. I'd been getting off my own shots to help her, but once the others were all inside she nodded at me. "Go!"

I threw myself in, and after Genevieve came through I slammed the door shut right as a few Ferals reached it. Blake and Kellan were already on top of it, and had two office desks stacked in front of the door before I'd hardly even backed away. But the Ferals were pounding against the metal entrance, and I wasn't confident that it would withstand the force.

"Get to the roof," Genevieve ordered, and I followed close behind her as the others found the stairwell and rushed up the four flights.

When we reached the roof of the building I practically collapsed against the side, breathing heavily to try and calm the massive adrenaline rush. That was way more action than I'd been hoping for. The others were breathing just as heavily, some of them bent over with their hands on their knees, some leaning back with their hands on their waists.

"Who likes explosions?" Garcia asked, holding up a couple grenades he'd pulled out of his backpack. All the Ferals were clustered in the alley below us, perfect for dispatching all of them at once.

But Genevieve shook her head. "We need one alive."

Blake motioned to Lee's backpack, "Lee, give me your rope."

Lee did what Blake asked, and when Blake had the rope in his hands he made a loop at the end with an elaborate slipknot. "I'm going fishing. Be ready."

He strode to the edge of the roof and dropped the rope down. All of us had made our way to the edge to watch, and he wiggled the dangling rope until he managed to get the loop around the waist of a Feral. The moment he did he yanked up, tightening the slipknot around the creature's body. It howled, clawing furiously at the ties around its waist as Blake began to pull, dragging the Feral upward toward the roof.

"Garcia, if you'd kindly," Genevieve instructed when the Feral was almost at the top.

"Gladly," he grinned, pulling the pins out of the grenades and dropping them into the alley.

I covered my ears against the blast, and a moment after Blake pulled the Feral up onto the roof the building rocked with the explosion. It seemed like they had it all under control now, so I snuck away to sit at the opposite side of the roof because I was still trying to catch my breath. This soldier stuff was a little more than I bargained for. I'd always stuck to the shadows, avoided danger like this unless it was completely necessary. The last six years after the outbreak it had mostly been other people, uninfected people, that I'd fought against. The threat of death was there, but it wasn't death I was afraid of. It was infection. And if it hadn't been for Genevieve the Ferals might have caught up with me before I'd even reached the alley.

A few gunshots went off again as the guys dispatched some of the Ferals that had escaped the blast, and while they did Genevieve came over and sat at my side. Knowing she'd finally seen where I stored my bobby pins, I pulled them out of my bracelet and held them out without looking at her. I waited a few seconds, but when they never left my hand I looked up.

"You're not going to take them?" I asked in shock.

"If it didn't just save our asses, I'd have taken them already," she answered, giving the softest of chuckles before narrowing her eyes seriously. "There's still a handcuff rule. Keep them, but if you pick the cuffs, I'll take them. Got it?"

I nodded and let out a deep breath. "I don't think I'm cut out for this." When my eyes wandered over she was watching me curiously. "All this tactical stuff and heroics." And this is the one time I'd ever admit it to her, "I'm just a crook. I don't know anything about being a soldier."

"You have a lot to learn," she agreed flatly. "But you're not such a bad shot with that pistol anymore." Then she looked at me and sighed, like

she resented what she was about to say, "And your being a criminal kind of came in handy."

I couldn't help but smile, because it sounded like she was trying to convince me I might actually be cut out for this. "You want me around, don't you?" I asked teasingly.

"I hate your guts, of course I don't want you around." She stood to walk away, but I could see by the look on her face that she was somewhat amused. "And I will kick your ass the next time you slip the handcuffs at night."

She said she'd kick my ass, just like she said she didn't trust me. But she let me keep the bobby pins knowing full well that I could easily pick the cuffs whenever I wanted to, knowing that she let me keep my knife and that my pistol was always close by. Even if she still hated me, I knew she was starting to trust me. It might've been just a little, but it was something.

No One Sleeps

So sorry it's been forever since an update! But here it is, another three chapters. Also, a good friend of mine wrote her own short story set in the same world as Charon. Her username is Socratz87 and the story is called In The Teeth of Haros. Go check it out and leave her some love!

Empty by Metric (SizzleBird remix)

No One Sleeps

Dugan

I glanced up at the television from where I was sitting on the couch, and after switching the channel over to the news I returned my attention to the paperwork on the coffee table in front of me. While I read over a paragraph of a legal document I took a sip from my coffee cup, trying not to yawn as I set it back down. I hated bringing work home with me at night, but sometimes working after Patricia and Christina went to sleep offered fewer distractions than being at the office. I was about to move on to the next paragraph when the news caught my attention.

"…*direct from Washington," the anchorman was saying, and just the fact that it was a live broadcast so late at night was enough to hold my attention. "The government asks that you please stay in your homes and remain calm. We'd like to remind you that this is an official, statewide lockdown. Military have been dispatched from Fort Irwin and Edwards Air Force Base to the following areas: Sacramento, San Jose, Los Angeles, and San Diego." I grabbed the remote control and tossed a brief look toward the window. "Again, we are not evacuating, the safest pla-"*

I changed the channel to a more local Los Angeles news station and stood, tossing the controller into my seat and slowly lumbering to the sliding glass doors. I opened them and stepped out onto our balcony, glancing at the street six stories below.

"…*Contagious, perhaps drug-induced, fits of rage," the female voice*

came through the television. "For the last week local authorities have encouraged people not to seek treatment at overcrowded hospitals unless it's an emergency, but only one hour ago Cedars-Sinai Medical Center was completely shut down. This footage was taken last night, as a man infected with what people are calling The Feral Sickness tried to leave the hospital."

At that I stuck my head back into our two-bedroom apartment to look at the TV screen. In the clip a man sprinted out of the hospital, followed by four security guards. He only made it to the curb before turning on them, and it took all four of them nearly two minutes to restrain him.

"*Cedars-Sinai assures us the man was unharmed," the newswoman continued. "But those infected with The Feral Sickness are considered extremely agitated and dangerous, and authorities advise against trying to subdue or approach anyone you believe may be infected."*

All I could do was stare at the television. For a while now we'd been hearing about people becoming infected with this mysterious new disease. I'd even seen viral videos of infected persons online. But to be honest, until now I'd thought it was mostly a hoax. I still wasn't sure what to make of it, but it felt just a little more real now that I could see massive military vehicles on the news.

At a loud crash from outside I pulled my head back out. I thought it had come from the street, but there was a movement to my right. The neighbor had broken through the sliding glass doors to his own balcony, and the woman I knew was his girlfriend came staggering out moments later. My view was hindered by the darkness of night and the bars that created a fence around their area, but I pushed myself onto my tiptoes to try and see better. She had crouched down beside him, and with her face so close to his in the dark I wondered if she was listening to whether or not he was breathing.

"*Is he okay?" I called softly, worried he might really be hurt.*

She shot up, turning to face me so swiftly it was almost as if I'd frightened her. There was a distance of about ten feet between our balconies, but

even from where I stood I could've sworn I heard her inhale deeply, like she was trying to sniff for me. I almost thought I was dreaming, because a moment later she snarled at me, immediately sprinting the remaining length to her balcony's railing. Once she reached it she hurled herself over, but the gap was too great. Her fingers barely clipped the railing of my own balcony before she went tumbling down six stories, smashing between a few of the decks on the way down. I'd raced to the edge, as if I could do something to help just by watching. After she hit the ground I stood there, staring in shock.

A few seconds later the shock wore off, and I raced into the house to grab the phone and dial 9-1-1. "9-1-1, please hold," the operator said the moment it clicked over.

"*No, no," I whispered frantically, peering over to the ground again. Then I saw the woman's arm twitch. "Oh my God." She was still alive. I hung up and dialed again.*

"*9-1-1, please hold," the voice requested again. I was about to throw the phone and rush downstairs to help the woman myself, but then I saw three young men coming down the street, less than two yards away from her by now.*

"*Hey, look," one of them said, kneeling down in front of the woman. Even from up here I swear I heard her give the same, terrifying growl.*

"*It's an infected," another mused, and it made me sick when he tapped the broken body with his foot.*

The third one raised his arm, pointing something dark and glimmering at the woman. "No!" I hollered in panic, but it was too late, and there was a flash as he pulled the trigger.

When I shouted all three of them looked up. "Are you infected?" one of them asked, but the one with the gun didn't wait for a response. I scrambled back into the house as he fired three shots up toward my balcony, securing the sliding doors behind me.

"*Daddy?"*

At hearing my daughter's voice I swiftly turned, and picking her up I carried her back to her bedroom – a place I considered a safe distance from the dangers of the balcony. After I told her to stay put in her bed I strode back out to the living room, only to find that Trish was there waiting.

"*Were those gunshots?" she whispered, that way our daughter wouldn't hear.*

I nodded and motioned for her to be silent. I couldn't think. I didn't even know what was going on. Didn't know if we should stay put and wait things out. Or if this was a national emergency and we should be preparing for some kind of evacuation. While my brain tried to function through the adrenaline rush, the dog we'd gotten for my daughter started growling at the sliding door, distracting me from any kind of rationalizing.

"*Topper, shut up," I ordered. The dog looked at me, gave a final defiant growl at the door, and then at receiving a snap from me reluctantly jumped onto the couch.*

I don't know how long I was staring at the floor, but eventually my wife's hand landed on my shoulder. "Is this real?" she asked, pointing at the television. I didn't answer, but at the look on my face she covered her mouth with her hand. "Dugan, what does this mean? What are we going to do?"

"*How much food do we have?" In a haste I paced to the kitchen, throwing open every cupboard to count the amount of food we had with a long shelf life.*

I wasn't sure exactly what was going on, but my experience only minutes before had told me that if people weren't panicking already, then they were going to be soon. The anchorman had said the entire state was on lockdown. There was no way I was taking my family out of this apartment when I didn't know where to go or what things were like outside. It could just be that people were overreacting. Or it could be that The Feral

Disease was more contagious than anybody expected, and there were rage-fueled infected all over the place. What I did know was that if most people outside were reacting anything like those three teenage boys, I was going to keep my family in here as long as possible.

If this was a worst-case scenario, then we had enough food to last us a week. Two if we ate all the perishables in the refrigerator first. That was at least a little satisfying. With that small comfort I returned to the living room and dropped onto the couch, patting the spot beside me for my wife to sit down. When she was at my side she laid her head on my shoulder, and I kicked my feet up onto the coffee table to get comfortable.

"We'll just wait and see what happens," I told her, finally answering her question. A moment later I heard my daughter call for the dog, and after it disappeared down the hall I rested my head on top of my wife's.

I woke the next morning to the slamming of a door. I started up, scaring Patricia out of sleep, and instinctively glanced toward the balcony. But the sound had come from one of the neighbors down the hall of our own apartment, and now I could hear panicked and mumbled shouting. I motioned for Trish to stay put while I crept to the front door. First I pressed my ear to it to see if it would allow me to hear better, but the yelling was muffled through the neighbor's closed door as well. So I took a peek through the eyehole, hoping to catch a glimpse of the drama.

I'd thought the hall was empty, so when another neighbor strode past my door it gave my heart a bit of a jumpstart. The longer I stood at the door, the less I was beginning to think the shouting down the hall had anything to do with the news last night. At least, that's what I thought until I heard the neighbors door open for a brief second and then slam shut. The eyehole only allowed me to see immediately across the aisle, so I couldn't make out anything significant, but I could hear someone pounding furiously on the door that had just closed.

The man who'd passed by seconds before must have been as curious as I was, because his deep voice carried down to whoever was making all that noise. His footsteps were coming closer too, like he was making his way back to offer his aid. He'd just come within sight of my eyehole when

I heard it. A terrifyingly animalistic wail even more frightening than the growl from the woman last night echoed through the hall. Before the man could find the capacity for a decent reaction, something hit him hard, and he disappeared from sight.

I pulled away from the hole, unsure of what I'd just seen, and a moment later I shot toward the bathroom. My wife worked in a dental office, so we had more than one mouth mirror lying around. I grabbed one and rushed back to the front door, and after I'd plopped down flat on my stomach I shoved the reflective end underneath it. As I was adjusting the end I held in my hand to safely get a view, Trish moved above me to press her own eye to the hole, and Topper came out of Christina's room to stick his nose under the door.

It took a great deal of squinting to even be able to see anything through the tiny mouth mirror, but eventually I had it at the right angle. I almost didn't want to believe what I saw once it was adjusted, and I was almost ready to blame it on my imagination. It was a woman who'd been making all that racket down the hall, and my first glimpse was of her tearing a fresh chunk of flesh from the man's arm. It was so shocking, and gruesome, and gut wrenching, that I couldn't pull my eyes away. Until Topper growled under the door. That snapped me out of my shock, and I looked away from the mirror to shove the dog's nose out of the door.

"Take him back to the room," I whispered to Trish as I grabbed the dog by the collar and passed him to her.

While she led him away I went back to searching through the crack. I had to readjust the mirror again, and what I focused on was more shocking than my first view. My eyes made contact with the reflection of a black, vacant stare, and then a bloody mouth, just opening to let out a grisly snarl. Before I reacted to the sound the mirror was ripped out of my hands, and with a startled shout I scrambled a few feet back.

"What happened?" Trish came running back to the main area when I hollered.

I opened my mouth to answer her, but then the woman outside slammed

against the door so hard it shook the apartment, and I practically tripped over myself scrambling back even further. That was the first time I truly started to feel panic.

"It's real," I whispered in disbelief. It's real. It's real. It couldn't be real.

There was another harsh pounding on the door, accompanied by a human growl. That stirred me to action. I immediately grabbed the remote control to turn off the television and cease all noise. I ushered Patricia to Christina's room, where Topper let out a territorial bark at the thrashing from the living room.

"Shut him up," I ordered frantically before closing them in the room, and with my heart hammering in my chest, and stomach, and ears, I opened the hall closet to grab Christina's softball bat.

I carried it to the entranceway, standing in the tense silence and ready to swing. The only sound was the deafening thud each time the infected woman slammed against the door, and I never ceased to flinch with every crash. She was hitting it so hard the wooden door bent inward with every strike, and it was a wonder to me she didn't break through the very center of it. Eventually, after a few minutes that felt like hours, it stopped. She gave up, and after sticking her nose so thoroughly under the door to sniff that I could see her bloodstained chin, she gave up and wandered down the hall.

I was so terrified of making any noise that I held back my sigh of relief, and instead trudged silently to my daughter's bedroom. I cracked the door open, this time grateful for Topper's protective growl. Even if he was making noise, it was relief to have him here because I knew he'd sink his teeth into anything that tried to threaten my family.

"Daddy, I'm scared," Christina whispered as I climbed onto her tiny bed. She was sitting in her mother's lap, Trish's arms wrapped around her comfortingly.

"I know, sweetheart," I said, and after I leaned the bat against the wall near the bed I gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Everything's going to be

okay." At those words I glanced at Patricia, only to find she was looking at me questioningly, wondering if I was lying just to comfort our daughter. I nodded at her to let her know it was true. I wasn't going to let anything happen to them.

Things were idle in the apartment for two days after that, but only in the apartment. The world outside sounded chaotic, and in the moments it was overwhelming I put a movie on my laptop to let Christina listen to it with headphones on. I didn't want her to know or ask questions about what was happening out there. Nor did I truly want to know. It was enough to have seen what I did through the mouth mirror. So I refused to look out Christina's bedroom window, or to step foot onto the balcony. Just to be safe, we kept Topper in the bedroom, and any growl or bark loud enough to be heard from the hall was accompanied by a harsh scolding.

By the third day I was starting to think the outside world would never reach us, but as the three of us stretched out on Christina's bed for sleep that night, there was a loud thud from the apartment hall. I sat up to listen intently, and a minute later there was another – slightly closer this time. I grabbed the bat. Two minutes later it happened again, still closer, and the next time I realized someone was kicking in the neighbors' doors. Maybe it was the military looking for people who still needed to be evacuated. Maybe it was a civilian looking for supplies. Either way, I stood, told my family to stay put, and carried the bat to the entranceway.

Another door was broken in a couple apartments down, and after it the one right next to ours. There was a small outlet of wall that separated the entranceway from the kitchen, so I crouched down behind it, hoping to catch a glimpse of whether or not the intruder had a weapon before I decided what to do. Then I waited. I could hear a single pair of footsteps trudge down the hall. Stop in front of our door. I took a deep breath. Then the crash. The door flew open so hard the handle put a hole in the wall, and a large man walked in. I sank further into the corner when he passed a brief glance into the kitchen and then continued toward the living room, and then searched his hands. He had a large kitchen knife gripped tight in his right hand, but if I needed to I could take a swing at him before he'd be able to reach me.

I rushed out from my spot, holding the bat up aggressively, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

The man turned on his heels and made a movement like he was preparing to come forward at me, but I tensed the bat back as a warning, and he hesitated. "I didn't realize anyone was here," he said complacently, and after studying me for a second he set his knife on the ground.

"I'm here," I told him, growing severely tense when he took a step forward. "Leave, and nobody has to get hurt."

"Do you have any guns here?" he asked, taking another step toward me.

"Stop moving," I warned shakily. I didn't like that he kept coming closer, but growing up with the parents I did, I'd never struck anyone in my life. I wasn't sure if I could.

He held his hands up with resign, but he continued forward. "I'm unarmed."

As I was debating whether or not to hit him with the bat, I saw Trish poke her head out of Christina's room, and in that single moment of distraction the man's fist caught me in the jaw. The moment I went down I heard Patricia gasp, and knowing the man had heard it too, I didn't waste a moment to take action. I didn't even lift myself off the ground all the way before throwing myself at the man and taking him to the floor. Still unsure of whether or not I could hit him, I tried to grab at his arms so I could restrain him. He seemed to have experience though, because before I knew it I was on my back, and his knuckles landed against my face twice more.

Trish must have shoved Topper out of the room to come to my aid, as there was a canine snarl right before the dog's jaws clamped down over the man's arm. The man was temporarily distracted as Topper shook side to side, so I struggled under him, eventually managing to knock him off me. He landed on his back on the floor and used his free hand to

smash his fist against Topper's head. The dog let out a yelp and stumbled back, but not before I managed to hit the man a few times in the cheekbone. It didn't deter him from fighting with me as much as I hoped it would, and a couple seconds later, after Topper joined back in, we were a rolling mass of brawling flesh.

I was so focused on hitting the man anywhere I could that the pain I felt in my own body blended together and faded away. But I was already getting exhausted, and the pain of my strikes and Topper's biting seemed like nothing to the man. He managed to get the upper hand, and as he wrapped the fingers of one hand around my throat he reached behind him and struck the dog. Topper retreated once more, and with his free hand the man hit me again. And again. And again. The fourth time, before he landed his next hit, he cried out in pain, and when he turned to find the source of it I saw Patricia pull his kitchen knife out of his back only to plunge it in once more. The man got off of me and stood, but when he tried to go after Trish, who was retreating, he stumbled, and a few seconds later collapsed face first onto the floor.

"Dugan!" Trish called frantically and rushed to my side. She had tears streaming down her face, and I didn't know whether to be relieved, or frightened, or angry, or proud.

"Mommy," Christina cried, her footsteps sounding closer and closer.

I knew my face was bleeding profusely, and I could only imagine how much it would frighten my daughter not only to see me, but the body of the man her mother had just killed. "Don't let her see anything," I told Trish, choking on my own blood and rolling onto my side, because I just didn't have the energy to spit it out.

While Patricia was ushering Christina back to her room, I realized the front door was open, and in a renewed panic that some infected person might come in, I found the energy to stand. I closed the door as much as I could, but since the man had broken the latch I pushed the coffee table in front of it. When Trish came back we pulled the oven from the wall and stacked it on top, along with a small bookshelf and every book and heavy item we could find lying around the house. Patricia had been helping me

silently and dutifully, but when the last item was place on our protective pile she looked at me in the dark of our apartment, and she burst into tears.

"Oh, baby," I said soothingly, moving toward her with open arms. "Come here."

She let me pull her close, and she sobbed into my shoulder for a short thirty seconds before taking a deep breath and pulling away. "I can't do this. Not yet," she whispered, wiping at the water streaming down her cheeks. Then she studied my face again, and with an agonized look in her eyes raised a hand like she wanted to touch me. "We have bandages in the bathroom," she said, and her voice almost broke with fresh sobs.

"*I'll be right there," I told her, trying my hardest to give a comforting smile even though it hurt my split lip.*

After she strode to the bathroom I turned toward the body. I couldn't let Christina see any of this. It was bad enough I couldn't hide my face from her, but I wanted to protect her from exposure to violence for as long as I possibly could. That meant staying in the apartment as long as we had food, and as long as the empty apartments next to ours had food. I wasn't taking them out into the world until I absolutely had to, this experience cemented that idea in my mind. I hadn't the weapons or the skills to protect them from men like this. More importantly, I wasn't mentally prepared to protect them from men like this. I needed time.

The first time I set foot on the balcony in three days was to push the body over into the street, and I wasn't sure whether to say hello or goodbye to the dark world that received my cold-blooded act.

Static Air

Flecks by These Brittles Bones

Static Air

Genevieve

"What do you got there?" Mr. Greely asked, moving the beam of his flashlight toward me so he could see what I was holding.

For the past month since the outbreak we'd been slowly working our way to the edges of Rochester. Our goal was to follow Lake Ontario to Fort Drum, where Mr. Greely was hoping some of his old army buddies, or at least some military personnel, would still be alive. There were eight of us left in our small group – Mr. Greely and I, four other men of different ages, a woman, and another girl a couple years older than me. Right now we were scavenging in an old grocery store, searching through shelves that had already been picked clean by other survivors. Immediately after the outbreak food and weapons had been stockpiled by anyone who could get their hands on some, and if you weren't one of those people, you were mostly out of luck now.

I held up the small box of snack cakes so Mr. Greely could see it. The only reason I could see that it hadn't been accounted for yet was because it'd fallen between two of the shelves, out of sight unless you purposefully looked there. Mr. Greely gave me an approving grin and a pat on the back, and then continued past me to keep searching.

"You going to share?" asked a deep, playful voice from behind me.

The tall blonde kid was pretty new. His name was Blake. We'd only found him a few days ago, but he was so charismatic and easygoing it was hard for me not to already like him. Even though I already considered him a friend, with the loss of my dad and brother so fresh, it was hard to let it show.

"Everybody shares everything," I answered flatly as I put the box into my backpack.

No matter what kinds of doleful answers I had for his questions the last few days, he continued to try and draw me out. "Do you like the chocolate or the vanilla ones better?" he asked, but before I could respond he spoke again. "Hold on, don't tell me." He clasped his hands together and thoughtfully pressed his index fingers to his lips. "You look like a chocolate kind of girl."

He was wrong, but he looked so happy and excited about even guessing that I had to give him something. So I managed a small smile. "Vanilla," I corrected, and at his overly dramatized disappointment I couldn't help but chuckle. "I never really liked chocolate." Then as he started to follow me around to the next empty aisle I asked, "What about you?"

"Definitely chocolate," he told me. "I'm almost appalled at you."

"Most people are when they find that out," I replied, letting him see my amused smirk so he'd know I wasn't offended.

As we turned down the next small aisle the girl my age looked up at Blake and I. I could barely make her out it was so dark, but I could tell she was staring at us curiously. I'd seen her trying to get friendly with Blake since we found him.

Blake noticed it too. "Somebody's jealous," he sang playfully, quiet enough that she wouldn't hear.

"Yeah," I chuckled, somewhat uncomfortably seeing as I didn't want to give him the wrong impression.

"Oh," he added quickly, awkwardly, "I'm not trying to flirt with you."

"I know," I told him instantly. I really hadn't known, but it was somewhat of a relief. The loss was too fresh for me to even feel anything but pain for too long.

He was quiet for a few seconds, studying me through the dark. "If you

want me to, I can leave you alone." He made an obvious pause, and then added, "Rebecca told me what happened…"

Up until then he'd actually been making me feel a little better, so I shook my head. "It's okay. It's kind of nice." I took a thoughtful moment and then shrugged. "Mr. Greely doesn't really know what to say to me most the time. Makes it harder to forget."

He nodded in understanding while he shined his light into an empty bag of chips. "Do you want to forget?"

"*No," I sighed softly. "I just don't want to miss them so much." Again Blake nodded in understanding. It made me curious about him. "Did you have family?"*

"*Just my mom," he answered. "But she was off on one of her impromptu stays with her asshole boyfriend in Buffalo…" his voice trailed off, and he looked over at me like he wasn't sure if I'd be uncomfortable with him talking like that.*

"*Aren't you worried?" I asked curiously. "Don't you think you should find her?"*

He turned up one side of his mouth in a sad smile. "I kind of already know, you know? I can feel it." I mouthed the word 'oh' and glanced away, unsure of how to offer any kind of comfort. "I never knew my dad," he continued breezily. "Word was he left my mom before I was born. My friends were my family, but you know how it was. Too chaotic in the city to really find anyone."

"*I'm sorry," I offered remorsefully.*

"*Me too," he said with a grateful smile.*

Blake opened his mouth again and had started to say something else, but he was cut off by a terrifyingly Feral scream, and somebody yelling, "Oh, shit! Run!"

I guess someone had ventured into the back freezer, and opened it to

find someone had stuffed a bunch of Ferals in there. I was about to take off running down the aisle, but Blake grabbed me and pulled me down, clicking off his flashlight and then swiftly taking mine to do the same. Just as my beam disappeared a few of our group members went sprinting past the aisle, followed by three Ferals. Unfortunately, right after that a few others from our group, including Mr. Greely, turned down our aisle, and there were six Ferals following them.

"Okay, run," Blake said hastily, giving me a push toward the door.

He didn't have to tell me twice. I took off running, hearing the thundering of footsteps behind me. I shot out the door of the grocery store and immediately turned left, glancing back just long enough to see that Blake, Mr. Greely, and three other Ferals were still on my tail. The next alley I passed I turned down, praying there was a fire escape at the end of it. Blake followed me in, and as he did I saw three figures go darting past the entrance of it. I knew Mr. Greely hadn't followed us here because he'd lead the Ferals away, but one of them stopped because it caught sight of us, and it instantly flew into the alley.

I reached the end and almost sighed with relief that there was a fire escape. When I got close enough I jumped as high as I could into the air, but the ladder was pulled up, and I was too short to reach. Panic was the major emotion I was feeling, however, so I jumped again even though I knew it wouldn't work. But just as I jumped Blake's hands landed on my waist, and he used my momentum to throw me high enough that my fingers clamped down over the lowest bar.

I scrambled all the way up to the roof of the two story building before looking back down to make sure Blake could reach the ladder. My glance only told me that the Feral had caught up before he could, and now he was wrestling with it. I was about to call out to him and rush back down to come to his aid, but before I could something grabbed me by the shoulders and yanked me so hard backward I went skidding across the rooftop I was on.

As I came to a halt I could see it was a man that had grabbed me, and there was another one standing at his side. I tried to dart up, thinking only

of grabbing the steel baseball bat stuck in the straps of my backpack, but a third guy above my head put his hands on my shoulders and shoved me back down. I wasn't sure where they'd come from, but they didn't look friendly, two of them had guns in their hands, and I was positive the man holding me down had one nearby.

"It's just a girl," one of them chuckled, the youngest one, in his mid-twenties if the moonlight let me judge correctly.

Then I heard a metallic ringing, like Blake had just grabbed a hold of the ladder. "Blake!" I shouted.

"If he comes up here, shoot him," the one holding me down hissed.

I almost gasped with fresh panic. Blake didn't have a gun either. "Don't come up!" I hollered to warn him. "There're three! They'll shoot y-"

The man above me whacked his palm hard against the side of my head, managing to slap it flat against my ear. It had to have hurt more than if he'd punched me, and now the pressure against the side of my brain made it hard to even keep my eyes open. Then he flipped me over and began to wrench my backpack from off my shoulders.

"No!" I protested, flopping onto my back and grabbing a tight hold of the bag before he could pull it away.

"Let go," he ordered, pulling so hard it lifted me a few inches off the ground. But I wasn't releasing my clutch on it. Everything I owned was in it. All I had left from my home.

As the second man strode over, the third one released his hold on my bag and watched him to see what he'd do. The moment he got to my side he pulled his foot back, and then sent it crashing into my ribs. I hollered with agony and instinctively curled up, hugging the bag to my chest.

"Give them the bag," the youngest man begged from his spot a few feet away.

When I offered no response the third man kicked me in the back. After a

cry of pain I forced myself to ignore it, and began trying to crawl toward the fire escape. I could deal with a Feral better than I could deal with three grown men. The two guys let me crawl a couple feet, striding along at my side. Then a heavy boot landed against my back, and when I shifted onto my back to protect it, another crashed again into my ribs.

"The bag," the third man demanded. At this point I was in too much pain to do anything. I couldn't find the courage to refuse, but I couldn't find the strength to even unwrap my arms from it.

The second man sighed in annoyance and folded his arms over his chest. "Teach her a lesson."

Out of fear I rolled onto my side and once more curled into a ball around the backpack, but the third man grabbed one of my shoulders to expose me as he knelt at my side. Once he had me on my back again his fist smashed against my cheek. He managed to hit me three more times before in my disoriented state I thought to cover my face with my hands, thus releasing the bag. When I no longer had it in my grasp the man stopped hitting me and stood, taking the bag with him. Like he thought I had the will to protest again, he kicked me in the ribs once more. As his foot was drawing away there was the faintest ring of movement against the ladder.

"Let's go," he said, and he and the youngest one immediately ran to the opposite edge of the roof and jumped across to the next one close by.

My eyes were so blurred with agonized tears and my head was so woozy that I could barely tell the second man was just staring me. I almost thought I was just imagining it, until he pulled his foot back further than either of them had yet, and he kicked me one last time. He was gone with the other two and my backpack by the time someone came up the ladder.

All I could do was lie there. I couldn't look up to see who'd come to my rescue because I could hardly even breathe. It wasn't even until now that I felt the salty tears streaming down my cheeks. They stung the open wounds on my face, and every time I sobbed it caused an excruciating pain in my abdomen.

A moment later I heard Mr. Greely's voice bark 'check on her', and then Blake was at my side. "Genevieve?" he gently shook my shoulders. "Oh my God," he mumbled, and I could tell he was panicked, because he started babbling. "I'm so sorry it took me so long. You said they'd shoot me and so I went to find Mr. Greely."

One of his arms slipped carefully under my neck while his other went beneath my knees, and he scooped me up to carry me to the side of the roof. Once there he delicately set me down, leaning my back against the ledge of the roof, but it hurt so bad to sit up that after he let me go I slumped over onto my side.

"*Mr. Greely!" Blake hollered frantically, and while my eyes were closed I could hear footsteps rush over.*

Mr. Greely dropped at my side and put his hand in mine. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me," he instructed, sounding just as panicked as Blake did. But I didn't have the strength to squeeze his hand, so I let out groan instead.

"*I'm so sorry," Blake whispered, but in my fading consciousness he sounded so far away. "I'll never leave you again, I promise."*

"*Hold your light on her," Mr. Greely instructed, and whatever he said next was lost in the darkness.*

…

"What does this mean?" I asked Echo, pointing one finger straight up in the air and making a deliberate circle with my hand.

She'd looked up from her breakfast to watch, and now she was squinting one eye at me thoughtfully. "That's uh… a rally point."

I nodded my content at her answer, even though I knew she'd remember what it meant. Since the special assignment I'd been making sure she learned all the hand and light signals we used on mission. It was where the nerd I used to know shined, because she had an impeccable memory, and managed to learn all of them within a matter of days. It had

been a little over a week now, but I still asked her randomly from time to time, just to make sure the information was sticking.

"Morning, ladies," Blake's voice came from behind me, and for some reason Echo raised a surprised eyebrow at him. Curious, I turned before he got a chance to sit down. Casey was with him, and while he had his plate of food in one hand, it looked liked he'd just let go of Casey with his other. "There room for us?"

"Knock yourselves out," I consented, motioning for Echo to come and sit over by me. I wanted Blake and Casey to sit across from me, that way I could see if there was something going on… and possibly make fun of Blake for it.

"Hi, Genevieve," Casey said with a shy smile as she and Blake moved around to sit across from me. Then she smiled at the raider, "Echo."

I gave Blake a smug grin as he sat, only to have him scowl at me because he knew I was going to tease him. It looked like he was about to mouth a warning too, but then Echo plopped down next to me. It's what I'd told her to do, but I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering to her when she did, because she'd sat down so close the warmth of her body made me realize how chilly the morning breeze was. There was at least three feet of empty bench that could separate us, so when she realized I was staring at her awkwardly she gave an apologetic smile and scooted away.

"What are you crazy kids up to?" I asked playfully, turning my gaze back on Blake and Casey. Then, when the cold seeped back in to where the warmth was now missing, I shivered.

"Nothing." Blake answered too nonchalantly, and I couldn't help but smirk. Maybe I shouldn't be trying to tease him, but he'd been so adamant about not wanting a girlfriend that I couldn't let the opportunity pass by.

"You have plans for today?" I said, looking at Casey because I knew I'd get more of an answer out of her. Though my tone and smile were teasingly amused, I found it cute that she was leaning into Blake so

teasingly amused, I found it cute that she was leaning into Blake so contentedly that she was practically sitting in his lap. He deserved to be happy, even if I was going to bug him about it.

"I'm covering for April while she's at that place in the woods," Casey answered, her green eyes lighting up with a gleeful grin. "So Blake wanted to help me in the medical cabin today."

"He did?" I asked in playful disbelief, giving Blake a mischievously beaming smile.

He glared at me from behind his water cup, and taking a deliberate look inside of it he mused hopefully, "I'm out of water."

After that he gave a brief look around, and a moment later Casey stood happily. "I'll get you some."

The second she walked away with his empty cup he leaned over the table toward me. "Don't make it a thing," he said. "It's no big deal."

"Were you guys holding hands?" I asked jauntily, but kept my voice at a whisper to keep from embarrassing him too much.

"Genevieve," he whined pleadingly. "Don't make it more than it is."

I couldn't help but giggle at how he was blushing. He was starting to like her, he never got shy like this. "What is it, exactly?"

"Nothing," he answered, chuckling timidly.

"That was pretty snuggly for nothing," Echo chimed in, and nodded in acknowledgment when I gave her a grateful smile for backing me up.

"You like her," I continued, hardly holding back entertained laughter. "Admit it."

"Stop it," he glared, poorly containing his own smile.

"Admit it," I repeated, reaching across the table and playfully pinching his cheeks.

"Come on lover boy," Echo giggled encouragingly.

"Fine," he said, and after suspiciously glancing around and seeing that Casey was on her way back he whispered swiftly, "I sort of like her." At his confession both Echo and I made a show of triumph, and in my joy at Blake's potential love affair I even gave her a high five. "You guys are evil," he grumbled, and as Casey sat back down with his cup he smiled at her appreciatively. "Thank you."

"So, what are you guys doing today?" Casey asked before taking a bite of her breakfast.

"I was going to ask her," I answered, nodding toward Echo. "We've got night patrols, so we might take the day off."

Occasionally Echo complained that I never took days off. It hadn't really occurred to me that I never did until she came along. Mostly it was because I worried people might think I was lazy, even if my main job was being a soldier. Just because it was dangerous didn't mean it was hard, and there was always work to do around camp. It didn't seem like Echo had lived a pampered life with the raiders, but it definitely seemed like most days weren't filled with labor. So I decided when we had night patrols I'd give her the option to take the day off, that way I wouldn't have to hear her complain about it too much.

Echo's lips instantly curled into a smile, and she turned to face me enthusiastically. "Can we go to the river?"

I tried to hide my satisfaction at the suggestion, since I didn't want her to mistake my liking her idea for me liking her. Instead, I gave a small shrug. "Sure."

Honestly, going to the river was probably one of the best ideas she'd had since she got here. It would be winter soon, and the water was already starting to get too cold to bathe in. Might as well go for one of our last dips before we had to start heating water near the tent every time we wanted to wash up.

"Can we go right now?" she asked happily, standing before I could even

respond.

I peered into my coffee cup, and even though the remaining drip wasn't enough to sip, I tilted it toward my lips one last time. "I have to meet Cap first," I told her, and as I looked at Blake I nodded toward Echo again. "Can you guys watch her for a few minutes?" He shrugged unconcernedly, and with a grateful smile I started toward the meeting tent.

"Genevieve," Cap's gruff voice carried to me as I was about to enter the tent, and I backed up to see him jogging my way. For one thing, Cap never hurried, and I also couldn't read the look he had on his face.

"What's up?" I asked curiously, following him in when he continued past me.

"I was with April at the cabin," he answered, and upon reaching the table inside he pulled his revolver out of the holster around his waist. "There was an incident last night."

When he pulled a box of ammunition out of a footlocker on the ground, a little part of me panicked. "What happened? Is she okay?"

He looked up at me, seemingly confused about why I sounded so worried. Then he chuckled, scratching his beard like he was embarrassed he'd scared me. "I'm sorry, the two were unrelated." Then he held up his revolver as if to explain why he'd used ammunition. "We put the Feral down. The tetanus vaccine was unsuccessful."

I practically sighed with relief, dropping myself into the chair across the table from him. "What happened last night?"

Cap replaced the revolver at his side and took a seat. "Foot patrols found three Ferals wandering in the woods." My eyes widened in shock, and before I could ask he answered my question, "No one was hurt, luckily, but let your guys know. Make sure they aren't slacking off or falling asleep during their shifts. I might also add more foot patrols to the shifts, at least for a couple weeks."

"Sounds good," I nodded in understanding, but there was a sinking feeling in my gut. We'd never had an issue like this before. Our camp was safe. Isolated. Out of the Ferals' reach. "Do you think it will happen again?"

He looked at me for a minute while he thought about it, and then gave a soft shrug. "Let's hope it doesn't." We were both quiet for a little bit. I wanted to go and patrol right now. Even if this was the first time this had happened, I felt the need to protect the camp. But I had a shift tonight, and there was no way I could patrol twenty-four hours every day, no matter how badly I wanted to. "How's Echo adjusting?" Cap asked eventually.

"Fine," I mumbled hesitantly. Cap was someone I definitely didn't want to talk to about Echo. I still blamed him for putting me in this position.

"You're still mad," he observed.

I wanted to brush it off and leave so we didn't have to talk about it, but a part of me wanted to complain to him so he knew how hard it was on me. "It's just," I paused, debating whether or not I should gripe. "There are so many other soldiers here that-"

"Do you know why I put you in charge of her?" he interrupted, knowing where I was going with my complaint. I shook my head. "Out of everyone here, you have the most reasons to hate her. Not just raiders in general, like everyone else does, but her, specifically."

I knew that much. That's why I didn't want to be in charge of her, and the fact that he was acknowledging it only made me frustrated. "Then why?" I asked impatiently.

"It's obvious that you want her to fail," he answered, absentmindedly adjusting his green trucker hat as he glanced away. "And because you want it so badly, I know that when you start to trust her, I can too."

"I'll never trust her, Cap," I told him bitterly. If that was his whole reasoning behind it, then I felt used. "She's dangerous."

He was studying me again, like he was trying to figure out what to say. I almost thought I'd convinced him of Echo's unreliability, until he said, "I noticed you gave her the knife back." I opened my mouth to form a response, but I couldn't really think of how to argue that. "I've never found fault with your decision making. Should I start now?"

"No," I grumbled indignantly. I didn't like this, the way he was twisting my logic. The way he was pointing out that even against my will, I *was* beginning to trust her.

"I want you to start giving her some freedom," he said before I could come up with some other argument against Echo. "Just a little, an hour or two a week, and only during the day. See what she does with it."

I just stared at the tabletop, completely dissatisfied with the turn of the conversation. "We done?" I asked flatly.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said sincerely. "I'm sorry for what you lost. But I'm a man of my word, Gen, and I think that's even more important now that the world's gone to shit." I wanted to tell him he shouldn't have made that deal with Echo in the first place, but as much as I wanted it to be the wrong decision, it got Blake back. No matter how much I hated Echo, I'd let Cap make it again if it would save another life. That still didn't mean I had to be happy about it. When I just sat there, staring back instead of answering him because there was nothing I could say, he nodded with a sigh. "We're done."

I gave an awkward pursing of my lips in parting, and then walked out the exit back toward the DFAC. Despite my annoyance at Cap's wanting to discuss what discussing wouldn't change, I wasn't as frustrated about it now that I wasn't in his presence. Part of me was too confused about when I'd started to trust Echo enough to give her the knife. I knew why I'd given it to her in the first place, but I never would've done it if I thought she'd do something dangerous with it. She was constantly getting into fights with me, admittedly more often because I was picking them, but even though she was violent, I didn't feel like she was deadly. If she wanted to kill me, she'd already had plenty of opportunities, and she was never aggressive toward anyone else. Is it normal to trust someone you

hate? I didn't have an answer, and my mind was already exhausted enough that I just wanted to let it go. Plus, giving Echo a couple hours of freedom was a couple much-needed free hours of my own.

As I got close to the dining area it looked like my three companions were having a good laugh about something, but when I arrived they stopped, and Blake looked at me awkwardly like he thought I'd be upset he was having fun with Echo. I didn't mind so much, and gave him a small smile to let him know it was okay. Maybe it was because I was so happy for him having a crush on Casey that I was still in a decent mood. Or it was the prospect of those freedom hours.

"Thanks guys," I said to Blake and Casey, and then glanced at Echo. "You ready?"

She immediately stood to follow me to the tent and grab our bathing stuff. As we were coming out again with our items in hand Kellan was passing by, and he grinned the moment he saw me.

"Oh, Genevieve," he sighed infatuatedly, his lips gaining their infamously flirtatious curve. "Forty thousand men with all their love couldn't make up my sum."

I rolled my eyes, though I still couldn't help but chuckle at his continuously useless attempts. Even if I was never going to sleep with him, it was still flattering. Until Echo scoffed, rolling her eyes not nearly as friendlily as I did.

"You're not serious," she said, raising a disbelieving eyebrow at him before glancing at me. When I gave her an impatiently curious look she rolled her eyes again. "That's Shakespeare, you idiot. Jesus, doesn't anyone except for this dimwit read?" I just shook my head again, because it hadn't sounded familiar to me. "Hamlet?" She repeated the quote in a hurried murmur, "Forty-thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum." And then she turned to Kellan. "Seriously, if you're going to hit on a girl, don't use some cliché bullshit like Shakespeare."

"What do you know about hitting on girls?" he retorted defensively.

Echo chuckled, laugh line deepening with amusement. "More than you, apparently." After that she turned to me, staring deep into my eyes. "If I gave you my heart, would you cherish it?" I opened my mouth to tell her that was the stupidest pickup line I'd ever heard, but the moment I did she pressed her finger to my lips and put her other hand to her heart so dramatically I nearly snorted with laughter. "It doesn't matter. Take it or break it. It's no longer mine to decide."

She was obviously making fun of Kellan, and since I hated her I was trying so hard not to laugh. "I'm going to say the winner is," I started, failing to wipe the entertained smile off my face. "Shakespeare."

"You're so full of crap," Echo chuckled, shaking her head and walking away to start in the direction of the river.

Now I didn't know what to say to Kellan. To be honest, I felt kind of bad for him. In recompense I gave him a coy smile and a pat on the chest. "Better luck next time." And then I hurried after Echo. "You didn't have to embarrass him," I said, catching up as we reached the edge of the stream.

"Puh-lease," she responded sarcastically, and she kicked off her already untied boots while pulling her shirt over her head. "With a line like that, he deserved it."

I undid my own laces and then began to strip, folding my clothing articles on top of my boots. "Yours was even cheesier than his."

"I wasn't serious." She strode into the water, taking in a pained breath at the temperature once it reached her waist. "I would never hit on a girl with a pick up line."

"Then what would you hit on a girl with?" I asked, teasingly pointing out how entirely gay it sounded when she said that. Her only response was to make a mocking face at me. "Besides, he wasn't serious either."

Echo was silent for a few seconds, and then, "Oh, God." She dipped her head under water, and when she came back up she cleared her eyes

and cocked her head at me scoldingly. "Please tell me you haven't slept with him."

I narrowed my eyes at her because it really wasn't any of her business, but for some reason I didn't want her to think I was that easy. "He wouldn't be after me so desperately if I had."

"Phew," she said, pretending to wipe sweat off her forehead.

"Why do you dislike him so much?" I asked, half curious, half offended that she felt so strongly about it. My good mood was disappearing.

"Aside from the fact that he's disgusting?" she replied, absentmindedly working her bar of soap into suds.

She was starting to aggravate me again. "He's a nice guy," I told her fiercely. Plus, he was too attractive to be disgusting.

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "By whose standards?"

"Anyone's," I answered shortly.

Echo started massaging the suds into her hair, talking in a way that made her seem so much calmer about this than I was. "Not mine."

"As a murderer, you're biased," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

I knew she hated it when I called her that, and I got something of a reaction when she dropped her hands from her head and glared at me, grinding her teeth furiously. But it was obvious she knew why I'd said it, because she tried to regain some composure. "Fine," she said apathetically. "Then just go fuck him already."

"You're so irritating!" I shouted, splashing water at her because she was too far away for me to throw a punch.

Instead of saying anything she just looked at me while she ducked her head under water again, calmly rinsing the soap from her hair. She wasn't going to say anything, I knew it because she usually had one of two reactions when we got in a fight. She was coldly collected like now

two reactions when we got in a fight. She was coldly collected like now, or she went completely nuclear. The coldly collected response was somewhat new, and started when she realized how much it pissed me off. I wanted so badly to provoke her, to make her so angry that she'd lash out and make it acceptable for me to hit her, especially being as annoyed as I was right now. Every time I looked at her there was a stinging pain in my chest, a heartbreaking reminder of what she took from me, and most the time I wanted to hurt her back. But when she was in calm moods like this she was determined, and it was impossible to lure her into a fight. What made it infinitely more frustrating was that I couldn't find an outlet for my anger, and most the time I couldn't walk away so she wouldn't see how much she got to me.

By the time she resurfaced I'd turned away. Now I was taking deep breaths, focusing on scrubbing every bit of dirt off my body in an attempt to forget about my rage. But what made these situations *still* more frustrating was that I never used to lose my temper like this. Not until she arrived did I turn into an emotional time bomb. She brought out the worst in me, and I hated that.

One thing I couldn't complain about when Echo went into these silent Zen states was that they lasted a while. She didn't say another word to me until I'd finished a peaceful nap after we returned from the river. She stayed in the tent while I hung out with Blake outside at the campfire. She even remained silent the entire time we ate dinner, which was completely shocking since I'd realized mealtimes was an especially talkative time for her. Before I knew it we were sitting in the patrol tower, keeping a close watch out for any Ferals.

"You got a quote for when they come around again?" Echo asked, her voice carrying across to me through the dark. I could see her silhouette leaning over the railing of the blind as she held the night vision binoculars to her eyes.

"No," I answered softly. She'd been so silent the entire time that with my head leaned back against the wood rail I'd almost dozed off. "You?"

"I was thinking," she said, and then she told me the quote, "I just know that every man I kill the farther away from home I feel."

Even though she couldn't see it, I squinted thoughtfully. It wasn't just the way she said it, like it meant something to her, I also felt like I'd heard it before. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"It's from Saving Private Ryan," her voice replied. "We watched it in history. You remember? With Mr. Grant."

"Oh yeah." I could recall it now, watching the movie in class. It felt like a lifetime ago. More than that, it was like one of those stories you always hear about your childhood from other people, and after a while you've heard it so many times you aren't sure whether you can just imagine it perfectly or if it's a real memory. That's what it felt like, like back then might not even be real. But a moment later Echo chuckled, and I quit pondering how things used to be. "What?"

"Mr. Grant," she answered, snickering to herself again. "How he used to try and convince us to go to Civil War reenactments for extra credit."

I couldn't help but giggle, and quoted in the deepest voice I could, "If you come, I'll be the guy on horseback wearing blue, riding in to save the day."

"Oh my God," Echo snorted with laughter, "You sound exactly like him."

It felt so good to laugh that I didn't want it to stop. "Students, shut your pie holes," I continued in the same deep, monotonous voice, "History is the jewel of civilization, you should take pride in your nation."

I couldn't remember Mr. Grant saying those exact words, but it sounded like something he'd say, and in the dark I could see Echo was buckled over because she was laughing so hard. It didn't really make sense, but even though I still hated her, knowing what she was didn't hurt so badly when I couldn't see her. There was no sting of heartbreak, no feeling of betrayal, just a chronic dissatisfaction that flared up when she said something that specifically reminded me of who she was. That was probably another part of the problem, who she was, instead of who she used to be. Because I really liked who she used to be, and sometimes I'd catch the slightest glimpse, and even if it was just for a second, it was

catch the slightest glimpse, and even if it was just for a second, it was enough to confuse my hatred.

"What did you want to be?" Echo asked, her laughter tapering off into recovery breaths. "Before the outbreak, as a career."

"Well, if I didn't make a pro soccer team," I started, and heard her 'mhm' for me to continue. "I always thought I'd like to be FBI or CIA, or something like that."

"Makes sense," she mused, "Since you like being a soldier so much."

"I like helping people," I told her with a slight shrug. "Call me high speed, but the normal routes like doctor or therapist just seemed so… boring." At that I heard her chuckle. "What about you?"

She was quiet for a few seconds, and then she sounded kind of unsure, "I don't know, nothing ever really called to me. Maybe a librarian or a teacher, if I never could decide."

It was hard to picture, Echo, the raider, being a librarian. And just like that, with the reminder that she was a raider, I didn't feel like laughing anymore. "A librarian who can pick locks and fight well enough that you'd probably give Blake a good beat down."

I could tell by the tone of her response that she'd picked up on the change in my mood. She always knew what I was feeling, even when she couldn't see me. "The things I know," she said, her voice dolefully and cautiously soft. "The things I can do. That's what it took to survive in the city." She paused, and reluctantly added a moment later, "With the raiders."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," I replied sarcastically, ready for her to stop talking or change the subject before I started getting severely irritated again.

Echo gave a delicate sigh before telling me quietly, "It doesn't."

I didn't respond, partly because I didn't care how she felt about the things she'd done, and partly because I didn't want to talk to her anymore. But

after a minute of silence it bothered me, that feeling of betrayal. Maybe she didn't know my little brother was in the school, but I still expected so much more from her than falling in with raiders. She was the last person I ever would've expected it from, and I'd never felt so let down. "You know, I thought about you," I told her bitterly. "After the outbreak." She didn't say anything, but I knew by her silence she was listening. "Maybe because I was always watching out for you, but you were the first person I thought of when I started wondering where all my friends could be." She was still listening quietly, letting me say what I wanted even though my tone was anything but pleasant. "Can you believe it, I was kind of worried? Then the elementary school… and I just wanted you to drop dead." I wasn't talking to her so much now as I was talking to myself, thinking out loud. "Always the prey," I mused. "Now you're just a predator."

She sighed once more, and I could tell in the thick tension between us that she wanted to argue it. But she didn't, and she was quiet for a couple minutes before she spoke again. "Can I ask you something?"

"You're going to ask me anyway," I consented grumpily.

"Before the outbreak, at school," she said, and in the dark I could see her turn to face me. "Why were you so nice to me?"

I didn't answer at first, because the question reminded me of who she used to be. It was like flipping a switch, that's how easily she affected my moods. How easily she affected my opinion of her. All she had to do was bring up something like this, and I wasn't talking to the raider anymore. "Do you remember in fourth grade, some kid stole a bracelet out of my pencil box? And you told me about it?" She replied the affirmative. "It belonged to my mom. It was always one of her favorite things, and my dad gave it to me after she died."

"That's it?" She sounded genuinely surprised. "That's all I did?"

"It meant the world to me," I whispered sincerely, because for some reason I wanted her to know she had an impact.

She didn't seem to know how to respond to that. Probably because I

She didn't seem to know how to respond to that. Probably because I hadn't really said a single, even remotely heartfelt thing to her since she got here. "I'm sorry about your mom. What happened to her?"

The flipping of a switch. Some of my immediate reaction was hearing her say that goddamned word 'sorry' again. The other part was the actual reminder of *what* happened to my mother, because even if it wasn't Echo's fault, my mind made a connection. "None of your business," I told her scathingly.

"Okay, geez," she whispered in defensive shock. "You don't have to be so hostile."

Hostile? The murderer was complaining about *me* being hostile. "Why don't you tell me what happened to your family." Even though I knew it was one of those topics that made her nuclear, I said it anyway.

"Forget it." Her voice immediately gained an aggravated edge, and I knew I'd hit a nerve.

"No, come on," I urged, getting more and more annoyed by the second that she wanted me to talk about things when she was just going to clam up. "I know you had one. Your parents," and I tried to think back all those years, "And two sisters, right? They were at our middle school graduation."

"You share your story, I'll share mine," she said savagely.

I ignored her, keeping with my own nagging to finally get a reaction out of her. "What did you do, huh? You sacrifice them to the raiders? Is that why you sound so guilty every time I bring it up?"

"Stop!" she shouted suddenly, and I heard the palm of her hand slap hard against the floor of the tower while the boom of her voice echoed through the silent night. When things quieted down again she sniffled, but there was still fury mixed in with the fresh anguish. "You don't know the first fucking thing about my guilt."

I wanted to keep picking at her, because not even the night could mask my hurt now and I'd finally gotten a reaction. But sitting there in the dark

my hurt now and I'd finally gotten a reaction. But sitting there in the dark, not knowing whether she was more furious or sad, I couldn't predict the next reaction, and I was a little bit afraid. Not of her trying to hurt me. I had my rifle while all she had was a pocketknife. I was sort of afraid of finding out. Either she did something terrible, or something terrible happened to her, either way I was nervous to know what kind of effect that information would have on my feelings toward her.

"If I ever tried to explain myself," Echo eventually said in a whisper. "Would you hear me without judgment?"

No. "If you say another word to me, I will physically throw you out of this tower." She didn't say another word to me for the rest of the night.

I Don't Want To Play

Enemies by Hannah Georgas (WE SINK remix)

I Don't Want to Play

Echo

I stood up to leave the small house our group was staying at now, passing between the kitchen and the living room to get to the front door. For the past hour I'd been resting in a nearby room, waiting for Victor to leave the main area so he wouldn't see me go out. Now I couldn't wait any longer, and decided I needed to make a break for it. I'd barely reached for the handle when he stopped me.

"Echo," he called from the foldup table where he was playing poker with some of the other guys. "Where you going?"

"Out," I answered impatiently, already itching to get to where I was going. In my aggravated mindlessness I almost scratched at my wrist where there was a freshly healing tattoo, but I caught myself right on time, grateful to have avoided the pain that would've resulted in my itching it.

He waved to try and coax me over. "Come here, play with us."

"*I'm going scavenging, Victor," I told him, glancing from him to the other guys at the table, and then to the cups of alcohol in front of them.*

"*Then let me go with you," he said, standing up slowly so he wouldn't tip over.*

"*You're drunk." I was practically tapping my foot because I was so ready to get out of the house. I was already running late. "Stay here."*

"*Yeah, stay here, Victor," another guy named Martin said. "She might be eighteen now, but she's still never going to fuck you."*

Victor turned to flip Martin the finger, and before he could swivel around to address me again I was out the door. Just in case he decided to try and come after me I jogged away from the house, making sure to stick to the shadows in case there were any random Biters wandering around. My destination wasn't far, but even though I was running late I eventually slowed down, not wanting to make a mistake if it could mean the difference between life and death. Before long the housing tract I was heading for came into view, and I crept through the dark into the fenced backyard of my destination home.

"*Valerie?" I whispered, tiptoeing through the long grass near the wall of the house and trying not to make too much noise. I was about to call for her again when I felt something poke into my ribs. It scared me enough that I jumped, and when I spun around Valerie had her hands over her mouth to keep from laughing to loudly. "Jesus, Val," I complained lightheartedly through a laugh of my own while I set my hands on her hips, and then I pulled her backward with me until my shoulders met the wall.*

Her eager lips were on mine the second my back touched the house, but she pulled away a moment later to nag teasingly, "You're late." We always met somewhere in secret when we got together. Leon had taught me to fight, and I could defend myself against any of the guys if they found out and decided to harass me about it, but Valerie still insisted on sneaking away. She didn't want it being any harder on me with the group than it already was. Sometimes I just wished I could make it easier on her.

"*I'm so sorry," I said, giving her an apologetic peck and feeling my excitement escalate when her bare hands connected with my stomach. "I was trying to avoid Victor, he didn't want to let me leave."*

"*He's a dick."*

Her mouth met mine again, and through the side of my lips I whispered knowingly, "You're telling me."

Valerie's hands didn't hesitate to set to work on the button of my pants,

and even though her lips tried to leave mine so she could respond, I followed her, reluctant for it to end even for a second. "I hate the way he looks at you."

"*I know." I stopped trying to catch her mouth and pulled away to study her, to see the dislike on her face. I tried to be comforting by fondly pushing her hair behind her ear, and after running my thumb over her cheek I gave her a deep, long kiss. "But you don't have to worry about me," I assured in a hushed murmur.*

"*I used to," she told me, looking me seriously in the eyes, but a moment later she shook her head as if to ward off the tone our conversation had taken. Then without warning she slipped her hand between my legs, and when I let out a satisfied whimper she grinned. "Ah, ah," she scolded, clearly amused as she tried to wipe the grin off her face, "There could be Biters around. Not a peep."*

I chuckled against her lips as she kissed me again, and attempted to ignore the bliss of her touch while I turned us around and pressed her against the wall. "Let's see you stay quiet then," I challenged playfully, dropping my mouth to her neck while my own hand wandered below her waist.

I'd barely started when she pulled my mouth away from her neck to bring it back to her own. "God, Echo, you're getting too good at that," she whispered euphorically, leaning her head back after hardly a second, like she couldn't decide whether she wanted to kiss me or just let me work.

I smirked, planting a peck on her cheek and running my other hand up to her chest. "Which part?"

"*All of it," she breathed, the last half of it escaping through a soft moan.*

"*Ah, ah," I told her with a coy smile. "Not a peep, remember?" She nodded without protest, and wrapped her arms tight around my neck so she could kiss me without stopping. This was so much better than being stuck in the house.*

…

The chill of dawn caused me to shiver, and in my sleeping state I panicked, thinking Genevieve was already awake and would catch me without the handcuffs on. I almost shot up into a sitting position, but even through the panic I managed to stay calm, cracking one eye in the dim gray to look over at her. She was still fast asleep, so as quietly as I could I refastened one of my wrists to the corner of my cot. I was glad I'd woken when I did, because I'd hardly cuffed myself back in when she turned onto her side, facing me. I could tell her eyes were barely open, looking at me, so I gave an innocent smile.

"Why the hell are you awake?" she grumbled, rolling onto her stomach and covering her head with her pillow.

"You were talking in your sleep," I told her seriously.

She lifted her head just enough to focus on me. "I was?"

"Yeah," I nodded, and then added playfully, "You were talking about how bad you wanted to let me out of these handcuffs."

"Shut up," she said, and she almost laughed as she threw her pillow at me. "Go back to sleep."

The way she was acting right now, how she seemed to be in a good mood so far this morning, it made me smile. I wanted to keep messing with her so she'd keep being friendly with me. "Echo," I groaned, making stuff up as I pretended to imitate Genevieve, tossing and turning as if I couldn't sleep. "She's uncomfortable. I should let her out." But I was making my voice more annoying than she really sounded, and I could hear her give an amused chuckle. "She hates those cuffs. How she does dread them so."

Even though her lips had the slightest curve of that crookedly modest smile, she rolled her eyes and turned onto her back to ignore me. "I can't hear you."

I threw the pillow back at her, hitting her in the side of the head with it. "Can you hear me now?"

"No," she answered, putting the pillow back under her head.

While I was messing with her, the handcuffs were already starting to get uncomfortable. I really did hate them. So I sat up, trying to maintain some level of playfulness so Genevieve wouldn't get mad about my ceaseless attempts to get her to take them off. "Close your eyes," I told her while I sat up. Then I stood, and the tent was just small enough that with one hand still cuffed to my cot I could stretch all the way to Genevieve's. "You're getting sleepy," I crooned, peeling back the edge of her sleeping bag and reaching my free hand toward the pocket of her jeans.

She hadn't closed her eyes, and she was watching me like she wasn't sure whether or not I was really going to try and grab the key from her, and whether or not she should be mad about it. I barely got the tip of my index finger into her pocket before she smacked my hand away. "Do you have any idea how annoying you are?"

"Annoying enough for you to take these off?" I asked with a hopeful grin, backing up until I was sitting on my bed.

"Good God, I need coffee," she sighed, pushing herself up and digging the key out of her pants. After she tossed it to me she slipped into her boots, and when she got off the cot she shivered, making me aware of how cold it was this morning. "I'm going to see if Cap is awake yet, find out if he needs anything," she told me while she put on her gray hoodie.

I copied her, pulling my own black sweater over my head. "Okay," I shrugged compliantly, "I'll just sit in the corner like usual."

"No," she said thoughtfully, "You can stay here."

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Should I wake up Blake or something?" I asked unsurely, since whenever Genevieve wasn't watching me she usually left me with him.

"Do what you want," she answered like she was completely unconcerned about it, casually throwing her rifle over her shoulder and turning toward the exit of the tent. "I'll come to get you in a hour. Just be back by then."

"Is this a test?" I hesitantly called after her as she left, wondering if I should really go and wake Blake anyway. She either didn't answer or didn't hear me, so I stood there, staring at the flap-door. "Well… color me confused," I mumbled, glancing around the tent uncertainly.

I felt awkward standing here by myself. It had been at least two months now since I'd been at this camp, and not once had I been left alone. Nor had I really been left to judge for myself what would occupy my time. Now I had a whole entire hour to fill, and I had no idea what to do with it. Part of me still wanted to go and wake Blake up. It wasn't just that I was scared I might do something Genevieve found unsatisfactory if I was left alone. I didn't know what to do with myself. I'll be damned, my first minutes alone, and I was worried about being bored.

A small chuckle escaped my throat when I realized how ridiculous that was. Without another thought I strode happily out the exit, determined to do anything other than just sit in or right outside of the tent. There really wasn't much to do though. It didn't make sense to try and find a job to do since I only had an hour. Some of the civilians were still sleeping, and the ones who were awake were either eating breakfast or already working at their jobs. The only thing I could really think to do was walk around, which was probably as boring as if I'd just sat back at the tent, seeing as I already knew the layout of camp and there wasn't much to explore.

So far, this first hour of strangely given freedom was a waste. After eating breakfast I wandered around aimlessly for what felt like twenty minutes before I decided I might as well wait for Genevieve by the tent. I was on my way back when as I passed by a man's campsite he said 'hi' to me. The layout of his site was pretty simple. A slanted tarp served as the roof of his small shelter, covering his cot and a few bins of things. Since I didn't know him, I gave a smile in return and kept heading in the direction of Genevieve's tent.

"You're kind of new? Right?" the man asked before I could get too far away.

"Yeah," I answered hesitantly, backtracking a little bit to be polite. He

looked to be in his late forties, with close-cropped black hair and dark brown eyes. He was kind of scrawny, hardly taller than I was, and it didn't appear he was one of the hard labor workers around camp.

"I've been trying to keep acquainted with all the people here," he explained, putting on an invitingly friendly smile as I made my way closer. "I'm Anthony."

"Echo," I introduced myself. It wasn't until I was practically standing right in front of him to shake his hand that I noticed the small gold cross hanging around his neck, and a stealthy glance behind him revealed a worn Bible sitting on his cot. "What do you do around here?" I asked.

"I'm a teacher for the grade school children," he answered, and a moment later he confirmed my suspicion, "And once a week I do a sermon for whoever wants to listen."

"Uh huh," I mumbled uncomfortably, taking a step away and thinking he might damn me to hell if he found out who I was. "I'm probably the last person you want to be talking to."

"I know who you are," he said before I could hurry away. "You're a bit infamous around here."

Great, I thought sarcastically. If he knew who I was then he was probably talking to me to go on some save-the-raider crusade. "No offense, sir," I started as politely as I could, "But I'm really not looking for religion."

"I was just saying hi," he chuckled amusedly, but it was clear he knew he'd freaked me out, so he gave a small wave. "It was nice to meet you, Echo." I felt awkward enough that I was going to just walk away, but then I caught a glimpse into one of the plastic bins under his tarp. It was full of books. It had been so long since I'd read a book. He followed my gaze, and his lips turned up in a happy smile. "You like to read?" Anthony motioned for me to follow him as he made his way to the bin, and when he removed the lid the delightful smell of musty paperbacks flooded my nostrils.

"Love to read," I corrected, mesmerized by the sight and smell. One of

the novels on the very top I'd already read, but it looked like it was filled with ones I hadn't.

"Would you like to borrow one?" he asked. "My students are a little young for these."

"Are you sure?" Sometimes, what with being a soldier now in this seemingly endless apocalypse, it felt like I'd never hold a book again in my entire life.

"Absolutely." He motioned toward the bin again to let me know I should pick one. I reached for a random book, determined to go through every one in there.

"Thank you so much," I told him gratefully.

He nodded, following me to the edge of his campsite. "When you're finished with it you can come get another. Don't worry about if I'm here or not."

I couldn't help but grin. This was a dream come true. "Thanks," I repeated, and gave him an appreciative handshake before starting once more for Genevieve's tent.

Blake was awake now, though while he sat outside at the campfire it only looked like he was barely awake. His eyes were half closed, and he was staring so tiredly he didn't even see me pass by to put the book in the tent. After I'd set it onto my cot I made my way back out, and he looked a little surprised when I dropped down onto the log set perpendicular to his.

"Morning," I greeted, chuckling when his only response was to nod and then go back to staring at the fire.

A moment later he glanced around. "Where's Genevieve?"

I shrugged, knowing meetings with Cap never took an hour, but not really knowing if she'd had some other task she didn't want to tell me about. "She left me alone, said she'd meet me back here in a while."

He nodded knowingly, shivering against the morning and shoving his

He nodded knowingly, shivering against the morning and shoving his hands into the front pocket of his jacket. "She finally gave you that hour of freedom."

"I don't know why she did," I told him in confusion, since the way Blake said it made it sound like she'd been planning to.

He pulled one hand out of his jacket to rub his sleep-heavy eyes. "I think it was Cap's idea."

"I knew it was a test," I mumbled. Of course they wouldn't leave me alone because they trusted me. That would mean Genevieve was starting to like me, and we all knew that would never happen.

"Did you enjoy it, at least?" Blake asked.

"I was actually kind of bored," I told him honestly, and he mirrored my entertained laugh. After a moment I told him more seriously, "Genevieve's kind of like the center of my life now. I don't really know what to do with myself if she doesn't tell me."

"You'll figure it out when they start giving you more time alone," he said with a light shrug. "Find a rhythm or something." When I didn't respond to him, just offering the smallest of nods, he raised an eyebrow at me. "You don't want the freedom?"

"I don't know." I stared at the fire for a thoughtful minute, trying to figure out why he was right. Why I couldn't decide what to do with myself for the last hour. "I want the trust that comes with it, but the thing I want most is for Genevieve to forgive me. Doesn't seem like I can get it if she's never around." The only thing keeping me around her in the first place was Cap's instruction, and I knew that. If it weren't for him, Genevieve would want absolutely nothing to do with me. Blake nodded in understanding, and we were both quiet for a bit before I thought of something else. "Can I ask you a question? About Genevieve." He nodded again in consent. "What happened to her mom?" To my surprise, he chuckled. "What's funny?"

"You and Gen," he answered, the remains of an amused smile on his

face. "You're both stubborn as hell." I just cocked my head at him, not sure what he meant by that. "She wanted me to ask you the same thing. You both asked me instead of talking to each other… you know… like normal people."

I would've laughed at his teasing, but he brought up the memory. "About my family?" I clarified, unable to look him in the eyes and staring straight into the fire.

"Yeah," Blake said, and then added, "Her mom was killed when she was seven, I think."

"How?" I asked, holding my hands toward the flame to warm them. It was definitely getting colder these days.

"She was mugged. In broad daylight too," he said sympathetically. "I guess she tried to scream for help, and the guy shot her."

I didn't know what to say, and I tried not to let it show that my stomach lurched. That's why Genevieve got so upset when I asked about it. It wasn't just that I got her dad and brother killed. She lost her entire family to thieves like me, and I was probably the living reminder of it. The reminder she was stuck with. I didn't care that it was a setback to getting her to forgive me. It just made me feel even guiltier now than I did before. She'd already been justified in hating me, and this was yet another connection for her to make.

"You don't have to tell me about your family if you don't want to," Blake said, because I hadn't yet responded to his answer.

"It's okay," I said reassuringly. I hadn't talked about it once since the beginning of the infection, but if I was ever going to, now was the time. Maybe he'd tell Genevieve, and maybe she'd understand why I was scared enough to choose being with the raiders over being alone. "You remember the week of the outbreak? How it all happened so fast?" Blake nodded in recollection. "My dad came home sick one day and shut himself in his room. It was right at the time we started seeing it all over the news, the military mobilizing, and the anchormen telling people not to go to the hospitals because they were overcrowded." Blake nodded

again, and I could tell he remembered it perfectly. "My mom wouldn't let me see him because she wanted him to get enough rest. I was in my room the next night," and I tried to remember what I'd been doing, it was so long ago, "I don't know, practicing on my piano or something, and I heard a scream." Blake was watching me intently now, and I saw him scoot a little bit closer on his log to mine, like he was getting ready to come over.

"By the time I got downstairs he'd bitten my mom and oldest sister," I continued. "Right as I got there he," he tore a chunk out of my other older sister, "He bit my other sister and turned on me." The only weapon I could find in the house was that hammer, sitting on the dining room table because my mom had been putting nails in the wall to hang a painting. "I begged him to stop. Told him he was scaring me." There'd been tears streaming down my face. My dad hadn't looked like the Ferals did now, so emaciated and mangy they hardly seemed human anymore. My dad had been so sick he hadn't even changed out of his business suit. It made me want to hug him, like I did every day when he came home from work. "But you know how it is, there's nothing left in there. I hit him with a hammer, I only wanted to hurt him, to make him stop, but he just kept coming. Kept coming and coming until I'd hit him so many times," I took a deep breath, barely able to say it even now, "He bled to death."

"After that I collapsed." Went so completely catatonic the only evidence I was even alive was my constant sobbing. "When I recovered my mom and my sister, Millie, were just waking up. The fever killed Becca." My other sister. "I could tell they weren't right, you know? They had the same look in their eyes that my dad did. So empty." I looked Blake in the eyes for the first time, and seeing that he looked like he wanted to hug me, I glanced away. "I wasn't as scared of them coming after me like my dad did. I was scared of killing them like him. Slow. All I had was the hammer, but I made it fast."

"Echo," Blake said softly, and then it seemed like he didn't know what to say. "That's horrible."

I held back tears, trying not to take offense at his accusation. "I've done more horrible things than that."

"What?" he asked in confusion, and a moment later he swiftly moved to my side. "Not *of* you. *For* you." When I looked up at him, when I saw the sincerity on his face, a single tear slid down my cheek. "You know it's not your fault, right?"

It felt like my fault. "If there's a cure," I told him, knowing it was one of the soldiers' biggest missions, "Then it was for nothing." He just shook his head, still appearing unable to find something to say. At least my tears were done. I didn't want to seem too vulnerable. "Anyway, it was a long time ago. Genevieve just knows which buttons to push." He still didn't say anything, and when I glanced over he was studying me. "What?"

"I can't figure you out sometimes," he said, stretching his legs and leaning back on his hands. "Obviously you're a raider," he continued, twitching his mouth up in a half-smile as if to say 'no offense'. "And it's obvious what that means, and I can see why you're dangerous." He gave that smile once more before shrugging. "But then you start talking, and if I try to read you I can see the regret." Blake glanced over at me again for a brief moment, and then he gave a soft sigh. "It's like you're two different people, and I can't figure out which one of you is real."

"Most the time I'm not sure either," I admitted, rubbing my hands together and then sticking them out to the fire again. "But there are two things I'm sure of." I paused to look at him, and he was raising his eyebrows curiously. "The regret is real, and I'm going to make it up to Genevieve or I'm going to die trying."

His eyebrows dropped thoughtfully, and he took in a breath to speak, but then closed his mouth to think some more. Eventually he took another gulp of inquisitive air. "No offense, but why do you care so much if G-"

"You get an hour of freedom," Genevieve interrupted, scaring both Blake and I enough that we swiveled around to face her. "And you sit here the entire time with McMahan?"

"I walked around a little," I told her with a chuckle, grateful for the interruption so I wouldn't have to answer the question Blake had been about to ask.

"Did you eat?" she asked, and when I nodded she motioned for me to come with her. "See you later, Blake." I heard him say 'bye' as I strode away with Genevieve. She was carrying a small burlap bag in her hands, and she held it up to explain what it was for. "We're going to get some herbs. You wanted me to teach you, right?"

"Yeah." I was kind of surprised she remembered, seeing as when I asked she'd given me one of those dirty looks that always let me know I should shut up. "I'll carry the bag," I offered. Even though there was nothing in it, and I doubted herbs would make it heavy, I wanted to start doing little things to make her see that I wasn't as bad as she thought. Maybe it would put me on a faster track to forgiveness. "What was that hour alone about, anyway?"

Genevieve turned toward the river, looking over at me while she handed me the sack and answered, "It was Captain Greely's idea." Blake was right. "He thinks I'm starting to trust you."

That got me curious, and even though I didn't want to ruin the fact that she'd started off the day being nice to me, I had to ask. "Are you?" We reached the river, and started downstream toward a spot where there were large rocks we could use to cross without getting wet.

"Nope," she answered, but I knew it was a lie. If it wasn't that she'd given my knife back and let me keep my bobby pins, it was that she was less consistently hostile toward me. Lately she only got furious if she was in a bad mood or if I said or did something that triggered it. To be honest, it was still often, but not as often as when I first got here, and that was progress.

When we reached the rocks I hurried ahead of her and crossed first. The last stone to the bank wasn't far enough to leap, but it was far enough away that it was a stretch. With the rocks being wet and slippery, it was easy to fall. Even though I was the clumsy one, as Genevieve reached it I held out my hand to offer her help. Forgiveness… and maybe a little bit attraction…

"I'm okay," she declined, hopping off the rock to the muddy bank and looking at me like my offer was incredibly bizarre. She watched me

looking at me like my offer was incredibly bizarre. She watched me awkwardly for a couple more seconds before continuing forward. "Lesson one," she said a few minutes later, dropping onto her knees in front of a patch of purple flowers. "Chicory."

I squatted at her side, watching as she dug around one of the plants until she could easily pull it, roots and all, out of the dirt. "What's it for?"

She brushed off as much dirt as she could and then dropped it into the sack I was holding open for her. "The leaves are edible," she explained, starting to dig out the next one. "And sometimes the coffee we drink at breakfast isn't coffee." When she pulled the next plant out of the dirt she pointed to the root. "You brew these instead."

"Really?" I asked in shock, studying the plant when she handed it to me. I dropped the chicory into the sack, standing as Genevieve put one more in too. Then I held out my hand for her again, offering to help her up. This time, out of pure thoughtlessness, she took it, and only after she was on her feet did she give me that same, unsure stare. "Did that guy teach you this stuff?" I said hurriedly, trying to think back to when she'd mentioned something about this, since it looked like she was trying to find a reason to get mad about my being so helpful. "Cap's friend?"

"Connelly," she confirmed, and began leading me further into the woods. "He taught a few of us before he died. It's helped a lot." She'd been turning her head side to side to scan our surroundings, and now she pushed herself onto her tiptoes to see over a large shrub. "Today's our lucky day," she said with a smile, veering to the left. I followed her to a bush filled with red spots, and she immediately picked one and popped it into her mouth. "You're not allergic to raspberries, are you?"

I shook my head and held out the bag so she could drop some of the fruit into it. "Just strawberries." While she picked some of those I noticed another plant nearby, growing up the side of a tree and that had some kind of berries on it, greenish and small. "What are these ones?" I asked, reaching out to pick one and show it to her.

"Don't touch that!" she hollered, scaring me so badly I jumped back like the plant would bite me. "Did you touch it?"

"I don't know," I said, panicking a little by the tone of her voice. "What is it?"

"Poison ivy, you dumbass," she told me. I was holding my stiff hand out in front of me, and through an amused laugh she asked again, "Did you touch it?"

"Are you messing with me?" I glared because she was laughing, but she shook her head, and I figured it must've been the look on my face that she found entertaining. "I don't know. A leaf might've touched the back of my hand." I was so panicked now I wasn't even sure.

She was still laughing, but she looked around again. After searching for a minute she walked a few feet away to pick another plant, and then came back. "Show me where."

I gave her my hand and pointed with my other. "Oh God, I'm going to get all rashy."

Genevieve chuckled and grabbed a water bottle out of her backpack to rinse the spot off. "Shake it," she instructed, and after I shook the water away she pulled my hand closer, using the sleeve of her sweater to dab up the rest of the liquid. Once it was dry she took the knife from her thigh. I immediately tugged away, thinking she might cut me, and after snorting with laughter she used it to split the stem of the plant she'd picked. Then she put the knife back and prompted me for my hand. "You'll probably be fine," she assured me, delicately rubbing the inside of the stem over the place I'd showed her. "Just don't touch anything else without asking me first, okay?"

"Thanks," I nodded, though I couldn't help staring at her while she dropped my hand. I liked when she touched me without throwing a punch. She could be so gentle when she wanted, and it felt so natural.

She noticed I was staring at her, and uncomfortably pointed to the plant to distract me. "Poison ivy, remember what it looks like." Then she held up the leaf she'd picked and motioned back toward where she'd gathered it. "Jewelweed, rub it on right after and it prevents a rash."

"Got it," I told her, and picked up the bag I'd dropped in my fright. "What's next?"

She started back in the direction we'd been heading before finding the raspberries. "We'll keep looking for stuff." I didn't say anything for a while after that. It was probably all in my head, but my hand was itchy, and I was still kind of afraid of getting a rash. It kept me distracted enough that I forgot about Genevieve until she spoke to me again. "What were you and Blake talking about?" I raised a curious eyebrow at her, wondering why she asked. "When I got there you both looked at me like I was interrupting something suspicious."

"Just random stuff." She interrupted something suspicious, that's for sure, and lucky for me, too. The last thing I needed was Blake knowing just how much I cared. "I can see why he's your best friend. He's a great guy." As I answered my eyes wandered to Genevieve's backpack. I'd forgotten mine at the tent, so the only thing I was carrying was the small sack of plants. She had the bag and her rifle over her shoulders, and I noticed that the rifle bumped into her hip every step she took. To continue my forgiveness routine, I added as a brief side note, "Is your backpack heavy? You want me to carry it?"

"Okay, what are you doing?" she asked skeptically, swiftly turning on her heels to face me.

"What am I doing?" I asked, even though I knew what she meant. I'd taken the routine too far, made it too obvious, and now it had weirded her out.

"You keep trying to help me with things, and talking about Blake like he's an angel." She was glaring at me. Perfect. "You're being freakishly nice. Stop it."

"I can't be nice?" I scoffed in amusement.

"No," she said seriously, and then that word I hate slipped off her tongue. "You're a murderer. You're not nice."

"I'm not a murderer, Genevieve!" I yelled instinctively, forgetting all about my goal of making it up to her as I felt the start of an offended anger.

"Really?" she asked sarcastically. "Have you ever killed anyone when it wasn't self-defense?" I just scowled at her, because she made it so much more black and white than it really was. "It's a simple question," she said impatiently when I didn't supply an answer. "Yes or no?" My silence answered for me. "See," she pointed at me. "Murderer, ergo, you can't be nice."

She turned to walk away, but now I was mad. "Don't pretend like you know anything about me," I growled, and in aggravation stomped after her.

"You're right." She turned on me again, getting more irritated now than I was. "I don't know anything about you. Where is the girl I used to know? She was nice."

"Forget it," I mumbled, because her bringing up who I used to be was like a blow to the stomach. I'd give anything to still be that girl.

"She never would've killed anyone," Genevieve continued, taking an aggressive step forward when I took an intimidated step back. "Hey," she tapped me on the forehead. "Are you in there?"

"Okay," I brushed her hand away, trying to get her to stop because she was causing a crushingly guilty pain in my chest.

"I wonder what she'd say if she could see you now," she told me, and then she tapped me on the forehead again. "Come out. I want to talk to you."

"Stop." I pushed her hand away more forcefully. "I get it."

But once she found a way to get to me, she rarely relented until it was too late. "Are you in there? Huh?" And she tapped me harder. "I want to ask her myself how disappointed she is." Tap, tap, tap. "Hello?"

"Genevieve, stop!" I shouted, growing so provoked that I put my hands

on her shoulders and shoved her back. "She is disappointed!" I yelled before she could recover and try to start a physical fight with me. "I know what I've done, and it kills me! Satisfied?"

"No, I'm not satisfied!" she hollered angrily. "I want you to suffer for the things you've done."

"Are you that fucking blind?" I asked, throwing up my hands in frustrated exasperation. "I suffer every day! But I had to choose between killing and dying!"

"I wish you chose dying!" she quipped bitterly, and even though I knew she felt that way about me, it still hurt.

"Congratulations," I said forlornly, trying not to let it show just how much that stung. "Because you're starting to make me wish I had too."

She just blinked at me, as if she never expected me to say that. I was surprised to see her eyes get watery, though I was sure it was mostly frustration. "I hate you, Echo," she told me quietly, but it didn't sound like she was telling me. It sounded like she was telling herself. Like she had to convince herself it was still true, because God forbid she feel a little damn sympathy.

"I'm working on that," I responded honestly.

"Don't." She blinked away the tears and looked me dead in the eye. "It won't work."

She turned and began to walk away, and I opened my mouth to try and find something to say. Before I could get anything out, a familiar smell stopped me. It was slight and swift, blown by on the breeze, but it was so familiar that I knew what it was instantly. "Genev-" I didn't even get to finish saying her name before something slammed into her, and she disappeared into a nearby bush.

I was there before her and the Feral even hit the ground, and it almost had its teeth on her arm when I pulled out my pocketknife. I used my booted foot to kick the thing off of her, and the moment it landed on its

back I threw myself on top of it, leading with my blade. It roared for only a second when I plunged my weapon into its chest, and then it expired. Genevieve had scrambled up, and now she was holding her rifle, scanning the area around us for more Ferals.

"Any more of you?" she asked loudly, trying to attract them with noise if there were others. I got up and stood at her side, waiting to see if anything else would come at us. "This is not good," she mumbled after a minute, glancing back at the lifeless creature. Then she tapped me on the arm. "Come on."

Keeping up with her was a struggle as she sprinted all the way back to camp, and then into Cap's meeting tent. He wasn't happy to hear about what happened, and even though security had already been doubled because of the Ferals found before, he added more people to patrols, including Genevieve and I. I didn't like thinking of what it could mean. I'd only just found this salvation of a camp, the last thing I wanted was for us to have to leave because Ferals were starting to wander into the woods.

Genevieve and I patrolled for what seemed like a couple hours before she finally said anything to me. It felt like she'd been in deep thought the whole time, probably pondering the same fears I had – it was obvious she loved this place more than anything. "Thanks," she said, "For saving me."

That hadn't been what I was expecting. "You don't have to thank me."

She gave a small shrug and adjusted the rifle over her shoulder. "You could've let it eat me."

"So Cap could kill me for killing you?" I chuckled at how ridiculous that was. "No thanks."

"You could've made something up," she told me. "Told everyone you did everything you could, that way they'd still let you live here. Life would probably be easier for you that way."

That's what she'd been thinking about this whole time? It sort of cancelled out her gratitude, the fact that she thought I'd really do

something like that. "Genevieve," I sighed in frustration, stopping and turning toward her so she'd take me seriously. "Don't you understand that you rescued me by bringing me back here?" She didn't look fazed by it. She didn't care. "I'd take a bullet for you."

"Maybe one day you'll get a chance," she mumbled, continuing along the path of our patrols.

"The Feral didn't change anything?" I asked in disappointment as I hurried after her. Saving her had been instinct, but since then I was kind of hoping it would get her to forgive me some, or at least trust me more.

"You killed my family." She looked back at me long enough to give me a fierce scowl. "Stabbing a Feral doesn't make up for that."

She was walking faster, just like she always did when I made her mad, and in my attempt to keep up with her I almost tripped on a large fallen branch. "Doesn't it make you like me even a little?" I asked optimistically, regaining my balance and jogging to catch up. She stopped to face me, glaring with an angry frown.

"Gratitude, Echo, that's all you're going to get," she said irritably, grumbling as she walked away again, "Take it or leave it."

I sighed once more, trudging in the direction she'd stormed off ahead of me. "Take it." I guess it was something.

All Right

Revolution by The Beatles

All Right

Dugan

"Weapons?" I asked, glancing over my rifle to make sure the magazine was full.

"Check," Kara answered, doing the same with her shotgun.

"Backpacks?" I adjusted the straps of the one I had over my own shoulders.

"Check."

"And food," I said, and both Kara and I looked into the duffel bag we'd scavenged specifically for food, that way we could carry as much of it as possible.

There was more of it left in the basement than we could fit into the duffel bag, and we could have stayed in the basement until all of it was gone. It was the only guarantee of a sure meal for an extended period of time. But our end goal was to find that camp in the forest if it actually existed. The food here in the basement was a sure thing, but it wasn't long term. We'd have to leave eventually, and both of us were impatient to continue our journey. Besides, the time we'd spent here gorging ourselves had been more than enough to recover our strength. We were refreshed and ready.

"Check," Kara confirmed, looking up at me to see what was next.

I tossed the duffel bag on over my backpack, setting the strap horizontally across my chest so I could tighten it as much as possible. It was a bit uncomfortable, but this position was more stable if we needed to run than to have it dangling at my side. Plus, with all the cans in it, it

was too heavy to carry on one shoulder the whole time.

"Let's do it," I said, taking out my knife while Kara held her fire axe at the ready.

With that we eased open the basement doors, poised at the entrance for a minute to make sure no Ferals were going to come running at us. Finding that the coast was clear we started our retreat out of town, keeping to the shadows until we reached the highway, and then ducking behind car after car to avoid detection. In order to get across the country we had two options – take Interstate Forty all the way across, or use smaller highways that were less direct. Seeing as the Forty was a popular Interstate, I thought it would be best we take less frequented roads, that way there wouldn't be as many cars to be wary of.

Eventually we reached the first of the small highways we'd be traveling across the country on, and I was pleased to find our calculations were correct. There wasn't a car in sight for miles. We strode along at the middle of the road in silence for a while before I happened to glance up. I almost stopped walking just so I could take in the brilliance of the star-specked sky above us.

"What are you doing?" Kara asked when my staring upward had caused my pace to slow.

"Looking at the stars," I told her, and then resumed looking straight ahead to keep up our pace. "I was just thinking about how we couldn't really see any of them where I used to live. Before the outbreak."

"Where was that?" She stopped walking and tilted her head straight up to take it in.

"Los Angeles," I answered.

She nodded like she knew what I was talking about, and said innocently, "In Hollywood."

"Yeah," I agreed with a chuckle. "Close to Hollywood."

She nodded again, resuming her pace down the highway so I could follow along. After a few minutes of silence she began to hum to herself, and it wasn't long after that I recognized the beat.

"What are you singing?" I asked curiously.

She shrugged, perhaps because she didn't know what it was called, but then she sang shyly, "We all want to change the world, but when you talk about destruction…"

I knew the song well, so I finished the next line for her. "Don't you know that you can count me out."

She looked over at me with a smile, and even though her voice remained quiet, she continued in a playfully high pitched squeal, "Don't you know it's 'gonna be!"

"All right," I continued the lyrics, though that was all I could get through because I was laughing so hard at how her voice had sounded. "How do you know that song? It's way before your time."

"My dad used to sing it all the time," she said through a giggle.

"You know who it's by?" I asked, to which she shook her head. "Did your dad ever tell you about The Beatles?" Again she shook her head, and I sighed with exaggerated disappointment. "They were legends!" I told her excitedly. "One of their biggest singles had over seven million sales. And they spent more time than you could imagine on the top charts." I glanced over at her to see if she could even comprehend what I was telling her, and I couldn't help but laugh. "And you're looking at me like… a teenager who has no clue what I'm talking about."

"Sorry, I like the song though," she chuckled. "Did you ever watch them play?"

"Well," I started, and then gave an embarrassed but amused huff of breath. "I was sort of too young too." She laughed at that. "Have you ever heard the real thing?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I think so, because I can imagine the tune in my head, but I can't remember ever hearing it other than when Dad would sing it."

Kara had been so young when all this happened that she'd practically grown up in a Feral-infested world. It made me curious what she could recall. "Do you remember anything from before the outbreak?"

"I have a couple memories," she answered. "Like when I got stung by a scorpion in the backyard, or when Dad got me a little robot dog for my birthday. But nothing really," and she hesitated to find the right word, "Important."

"What about your mother?" I asked, since I hadn't so much as heard her mention it since I'd found her.

"She was in jail," she said slowly, like she wasn't sure. "I think. My dad didn't really talk about her too much."

"Oh," I mumbled uncomfortably, not exactly sure what to say to her about that. Her gaze wandered toward me at my discomfort, but though she seemed to notice, she didn't seem affected by it, almost as if she didn't recognize it as something to be ashamed of. I guess it wasn't, anyway, seeing as prison didn't exist anymore. "Well, I think anything we can remember is important," I assured her.

She nodded in agreement, setting the fire axe over her shoulders and hanging her arms over it lazily. "Do you have a favorite memory?"

"I had a lot of time to make a lot of memories," I told her with a sad, reminiscent sigh. "But the one that comes to mind is the day my daughter, Christina, was born."

"That was a happy day?" Kara asked knowingly.

"Happy," I repeated with a laugh. "I've never been more terrified in my life. Maybe you'll know one day," I said, and then added protectively, "When you're much, much older." Kara snickered amusedly. "It's scary to love something as much as you love your kids. She'd be your age, if…"

At that we were silent for a few minutes, and then Kara asked quietly, "Does it get easier?"

I glanced over at her, somewhat surprised by the melancholy tone of her voice. Kara acted so strong all the time I often forgot that she'd only recently lost her family. "Yeah," I answered softly, and then paused thoughtfully to really consider whether that was true. "Yeah, it gets easier."

Right after I answered she grabbed my arm and stopped walking. I was worried she was finally going to have an emotional breakdown, until she pointed further down the road. "Look."

I squinted through the dark. It appeared that there was a light less than a mile away, dim and orange enough that it might be a fire. In order to see better I raised my rifle and pressed my eye to the scope. Sure enough, it was a fire, dimmed by the fact that we were seeing it through the windows of some vehicles that had been set horizontally across the highway to block it off. Because there were cars in the way, I couldn't see how many people there were, or what kind of people.

"We'll head off the road a little bit," I told Kara, nodding toward the stretch of desert on our right. "We can get close enough to see if maybe they're other survivors, but we'll stay out of sight in case they're bandits." If they were survivors that seemed nice enough to approach, maybe they'd want to head east with us.

Kara gave her approval, and we started off the road until we'd crossed over a small hill so we weren't visible from the highway. In tense anticipation I kept my rifle in both hands instead of slinging it back over my shoulder, and Kara did the same with her axe. I walked along at the side of the hill just enough to see when we were coming up on the camp, my feet sinking into the cold sand beneath me. Part of me was more worried about rattlesnakes than I was about the people, so I kept my ears alert for any warning of the reptiles.

Soon enough we were in line with the camp, and we both plopped onto our stomachs at the edge of the hill so we could look in. We discovered that the cars weren't just a line on the road, but that the people had

that the cars weren't just a line on the road, but that the people had created a complete circle of vehicles around their small camp. There were five of them, four men and a woman, and two large, mixed breed dogs. I couldn't tell if there were more, maybe lying down, because the vehicles hindered my view. They were all sitting in fold up lawn chairs around the fire. I used my rifle again to get a better look, searching for any weapons they might've had. One of the men was holding a machete in his lap. Against two other chairs were leaned a police baton and a steel baseball bat. The others might have weapons, but I couldn't see them.

"What do you think?" Kara asked in a cautious whisper.

"It's too risky," I answered quietly, looking over at her in the dark. Just because they had a woman with them didn't mean they weren't bandits. It seemed only logical thieves would want to set up on a highway. "I think we should just keep going."

When I turned my gaze back toward the camp, one of the massive dogs was standing on the hood of a car, it's pointed ears directed straight at us. The people at the camp had grown silent, and the air was still enough that I could hear the dog growling.

"What do you got there, Rocky?" one of the men asked the dog, and in response it snarled our way. *Shit*. The canine knew we were here.

Before either one of us could react, another man clicked on a powerful flashlight, and I knew for a fact that the beam caught us before we ducked behind the cover of the hill.

"You there!" called a male voice. "Come on out." Kara looked at me questioningly, and I shook my head. "I'm going to count to three." He waited a moment to see if we'd comply. "One." I was hoping they'd think they were seeing things and forget about us. "Two." I heard what sounded like the scraping of nails against metal, and by the time the man said 'three' I could hear the snarling of the dog coming up the other side of our hill.

Kara and I hardly had a chance to scramble back before the canine came

leaping over the peak. It landed right on me, and I managed to grab the fur on both sides of its neck before it took a bite out of me. In using it's fur to push it away, all the dog's skin was being pulled away from its face, and all I could see were its slimy gums and dripping white fangs snapping together only inches away. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Kara wind up with her axe, and when she sent it flying into the dog's side the animal let out a deafening yelp.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" yelled one of the men in response to the canine's cry, and the next set of nails against metal was accompanied by some thuds, and I knew the whole group was jumping over their barriers to begin pursuit.

"Kara, run," I instructed, scrambling off the ground.

We both took off further into the desert, angry shouts not far behind. Even closer was the snarling huffs of the next dog, hot on our tails. The soft sand beneath our feet was a disadvantage for everyone, but even more debilitating was the large and heavy bag of food on my back. It caused each of my feet to sink further into the sand, and it made running near impossible. Kara was ahead of me, so when the next dog reached us it launched itself onto my back.

"Keep going!" I shouted as I lost my footing, because Kara had stopped and was about to backtrack.

I fell forward, feeling the duffel bag of food shift over my shoulder as the beast tore into it. Better the bag than my flesh, and at the same time that I shuffled out from under the bag I pulled out my knife. On my feet I sent the toes of my shoe at the ribs of the distracted dog, and even though I hated to do it, I plunged my knife into its chest so it wouldn't keep chasing us. Once I killed the dog I didn't have time to grab the food, because the first man was only twenty feet away. I left it where it was, and started sprinting in the direction Kara had continued, leaving the bandits behind.

"Keep running you bastards!" the man hollered, firing a gunshot in our direction. At least it didn't sound like he was going to keep following. "I'll skin you alive for what you did to my dogs!"

Keep running is exactly what we did, until I could barely breathe from pushing so hard. I put my hands on my knees and bent over, trying to catch my breath, while Kara threw the axe over her shoulders again and leaned back, heaving just as hard as I was. It was only a few moments before her eyes widened at me, and she pushed on my shoulder to turn me around.

"Where's the food?" she asked in panic.

"I had to let it go," I panted.

She strode a few steps in the direction we'd just come from, staring through the dark as if she could still see the road. "We have to go back."

"I know," I said, waving her off tiredly. "Give me a second." It wasn't just that I needed a moment to recover. I needed a moment to let it sink in what we needed to do in order to get our food back. There had to be a way other than killing them.

"Before they eat it all!" Kara complained, still panicking.

I couldn't help but laugh, and I set a hand on her shoulder to calm her down. "There's a lot of food in there. Relax, we'll get it back." She searched my face, and nodded compliantly. I sat down in the sand and threw my arms over my folded up knees to ponder. "We need to think of a plan."

Kara dropped down next to me, and we sat there for a while in pensive silence. "I think I got it," she said eventually, and I nodded for the young mastermind to continue. "One of us could be a distraction and lure them away from the camp again. The other one could sneak in and take the bag." I tilted my head while I considered her proposal, and she added, "I'll be the distraction."

"It's too risky," I told her. She was small, and her short legs wouldn't carry her far enough with every stride to outrun grown men.

"Okay, then I'll sneak in and grab the bag," she shrugged.

"It's too heavy," I sighed. "If they see you then you'll never be able to run away with it fast enough."

Kara sighed too, but she sounded aggravated. "You worry about me too much." I looked over at her curiously, surprised she was asserting herself. "If you're always worried about protecting me instead of letting me help you, then we'll both end up dead." I didn't say anything right away, so she added to aid her argument, "The plan to get the food in the first place ended up fine. Because we did it together." I took in a thoughtful breath, weighing the consequences of her plan, and of abandoning my wish to protect her for working as a team. "Dugan," Kara said impatiently.

"Alright, alright," I chuckled. She really was concerned about that food. "You can be the distraction. But once they start coming after you, you run like hell. Okay?" She nodded vigorously. "You remember the last road sign we passed, with the highway numbers on it?" Again she nodded. "That will be our rendezvous. As soon as you lose them, head straight there."

We immediately started back toward the camp, and when we reached the hill I pulled my watch off my wrist and handed it to Kara. "I'm going to head to the other side. Give me three minutes."

"Okay," she whispered in response, and I saw her counting down. "Go."

On 'go' I started sprinting down the road until I was far enough that they wouldn't be able to see me cross, and then I ran to the other side of the highway and to an opposite hill from the one Kara was crouched behind. The remaining seconds until she created a distraction were excruciating, and it felt like forever. Eventually I saw her appear at the top of the hill.

"Hey, assholes!" she hollered, throwing a handful of pebbles at them. "You took my food! What else do you want?"

All five of them stood, and when one of them shouted 'get her' they took off after the already retreating Kara. I'd been hoping they'd be dumb enough to forget there were two of us, but before leaving one of them told the female to stay and watch the camp. At least only one of them was

staying behind, and I grabbed a baseball-sized rock on my way down the hill. I crept to the side of the vehicles without being spotted because the woman was staring after where the men had disappeared. Then I straightened up and pulled my arm back, mentally apologizing before I let the rock fly. It was right on target, and after it struck the woman on the back of the head she dropped with a thud.

I put a hand on the hood of a car, about to vault myself over it, when a gunshot sounded from somewhere over the hill. My head whipped in the direction it came from, and I felt all the blood drain from my face. I'd chosen the wrong part in this plan. It should've been me that was the distraction, that way all Kara would've had to contend with was this woman. Despite the panic-stricken void in my thought-process, my feet kept moving. I jumped over the vehicle, grabbed the duffel bag of food, and immediately started running back toward the rendezvous point.

When I got there, Kara was nowhere to be found, and my panic multiplied. I dropped the duffel bag on the side of the road and began pacing worriedly. Working as a team. She's still a child for Christ's sake. I never should've let her do that part. How could she outrun a grown man? And if they caught her, then what? At the thoughts of what could happen to her if they kept her alive I nearly got lightheaded, and I sat down at the edge of the highway.

I stood again a minute later. I couldn't just sit here. If they'd captured her they'd probably take her back to their fire to keep her there. I had to go back and rescue her, and if they had her then I couldn't be picky about killing them. In order to make sure the food was safe while I went to look for Kara, I began to move it further off the road where I could hide it.

"You got it!" exclaimed an excited voice from behind me.

I swiveled around, almost collapsing with relief because the sigh I let out was so deep. "Are you okay? What happened?" I asked hurriedly. "I heard the gunshot."

"I'm fine," she answered. "I hid, but one of them found me." She glanced away like she was afraid I'd be mad at her. "I had to shoot him."

"Oh my God," I said through another sigh of relief. I was so glad she was okay that I wanted to pull her into a hug. Instead I rubbed my hands over my face, and after I'd thrown the duffel bag over my shoulder I gave her a pat on the back. "I thought it was you."

She shook her head. "I was wondering why you looked so scared when I walked up."

"Kid," I laughed, starting to lead her back into the desert so we could go the long way around this time. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'll try," she assured me. "Especially since you're old enough I got to worry about a heart attack." She'd started giggling before she even finished her teasing, and she laughed even harder when I tried to give her a shove, and she easily danced away. Still grinning she resumed her place at my side, singing happily and in a high pitched voice, "Don't you know it's 'gonna be!"

"All right," I finished with a chuckle. Everything sure was.

Chilled to the Marrow

Riverside by Agnes Obel

Chilled to the Marrow

Genevieve

"Hey, Dad," I greeted my father with a smile and a hug hello, and then tossed my backpack onto the kitchen table.

I noticed he was working over some new kitchen appliance, but before I could question him about it he asked, "How was practice?"

"*It was fine," I answered, and as I hopped up onto the kitchen counter my little brother came running in.*

"*Genevieve!" he shouted excitedly. "You want to play PlayStation with me?"*

I nodded happily and hopped down, but my dad stopped me before I strode off. "At least take your muddy cleats off first, please," he said, pointing back in the direction of the front door. I turned the way he pointed, and he whispered after me, "And come back here real quick when you're done."

I did what he'd told me, and once I returned to the kitchen I leaned back against the counter at his side. "What is this thing?" I asked, finally setting a hand on the small appliance he was working over.

"*It's a juicer," he answered, motioning to all the vegetables he had laid out on the counter on the other side of him.*

"*A what?" I chuckled.*

"*A juicer," he repeated, laughing at the skeptical crease in my forehead. "You drink the vegetable juice it puts out to get more nutrients faster. It's*

healthy."

"*I'm healthy," I assured him, making sure to pout my lips in disgust when he handed me a cup of green liquid.*

"*It's not for you," he whispered, making a deliberate glance toward the living room where Micah was. His whole life my little brother had been a little sickly. There wasn't really anything wrong with him according to the doctors. He was just frail.*

Too bad my dad hadn't told me that before I took a sip. At the bitter taste that washed over my tongue I nearly choked, and set the cup down on the counter so I could pat my chest soothingly. "I am so glad that's not for me."

"*Well," my dad mumbled hesitantly, "In a way it kind of is…" I raised an eyebrow at him for explanation. "I already tried, but he won't drink it." And he picked up the cup, trying to hand it to me again. "Not unless you can convince him."*

I took a sniff of the drink and nearly gagged. "This might just kill the kid," I laughed.

But he didn't find it as amusing as I did. "Gen, I'm at my wit's end," he sighed pleadingly, stressfully massaging his fingertips over his eyes. "If he misses any more school because he's sick…"

I let it sink in for a few moments what I thought he was implying. It'd been eight years since my mom died. My father had recovered as much as I ever thought he would, but sometimes I could tell being a single dad was harder on him than he let show. So I tried to keep on a cheerful smile. "Fine, but you at least have to put some apple juice in here or something."

"*It's processed," he complained when I opened the refrigerator to grab a jug of juice. "That defeats the point."*

I put the green juice into a bigger cup and then filled the rest of it with sweet apple juice. "It defeats the point if he won't drink it at all," I pointed

out, tasting the new concoction. It still wasn't great, but at least it didn't make me want to hurl. I waited before leaving to see if my dad would agree. He nodded, but his gaze had fallen to a spot on the floor across the kitchen, and he was lost in some sad thought. "I love you," I told him, wrapping one arm around his waist to give him a hug. "You're the best dad in the world."

He stared for another second before forcing a smile and returning the embrace. "Thanks. Love you too."

I held up the drink as I started walking backward toward the living room. "If I have to bribe him, you owe me twenty bucks." I was glad to see a genuine laugh light up his face. "What are we playing?" I asked my brother as I plopped down on the couch beside him, purposefully setting the drink down on the coffee table where he could see.

"*Madden," he answered, handing me the second controller. Then his eyes wandered to the cup. "What's that?" he asked skeptically.*

"*Veggie juice," I told him, picking it up and taking a small gulp. He visibly shuddered when I did, and remembering what my first taste had been like, I couldn't blame him. "Here, try it."*

He hesitated at first, watching my face for any sign of disgust, and then he slowly reached for the glass. He took a tasteful sip, and smacked his lips in repulsion as he handed it back to me. "No thank you."

I chuckled at his reaction and playfully waved the drink in front of his nose. "Come on, drink it. It'll make you faster than me."

"*No one's faster than you," he said, cocking his head at me like he was scolding me for the bluff.*

"*You could be," I suggested, trying to hold back a laugh at his attitude.*

"*Liar," he smirked knowingly.*

I sighed in defeat, and seeing no other way, I set the cup down. "Okay, real talk?" I offered, lowering my voice and leaning in like I was going to

tell him a secret. He nodded with interest. "Dad's worried about you," I admitted, and I could tell he instantly got as serious as I was. "And if you miss more school then he could get in a lot of trouble."

"*Like," Micah started hesitantly, his eyes full of concern, "With the principal?"*

"*With people more important than the principal," I told him honestly. "Do you remember when you broke the vase that Dad gave Mom for their anniversary? And you were really sad so I told him I kicked a soccer ball into it, and I covered for you so he wouldn't get mad at you." Micah nodded with recollection. I instantly felt bad for the sorrowful look in his eyes, but he was getting too old to be tricked into things. I had to start telling him the truth. "This is kind of like that, okay? We have to cover for him so nobody gets mad at him, and all you have to do is drink juice."*

"*That's it?" he asked, glancing at the cup on the table.*

"*That's it," I confirmed.*

He started to reach for it, but still hesitant, he took a deep breath and pulled back. "Are you sure this'll work?"

"*It's worth a shot," I told him with a shrug, and he gave an unwilling sigh. "Tell you what," I said, and I grabbed the glass of liquid. "I'll drink half of this one, and next time, whenever you have a cup, I'll have one too. Deal?" He studied me for a minute like he was trying to discern whether or not I was lying, so I added, "Me and you are always taking care of each other, but sometimes we have to take care of Dad too."*

At that he glanced toward the kitchen where our father was, and then he nodded dutifully. "Deal."

I chugged half of the beverage, and then watched in triumph when my little brother swallowed the rest of it.

…

A metallic click woke me in the stillness of the morning, and I lay quietly

for a second before moving to see if I could pinpoint what it was. A moment later there were a few more noises, and I knew Echo was cuffing herself back to her cot. Being as clumsy as she is, she must've dropped them on the floor, and that's what I'd heard at first. I'd woken up really early the other morning and seen that she'd taken the handcuffs off at night. I went back to sleep, and woke up a little later to find that she'd put them back on. I wasn't sure how long she'd been doing it for, but that was three nights ago, and I'd been waking up early every day since then to discover the same thing.

"Don't bother," I told her, and turned in my bed to face her.

Her eyes were wide with fright, like she was expecting me to get furious about it, but I couldn't. Maybe even a week ago I would've been furious, but the truth was that lately I didn't have the energy to get as mad about the little things. Most the time it was easier not to give a shit.

She'd frozen when I turned to face her, and her hand hovered over the cuffs, still prepared to lock herself in. "Are you sure?"

Today was already one of those days where it hurt just to look at her, so as I turned onto my stomach to bury my face in my pillow I mumbled, "Whatever."

I could hear Echo drop the cuffs after a whole other minute, like she'd finally decided I wasn't joking. "What do you want me to do with them?" she said, sounding hesitant, sensitive as always to my mood.

I answered without picking my head up, "Put them in my backpack."

"Huh?" she asked, since the pillow had muffled my words beyond recognition.

I lifted my head just long enough to say brusquely, "Just put them in my backpack," and then I dropped my face again.

She got off of her cot and shuffled around a bit, but after she zipped my backpack up and set it back on the floor things went silent, like she was just standing there. "Are you feeling okay?" I didn't answer. For one, I

didn't like that she sounded genuinely concerned. Nor did I want to explain that she was the cause for my mood. "Genevieve?" she pressed, but still I gave no response. She waited another minute before asking again, "Are you sick?"

After her question she touched my shoulder, either trying to be comforting or trying to get my attention. "No," I answered in aggravation, and when I angrily pushed myself up she pulled her hand away, startled by my sudden movement. "I'm not sick," I told her, shoving my feet into my boots and not bothering to tie them before I threw on my sweater. Once that was on I slung my rifle over my shoulder, picked up my eating utensils, and hurried out of the tent.

Even though it was later in the morning, it was still pretty cold. Cold enough that if I could bear seeing Echo's face right now I would've gone back into the tent to grab my winter coat. Instead I pulled the hood of my gray sweatshirt over my head, thankful for the slight warmth it offered. I was actually surprised that Echo hadn't caught up with me yet, seeing as whenever I stormed off she usually followed. Nor had she reached me yet as I got to the breakfast area. But I didn't think she'd take too much longer since I hadn't told her she could stay alone, and I knew she still got pretty nervous whenever I gave her a little freedom. I wasn't surprised to see Kellan eating with some of the other soldiers. We'd all had night patrols last night, so I was sure he'd slept in too. In hopes that Echo would find somewhere else to sit so I wouldn't have to interact with her when she arrived, I plopped down uncomfortably close to Kellan's side, knowing she generally liked to avoid him.

Kellan's face lit up when I sat next to him. "Morning, LT."

I just gave him a nod in acknowledgment, not really in the mood to talk to him yet either, and when the other soldiers around greeted me, I repeated the motion. Soon after that Echo finally arrived, and while she didn't sit down at the same table as I did, she was within eyesight, and I did my best not to look at her. I don't know why some days hurt more than others. There were the occasional good days when I could put up with her, though most the time I was angry or annoyed. Every once in a while I'd get one of these days. Before Echo showed up there'd be times

my dad and brother would cross my mind, and I'd miss them. Now that she was here, I think those times resulted in this, where no matter what she or I did, her presence caused me pain.

I glanced over one time after I'd finished eating, only to find that Echo had finished too and was just sitting there, waiting to see what I'd do. I'd only been half listening to the conversation going on around me the whole time anyway, so I stood, and with my utensils in hand I started toward the river to rinse them. As I walked there was the softest crunch of footsteps following behind me. It still impressed me that for being so damn clumsy Echo was incredibly light on her feet. She didn't say anything while she trailed me to the river, or when she knelt at my side to wash her own dishes, or the entire way to the meeting tent so I could talk to Cap. When we got into the tent she silently made her way to her usual corner, while I gave Cap a nod in greeting.

"Morning," he said, smiling a little too cheerfully for the mood I was in. "How'd patrols go last night?"

"Fine," I answered with a nonchalant shrug. "No Ferals."

It had been over two weeks since we'd doubled up on patrols, and I hadn't heard of a Feral being around since the one Echo saved me from. At that reminder, I stole a stealthy glance back at her. She'd already been leaning her head against the wall out of boredom, but when she noticed I was looking at her she lifted it up and gave me the smallest of apprehensive smiles. Normally I'd glare, or turn back to Cap with attitude so she'd get the point, but right now, with that sad feeling in my gut, all I could do was slowly move my gaze away and return my attention to Cap.

"That's good news," Cap said happily, and then switched to a different topic. "Second Platoon is on a supply run." I nodded knowingly. They'd left a few days ago, and with how much they were supposed to be loading up they probably wouldn't be back for a few more. "I'm sending you guys out as soon as they return. It's going to start snowing soon." I already knew why he was sending us out, but he said it again anyway, "I want to make sure we have enough supplies to last us the winter."

"Sounds good," I agreed. Usually our vehicles did an okay job getting

through the snow, but weather was unpredictable, and it never hurt to be prepared for the worst. "You know where you want us to go?"

He reached for the map he always kept on his table, and spread it out as he answered, "I wanted to discuss it with you. You know better than I do the spots we've picked clean."

I stood up to get a better view of the map. The reality of the situation was that we'd pretty much picked clean every city that surrounded our forest. "We're going to have to travel," I told Cap, putting my palms flat on the table and leaning over the paper. "If we want to check out big cities, we could head to Hartford." I pointed to Connecticut. Big cities were the only places I knew for sure had supplies left over. Sure, it was more dangerous, but all the Ferals in the area usually made it less appealing to mass scavengers like us.

"That's a long journey," Cap mused, and as he examined the map Echo stood and shuffled over to my side. "If you're up for it, I don't see a problem."

"We don't have to go that far," Echo said before I could respond. I didn't much care what she had to say, but Cap appeared interested, so she continued. "I was all over Rochester, and it was always the suburbs that were easiest to pick from." She pointed to a spot on the map, opposite of the direction I'd been heading with my assessment. "Have you guys hit Webster?"

"No," I answered.

"Can we go there?" she asked.

But I'd meant no, as in I wasn't taking her there. It was too close to Rochester, and I didn't trust her enough yet to put her too near her old raider buddies. "We're not going to Webster."

"Okay," she mumbled unsurely, studying the map again. "What about Fairport?"

"I'm not taking you near Rochester," I growled impatiently. I was aware of

Cap's watching the exchange, but he didn't say anything, and I knew he didn't want to interfere since Echo was my responsibility. He trusted me enough to make the call.

Echo watched me for a few seconds thoughtfully. "Oh," she said, as if finally understanding my motive. "I don't know any suburbs on this side of the map…"

After the outbreak and leaving Rochester with Cap, we'd practically gone rural. The only times I'd gone into the city was to get supplies. Even though I hated Echo giving input, she had survived *in* the city for the last six years. If anyone knew the best places to find supplies, I believed it was her. So I glanced up at Cap. "Do you know of any suburbs in this area?" I asked, using my finger to make a circle around the area south of the forest.

Cap pursed his lips, scratching at his beard thoughtfully while he examined the area I'd pointed to. "Maybe here," he said eventually, setting his finger down. "At Clifton Park."

While I nodded I committed the spot to memory, that way I could look at my own map later and figure out the best way to approach it. "Okay. Anything else you need?"

"Not really," Cap shook his head. "But you can find out from April which medical supplies she needs the most."

After saying goodbye to Cap I strode toward the medical cabin, hearing Echo follow along behind me. Since I hadn't so much as looked at her after listening to her input, it seemed she knew to leave me alone. April was in the cabin with Casey when I got there, and I waved at both of them in greeting.

"Hey," I said from the door, just sticking my head in because I wouldn't need to stay long. "Can you guys start putting together a list of supplies you need? We're going on a run once Second Platoon gets back."

"Sure thing," April consented happily, and after a thankful smile I ducked out

out.

Lately, after we had night patrols, we'd been taking the day off. The last thing I wanted to do right now was relax in the tent or outside at the fire where Echo might feel more obliged to talk to me. I couldn't handle it today, and for some reason the fact that I was in this mood was frustrating, which only made it worse. Instead of resting I grabbed a burlap sack from the food storage, and with Echo still following behind me I headed into the woods to forage.

"We aren't taking the day off?" she asked knowingly, finally sounding like she just wanted to make conversation.

I didn't answer her, and knelt down to gather the first of the useful plants I'd spotted. She was quiet for a minute, picking some of the plants on her own, but when I held the bag out to her so she could put her spoils in it without so much as looking at her, she spoke again. "Are you mad at me?"

Without saying anything I continued on, stopping at the next small herb I spotted.

"Is it about the handcuffs?" she asked timidly. "Are you mad that I took them off?"

With something of an annoyed groan I immediately turned back toward camp. It didn't seem like she was going to let this go, and the only thing I wanted now was to get back to camp so I could dump her on Blake and have some time to myself. We weren't even really out of the camp's boundaries yet, and we'd hardly even gathered a handful of plants, but I didn't care. That sense of betrayal I felt just hurt too much today.

"Genevieve?" Echo pressed. I sighed and sped up, we were so close to my tent now that I could see Blake sitting at the fire, and Casey was already sitting there with him. "Did I do something wrong?" Echo asked as she jogged to catch up, stopping me only twenty feet from my relief.

"Yes, for Christ's sake," I groaned in exasperation, finally turning toward her. "When are you going to get it through your thick skull? You killed my family. Just leave me alone."

family. Just leave me alone."

"Genevieve, I'm sorry," she whined, holding her hands out in sudden vexation.

Up until now I'd been in too low a mood to get angry, but like it always did, that word set me off. "Stop apologizing!" I shouted, and I could tell after how quiet I'd been so far that it startled her, because she flinched. Even Blake and Casey turned around to look at us in surprise.

"What will it take then?" she asked, clearly growing frustrated. "What do I have to do for you to forgive me?"

"Can you bring them back?" I asked weakly. All the energy I had for anger had been expended in that one shout. Apathy was so much easier than being in pain. Instead of giving the obvious answer, Echo exhaled in defeat. "Then there's nothing you can do. I'll never forgive you, I'll never like you, and I'll never *want* to be around you, so just give it up."

Echo's eyebrows furrowed with offense. "Dammit Genevieve, do you even remember what they looked like?" My eyes widened in shock at the question, and at my reaction she continued. "What color eyes did your dad have? Huh?" she asked angrily. My heart dropped. I knew the answer to this. I had a picture of them in the trunk in my tent. "Were they brown like yours? Or were they hazel?" I glared at her. It had been so long since I'd looked at that picture, and she was confusing me. "Hell, maybe they were a bright fucking blue."

"Stop," I begged. This hurt more than looking at her, because I should be able to answer these questions without a doubt in my mind. But it'd been so long.

"What about your brother?" she continued, too offended or mad to care about the pleading look in my eyes. "Was his hair black? Or brown?"

Both of those sounded right, and the crippling pain in my chest multiplied. "Stop it," I begged again, louder this time, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Blake turn around to face us completely, preparing to stop a fight if it got too out of hand.

"Was it curly?" she asked. "Or just a little wavy?" I could hardly stand it anymore. I was so confused. So ashamed. "Maybe it was perfectly straight."

"Stop!" I shouted pleadingly, unable to take any more.

I was too upset to control myself, and the only way I could see to stop her from talking was to hurt her. So I charged, catching her in the torso with my shoulder and taking her hard to the ground. It was obvious it knocked the wind out of her by the wheezing sound it made when she tried to suck in air, but I was so mad that I didn't care. I pushed up so I was sitting over her, and since she was too focused on trying to breathe to block anything, I hit her in the jaw. That snapped her out of it, and when I went to punch her again she dodged it. Immediately afterward she put her two hands together, and bringing her arms down fast she slammed her fists so hard against my chest I went tumbling backwards off of her.

Blake came over at the same time both Echo and I darted up, grabbing my arm so I wouldn't go at her again. But I wrenched away from him, charging Echo and taking her to the ground once more. I was in the same exact position, but before I could throw another hit she grabbed my wrists.

"Genevieve, stop," she pleaded, struggling to hold on as I tried to tug my hands out of her grip. "I don't want to hurt you."

"That's all you ever do!" I growled through the agony, yanking my right arm hard and finally managing to pull it free.

Not a moment after I got out she released her other hand's hold on my wrist, pushing her upper body off the ground enough that she could wrap her arms around my neck before I threw another punch. Her shoulders met the dirt again as she brought me down with her, and she had such a tight hold on me that I couldn't get enough leverage to punch her. I still tried. The only part of her I could reach while she held me like that was her ribs, but I still threw my fists into them as hard as I could. I knew it hurt because her clutch on my neck tightened each time with pain, but it wasn't enough to get her to release me.

"Please," Echo begged. When my hitting didn't work I squirmed, trying to wiggle out of her arms. "I'm so sorry."

I was so hurt, and mad, and frustrated that I could feel tears stinging my eyes. I pushed against the ground so forcibly it lifted us both a couple of inches, but she still wouldn't release me. "Let me go!" I hollered pleadingly, pushing up again and then purposefully falling on her hard as we both hit the dirt, hoping it would get her grip to loosen.

"I'm sorry I got them killed," she huffed, when as I dropped us to the ground again it knocked some air out of her.

My frustration had peaked, but her final apology brought back double the severe pain I'd been feeling all day. Brought back the agony she'd made me feel only a minute before. "Let me go," I begged again, pushing more frantically as I felt the first few tears run from my eyes. "I hate you. Let me go." I only struggled for a couple more seconds before my next words came out a sob, "Echo, please."

I couldn't fight anymore. I was too exhausted. I collapsed onto Echo, completely giving up the idea of getting free on my own and unable to try anymore through the fatigue and the tears. I couldn't even get a word out. I just lay there, frustrated sobs causing my chest to heave against hers. She'd gotten so still once I collapsed, but now her grip loosened on my neck, and even though my face was buried against her shoulder, I could feel her turn her head to look at me.

Maybe she was in shock that I was actually crying, maybe she wasn't sure if it was a ploy to throw her off guard, but since she'd loosened her hold and I was no longer struggling, this felt too much like a hug. I couldn't deny it was a relief to let the tears flow. I'd been holding them back since she got here, and I felt some of my frustration subsiding. But not Echo. It couldn't be. I couldn't let it be her who comforted me. Not when she was the one causing all this misery.

"Let me go," I begged again through a final sob, and even though she didn't loosen her grip any more than she already had, reluctant to release me, she didn't try to stop me from pushing up. "I hate you," I sniffled. She lifted herself onto her elbows after I was hardly on my knees and still

lifted herself onto her elbows after I was hardly on my knees and still practically straddling her, looking like she wanted to say something, so I shoved her back down. "Just leave me alone."

I used the sleeve of my sweater to wipe the tears from my eyes as I raced past Blake and into my tent. However, once I'd buried my face in my pillow more forced their way out. It was only for a minute though, and then I frantically stood back up and threw open the lid of the trunk, digging things out until I found the picture I'd taken from my house in Rochester. I hugged it tight to my chest for a little while, and then held it out so I could look at it. So I could remember that they both had black hair just as straight as mine. That my dad's eyes had always been the same brown as mine, but Micah's were a muddy green. I hadn't forgotten, and I felt so relieved now that I was sure.

"Genevieve?" Blake's voice practically whispered from the entrance of the tent, and a moment later he strode in. He'd sat down on the cot by my side before I even tore my eyes away from the picture to look at him. "Are you okay?"

All I could do was glance back down at the picture and shrug. I wasn't sure how to answer that question. 'Okay' was such a vague term. Physically? Mentally? Emotionally? The answer to all of those was 'I don't know'.

"Why do you fight with her like that?" he asked a minute later, when he realized I wasn't going to answer. His voice was so soft, like he was trying desperately hard not to upset me. "You're making this so hard on yourself."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked desperately. "How am I supposed to act toward the girl who killed my family?" If this were before the outbreak, I'd never be forced to interact with her. Nobody would ever have to be in my situation. I knew life was never fair, but this was bullshit.

"It's just…" He sighed, hesitant to be putting himself in the middle of this. "You knew her before. You know she's not that person. She's not a bad guy."

"You don't know how bad I wish I could believe that, Blake," I told him, setting my elbows on my knees and propping my head up in my hands. That was the truth. I wanted to believe it, but it took a certain person to be capable of doing the things that raiders did, and Echo had proved herself more than capable. "But you don't understand how much it hurts just to be around her. Every time I look at her all I can think is that it's her fault they aren't with me."

"She wasn't the only one there," he offered.

"But she's the only one *here*." I looked up at him, to see if he even understood just a little, and whether he did or not, he nodded. "It's so much easier to be angry all the time than it is to be hurt. And you want to know something?" I took a deep breath, not really bothering to wait for him to give confirmation. "Lately both of those just get so exhausting, and I can't feel anything. And it scares me."

I could feel his hazel eyes on me, taking it in, thinking about what to say. "It doesn't help at all knowing how bad she feels?"

"Sometimes it does," I told him honestly. "For a little bit." When she'd make me forget about the raider. When she was just the girl from high school. But it never lasted. "But I don't know how I'm supposed to forgive her. And don't tell me you honestly believe I should be able to get over it."

He shook his head to let me know he didn't think that. "It just sucks. I'm used to being able to cheer you up just by making a cute face at you." At that he gave me a playful nudge, and I couldn't help but smile a little.

"It's the thought that counts," I said, nudging him back with my shoulder. He chuckled, seemingly happy that he managed to somewhat lift my spirits. I did feel a little better, not as mad as I had been. Really it was just that apathy sinking in.

"You want me to stick around?" Blake asked.

"It's okay," I answered, feeling like I wanted to be alone. "You're watching her though, right?"

He knew I was talking about Echo, because he nodded as he stood and headed toward the door. "She's been sitting outside with me and Casey."

After I gave him a grateful smile he ducked out, and I lay back on my cot to rest, the picture still in my hand. Stretching out like this I could feel that my chest was bruised where Echo had hit me, and after about fifteen minutes of massaging it, it had almost led me into a daze. I was in such a calm state that it hardly even bothered me when Echo walked in and sat on my cot, right next to where I was lying. My eyes were half closed sleepily, but I felt so laid back I just watched her, waiting for her to say something. She wasn't facing me. She was sitting on the edge with her hands on her knees, staring across the tent to her own bed.

"I shouldn't have said those things to you," she said eventually, still without looking at or facing me, and instead she glanced down at her hands. "It was wrong, and cruel, and I was out of line."

It seemed in her apology she'd purposefully avoided saying the word 'sorry', like she knew it would make me upset. "I remember what they looked like," I told her, somewhat indignantly as I reached around her with the hand that was holding the picture, and she flinched when I dropped my arm into her lap. Her gaze immediately shot back to the opposite side of the tent, where she couldn't see the photo. "You can't even look at it?" I asked flatly. She didn't respond, so I lifted my arm in order to drop it into her lap again. "Look at it," I instructed.

Echo took a deep breath before hesitantly dropping her gaze to the photo. After she'd taken it in her gray eyes followed my arm up to my face, and when they met mine they were moist. There was so much genuine pain in that glance, pain worse than what I'd been feeling all day, that there was a little part of me that felt guilty for making her look at the picture. It caused me to pull my arm away, that way she wouldn't have to see it anymore.

"I'm glad you remember," she said after the minute it took to blink away the tears. "I can't." I didn't know what to say, and when I gave no reply she looked at me again, as if to discover whether or not I was mad at her yet. But this wasn't the raider, and then there was the fact that ever since Blake had told me about what really happened to Echo's family, I'd made

Blake had told me about what really happened to Echo's family, I'd made it something that was off limits to pick at her about. No matter what she'd done to me, bringing them up and making her feel guilty about it was wrong. I swore never to do it again, no matter how badly I wanted to hurt her. "Do you ever dream about them?" I shook my head. "That's the only time I get to remember."

All I could see was Echo's profile, but I couldn't miss the tear that ran down her cheek. In response, and because of how she was acting right now, because of who I felt like I was talking to, I reached around her again, and this time I put my hand on her thigh in an attempt to be comforting.

It seemed like it was a thoughtless instinct, but once I did her hand immediately landed on top of it. She didn't seem to notice she'd even done it, since she was preoccupied at the same time with sighing, "But it fades so fast."

Then her thumb caressed the tops of my fingers, and her gaze lowered as if feeling it for the first time. She pulled her hand away and, clearing her throat, rapidly stood. Echo's delayed reaction to my offer of consolation struck me as odd, and I could've sworn her cheeks tinted a shade of red. That was it though. Just that sudden shift through something of a rejection of my comfort, and the girl I used to know was gone. Like always, the shift caused a prompt change in my mood, and I was ready to be alone again.

"Anyway," she started uncomfortably, turning just enough to look at me, and her eyes darted briefly toward my hand. "I just wanted to tell you that I was wrong."

"Okay," I responded impatiently, folding my hands behind my head. Her face twisted in confusion at my change of disposition, like maybe she thought just moments ago that she'd made actual progress with me. But she'd never make real progress with how I felt about her, and now I regretted being nice even for a second.

"Okay," she repeated in a sigh, and then she was gone out the entrance of the tent. I sort of just stared at the flap-door after she disappeared,

feeling entirely weird about how that whole conversation had gone, wondering why Echo had acted so awkward. And I hated that I was even curious.

Punishment Called Life

Breathe by Delilah (Cally D remix)

Punishment Called Life

Echo

"*Have you seen my gun?" I asked Valerie as I hurriedly dug through my backpack, and then got down on my knees to check under the velvety red seats. Our group was staying at a movie theater now, which was nice since even though we were still in the heart of the city the walls were pretty sound proof.*

"*Where are you going?" Valerie asked curiously, picking up a piece of clothing to check beneath it. Finding it there she grabbed the pistol, and began to stride over to hand it to me.*

I reached out for it as I answered, "On a raid. Miles spotted a group."

She handed the weapon over, but I could tell it was reluctantly, and a moment later she gave a slight protest, "We were supposed to meet soon."

"*Can we do it tomorrow?" I asked, glancing over her shoulder toward the exit, knowing the others were probably heading out the door already.*

"*What about your hip?" she asked, pointing to where I'd been stabbed. It was recent, but if I was healed enough for sex then I was healed enough to go on a raid. It seemed more like she was trying to find an excuse.*

"*It's a big group," I justified. "They need me." I made a move for the center aisle.*

She stepped in my way. "Is Victor making you go?"

"*No," I answered, and when my stomach rumbled violently I impatiently*

looked toward the door again.

"*Leon?" she asked, and I shook my head, growing slightly irritated by her interrogation. "You volunteered?"*

I nodded, instantly seeing her mouth turn down in dissatisfaction. At first I just thought she was upset we wouldn't be meeting, but then I caught the real emotion behind the look. "Hold on," I said in shock. "It sounds like you're judging me."

She folded her arms over her chest defiantly. "That's because I am."

"*Wow," I chuckled, but it wasn't amusement, it was offended disbelief. "I never figured you for a hypocrite." When she just shrugged I held out my hands angrily, frustrated that she was doing this to me now, when time was limited. "We've been on tons of raids together."*

"*Yeah, but you hate going," she said, stepping in the way when I tried to bypass her again. "You've never volunteered to go. Ever."*

"*I haven't had a solid meal in over two weeks, Val!" My voice was rising, my frustration with Valerie and my offence at her judgment were being aggravated by my severe hunger. "I'm starving."*

"*That's not supposed to matter to you!" she hollered pleadingly, and I don't know why, but this was so upsetting to her that her eyes were watery.*

"*What the hell does that mean?" I asked in confusion.*

"*You're not like them, Echo," she said, begging me softly now. "You're one of the last good people in the world. You're supposed to be the one person that hunger and violence don't affect because you're better than that. Don't prove me wrong."*

"*Valerie," I sighed, "I'm not just hungry. I'm starving. I feel weaker every day, and I know you do too. This is survival." A tear slid down her cheek, but she made no move to let me pass. "Please, Val, move." She lowered her gaze and shook her head. "You'd rather we starve to death than let*

me go on one simple raid?" When she offered no response my frustration swelled again. "Move." I was determined to go on this raid. Determined to make sure part of the spoils was ours, because it was first come first serve, and the burning in my stomach wouldn't let me think about anything else. Couldn't she see I was doing this for her? "Move!" I shouted angrily. This wasn't me. It was the hunger talking, yelling. But I couldn't control it.

"*No," she said quietly, flinching when I threw up my hands angrily. She stood there like it was so easy for her to ask me this, but in the tense silence I heard her stomach rumble, betraying her indifference to the hunger.*

"*I know you're hungry," I told her in annoyance, hoping it would get her to finally move. I'd have said or done anything to get some food. "I'm doing this for you."*

"*Don't do that, don't make this about me," she spat as if I'd offended her. "I won't be your excuse."*

"*I'm going on this raid," I growled, my voice rising again. "I'm going to get something to eat, now move!"*

"*No!" she yelled, eyes narrowing at me.*

"*Goddammit, why do you care so much?" I hollered desperately, unable to comprehend in my exhausted state why she would choose this over sustenance.*

"*I think I love you," she whispered while another tear fell from her eye. That snapped me out of it enough that I straightened out of my furious pose, and I blinked at her a couple times in shock. I opened my mouth, unsure even if anything would come out, but she interrupted before I could try. "Don't say it back, I know you don't love me."*

It was true. I didn't love her. I cared about her more than anyone that was left on this godforsaken planet, but it wasn't love. Nor would I have thought she felt that way about me. I'd always just figured we were all the

other had left. We were convenient, available, a needed companion in a lonely apocalypse. If it weren't for the outbreak we never would have met, and she never would've been the kind of girl I'd take an interest in. As much as I hated to say it, and as much as it made me feel like a hypocrite, she wasn't strong enough. She let the guys bully her and wouldn't accept my help. She wouldn't even use a real weapon other than that stupid wrench. This was the first time I'd ever even heard her raise her voice.

"*Why'd you say it then?" I asked, still thrown and unsure of how to respond.*

"*Because," she answered, finally pushing past me to grab her backpack off the floor. "If I mean anything to you, you won't go on the raid." She started for the door, but turned back one last time. "I'll be at our normal spot. If you go with them," and she looked away like she couldn't say it to my face, "Then I hope you know you deserve that tattoo." She ran out the door before I could try and stop her.*

"*Argh!" I shouted furiously the second she was gone, turning to my side and kicking the fold up seat of a red theater chair.*

Once the seat stopped rattling I sat down and put my hands to my head. The frustration along with the cramping pain in my stomach made my eyes well with tears. I hated the tattoo, just like I hated going on raids, but I was desperate. This wasn't the first time we'd gone hungry like this, but food was getting so scarce that it was the first time I was happy to go on a trip that I hated. I sat there for at least ten minutes thinking about it, though I was sure part of my starvation had something to do with my slow thought process. Despite the torment, I knew Valerie was right, and so I instantly stood and hurried after her.

I strode through the dark city as quickly as I could without rushing unsafely, but for some reason there were a couple Biters roaming around, when usually I could go out without encountering a single one. It slowed me down considerably, and added at least five extra minutes to my walk. Eventually I was nearing the alley I always met Valerie at, and I stopped in my tracks when I got close enough. There were noises. Biter

noises. And a scuffle. Then, before I could even sprint forward to help Valerie if she needed, everything went silent. Now I sprinted, not caring if I made a sound, and when I reached the entrance of the alley I could barely see her, bending over and using the wall for support as she lowered herself to the ground.

"*Val," I whispered, rushing forward and kneeling at her side.*

"*You came," she smiled, but her voice sounded forced.*

"*I came," I assured her as I pulled out my flashlight and shined it down on her. "Oh God," I whimpered at her blood-covered body. There were Biters lying around. She'd killed them all, or at least knocked them out with her wrench, but not all of the blood was from the Biters. I knew that because when I touched her stomach some oozed out over my hand, and she had more than one bite mark on her bare arms. "Val," I whined, tears filling my eyes. Through the blurry water in them I glanced at the gash in her stomach again. It wasn't a bite mark or a scratch, it looked like a knife wound. "What happened?" I asked, frantically applying pressure to it to try and stop the bleeding.*

"*It's okay. Listen," she said through a cough, ignoring my question. "I didn't mean what I said. I'm sorry. You're not like them, you'll never be like them."*

I didn't like the way she was apologizing, like she had to because she knew it was over. It made me unable to contain the tears anymore, and I wiped the flow away with the back of my bloodstained hand. "Don't apologize. Okay? Let's go, I'll fix you up at the theater."

I tried to lift her off the ground, but she gave a pained whine and stopped me. "Let me have your knife." I gave it to her, and she pressed it back into my hand. "You have to do something for me."

"*Stop it." I knew immediately what she wanted, and I shook my head as more tears streamed down my dirty cheeks. "You're going to be fine," I cried, and then like she was punishing me I begged, "Please don't do this. I'm so sorry I yelled at you. I'll do better. Please, Val." I wouldn't ever*

yell at her again. I could try to love her.

"*You have to, I got bit. Promise me," she said weakly, and after looking at my face her own eyes filled with water. "I'm too scared to do it myself."*

"*I can't do it again," I pleaded, clumsily holding the knife while I tried once more to apply pressure to her stomach wound.*

"*Promise me," she repeated sternly.*

I could see that she wasn't going to change her mind about it, and she wouldn't be able to do it herself. But even though I didn't think I could do it, I couldn't just leave her here, not so she could bleed to death slowly. Not so she could turn into a Biter. As much as it killed me, I nodded. "I promise." I buried my face against her neck, desperately trying to get as much time with her as I could, but I could feel her gulping air in shallow breaths, and her skin was already burning with a fiery fever.

"*Echo," she whispered, and when I looked at her she asked, "What's your real name?" Four years, and nobody in the group except for Leon knew it, not even Val. But she deserved to know, and when I told it to her she grinned, letting out a happy huff of breath even though it sounded painful. "I like it better." Then she took my hands away from her stomach to hold them in her own. "You've done things, and you're going to have to keep doing things," and she used one of her fingers to point at my chest, "Keep her here. You'll get out of here some day, and when you do, you won't have to be Echo anymore." I nodded, but she didn't seem satisfied. "Keep her safe," she said seriously.*

"*I will," I assured her eagerly, and a moment later she moved my hand with the knife toward her heart.*

I was about to protest, but in the moment it took me to let out a sob she gave me a look that reminded me I'd promised. I nodded to let her know I'd do it, and with a fond smile she raised one hand to cup my face. Shutting my eyes tight to squeeze out the tears I leveled the pointed blade to her heart, and then, trying not to think about exactly what I was doing, I gave it one hard push. Valerie's eyebrows shifted with the

slightest cringe of pain, but it was clear she was trying so hard for me not to let it show. However, I already regretted it, and my mind was instantly flooded with thoughts that she could've made it. That she could've survived the knife wound and fought the infection.

In a moment of panic I pulled the blade out, grabbing her hand with one of mine while my other dropped the knife and pulled her head to my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Val." I hugged her to me, and felt a weak arm go around my waist. The guilt was overwhelming. Maybe if I'd come sooner. Maybe if I'd asked her to just stay at the theater with me. "Don't go. I'm so sorry." I could love her. We could leave together. I didn't want to be alone. "Please." A moment later she went limp in my arms, and through sob after sob I apologized again and again.

"*Echo." The voice startled me, and I fell onto my backside as I swiveled around to face it.*

"*Victor," I said, wiping a tear off my cheek only to have it replaced by another. "You scared me."*

He ignored my surprise, and stayed standing near the entrance of the alley. "I always knew there was something between you two."

My heart dropped. The knife wound. "What did you do?" I asked accusingly.

"*I pulled out all the stops for you, Echo," he continued. "I knew you were fucking her."*

"*Did you do this?" I asked, my despair being increasingly replaced by a blindingly bitter rage. I forced myself onto my feet and pulled the pistol out of the back of my pants. "What did you do, Victor?" I asked fiercely.*

"*I did what I had to, you little slut," he growled. He'd hardly finished his sentence when a loud bang clapped through the air, and I lowered my gun as he dropped to one knee. He had his hands over his other leg, holding the seeping bullet hole I'd put in his thigh. "Echo," he said in shock as I bent over to grab my pocketknife. When I had that in my*

pocket I reached for Valerie's backpack, because I knew she always had rope in it. Victor had stood to start agonizingly making his way to me, and I let him get close enough that I was sure not to miss as I put another bullet through the same leg. "Fuck!"

After I slung the rope over my shoulder I picked up Valerie's wrench and strode over to Victor. Right as I reached him he was trying to pull his own gun out of his jeans, but before he managed I hit the side of his head with the wrench, just hard enough so it wouldn't knock him unconscious. I grabbed his weapon and tossed it away, and then I aimed my own at him again.

"*Get up, you worthless sack of shit," I commanded. This wasn't Echo anymore. This was something worse.*

He struggled to stand, but once he had I pushed him toward the entrance of the alley. I was sure there were Biters on the way because of the gunshots, and now I was feeling pressed for time. "Hurry up," I ordered, pushing him again and almost causing him to stumble over his injured leg.

I forced him out of the alley and a few feet to the nearest street lamp, and then I smashed my fist over the holes in his thigh to make him fall again. When he dropped to his knees I pushed him back against the pole and hit him in the head once more with the butt of my gun, just so he wouldn't struggle. I pulled the rope off my shoulder and yanked his arms behind the pole, and then I wrapped it tight around his wrists, locking him to the metal. A couple jerks at the bindings confirmed that they wouldn't come undone, and then I strode around to the front.

"*You won't leave me here," he challenged with a pained grimace. In response I pulled the pocketknife from my pants and flipped it open in front of his face. "Echo," he pleaded at seeing how serious I was, "Don't leave me here."*

Instead of saying anything I used my knife to cut open the front of his t-shirt, exposing his bare chest. I didn't hesitate to dig the blade diagonally through his skin. Didn't hesitate when his blood mixed over my hands

with Valerie's or when it made him scream. Didn't hesitate to do it again the other way to form a crimson 'x'.

"*I wouldn't be so loud, if I were you," I told him coldly, just to rub it in, to taunt him, and he quieted his whimpers to look up at me as I stood. "I already see some Biters coming."*

That was the truth. There were a couple sprinting down the street toward us, and without saying another word to Victor I slipped into the shadows. He'd be enough of a distraction that I didn't think any of them would come after me. I was right, none of them did, and even from a block away I could hear him scream. I could only stand it for a second, and then I started sprinting, trying to get as far as I could so I wouldn't have to hear it anymore. Running like that it didn't take long for me to reach the theater, and when I walked in everyone was already back from the raid.

"*Food!" someone shouted to me from the concession stand. A volunteer to share was something new, but I wasn't even hungry anymore.*

"*Echo," Decker said as I passed the counter. "Whose blood is that?"*

I stopped walking and looked down at myself. It was all over me. My clothes, my arms, and surely my face. "Valerie," I whispered. Some of it was Victor's.

He chuckled, "About time that dyke kicked the bucket."

My face burned instantly with replenished fury, and in the split second it took me to calculate what I could threaten Decker with so that he'd take me completely serious, I stormed over, grabbing so fiercely between his legs and squeezing so relentlessly hard there were tears in his eyes. I could see one of the guys start over to come to his aid, so I pulled out my pistol and pointed it at him to warn him otherwise. "If I ever hear you say that goddamn word again," I told Decker, taking satisfaction in the agonized red hue of his face. "Then I'll cut these off in your sleep. Understand?"

He nodded, and I shoved away from him to rush to the bathroom. When I

got there I hurried to the sink and pulled a water bottle out of my backpack. A brief look into the mirror showed me just how covered in blood I was. Mostly my shirt and my arms, but there was plenty on my face, and upon seeing it fresh tears made muddy stripes down my cheeks. I wasn't going to bother trying to clean my shirt, and I pulled it over my head and threw it into the garbage.

My hands were shaking so badly that I could barely unscrew the cap of the bottle, and it didn't help that my eyes were so blurred with tears I could hardly see. When I did manage to open it I dropped it in the sink, spilling some of its contents down the drain. Frustrated, and panicked, and scared, I growled and threw my fist at the mirror. Instead of shattering it my hand made a web of cracks in the glass, but I had so much more emotion to let out. So I turned on the stall wall beside me, pounding my arms and sliced knuckles against the metal until I was so tired my chest was heaving and the pain was too much.

Valerie was dead. The only person I had in this world was gone. And why? Because of Victor. Because of one possessive, delusional asshole. But what I did to him was wrong. God it was so wrong. I could still hear him screaming. Still feel my knife cutting into his chest. Into Val's chest. I wanted to take it all back. I wanted to go back there and untie him. But it was too late. He was dead, and I killed him. I deserved the tattoo.

When I could barely breathe through exhaustion and sobs I collapsed over the sink, using it to support myself so I wouldn't fall to the floor. After a minute I recovered enough to look up into the broken mirror. The frighteningly bloodstained face there was unrecognizable. It wasn't me. "Who are you?"

…

"Are you ready?" Genevieve asked, poking her head into the tent. I'd only half heard her since I'd been napping, so she spoke a little louder. "Echo, we're ready to leave."

I pushed myself up tiredly, glancing over at her and wondering how she was even standing. We'd had night patrols last night, and during our ground shift we'd stumbled across a few more Forals. Nobody got hurt

ground shift we'd stumbled across a few more Ferals. Nobody got hurt, but Genevieve was so disconcerted by it that she'd continued patrolling the borders of camp all day. I'd stuck with her as long as possible, but a couple hours ago I'd been about ready to collapse, so she'd let me come back for some sleep while she pressed on with another of her soldiers. Now that the sun would be setting soon it was time to leave for our supply run.

A shiver traveled down my spine once I pushed my blankets off, and while I slipped into my boots I looked at Genevieve again. She appeared exhausted, like if I took any longer to get ready she'd sit on her cot because standing up took too much of an effort, and if she sat down I was pretty sure she wouldn't have the energy to get back up.

"How'd it go?" I asked, trying to help get her mind off of how tired she was while she waited for me.

She'd been staring at the floor, but at my question her eyes wandered to me, and she blinked slowly. "It was okay," she answered, watching as I pulled on my dark green winter coat and then shoved my gloves into my backpack. It wasn't snowing yet, but it was cold enough to start, and I wouldn't be surprised if we had some within the week. "We didn't find any more Ferals."

I opened up the lid of the trunk near Genevieve's cot, pulled my pistol out, and checked the amount of ammunition in the magazine. "That's good news," I suggested, shoving the weapon into the back of my pants and then motioning to her that I was ready.

"Oh," she said as she remembered something, and before leading the way out she took her backpack off to pull something out of it. "I found this in the armory." She handed the item to me and returned her backpack to her shoulders.

It was a thigh holster for my pistol, one that fit perfectly around my leg. "Thanks," I told her while I buckled it and put my gun into it, genuinely surprised she'd thought of bringing it for me. "We match," I mused with a laugh, pointing to the knife sheath around her thigh. She smiled amusedly, and then gave a tired nod and turned to leave.

The moment I stepped outside the tent I realized the air had gotten about fifteen degrees colder since I'd lain down for a nap, so I pulled the fur-lined collar of my jacket up around my neck. Genevieve noticed the action, which seemed to remind her of the cold, because she pulled on the hood of the gray sweater she had underneath her brown leather coat, and shoved her own hands into the pockets of it.

"We have to do something about these Ferals," she said, her breath coming out a frosty fog in the icy air.

Even though she seemed to be in a decent mood, and I usually liked to talk to her during those times, the only acknowledgment I gave was a nod of agreement, and I didn't say anything else as we strode to the vehicles. I'd never been around her on so limited sleep, and I was a little afraid her temper might be a bit shorter than usual if I got too comfortable.

At the motor pool we got into the lead Stryker with Blake, Kellan, Garcia, and Jarvis, and before I knew it we were on our way. It was hardly ten minutes into the drive that Genevieve started slumping over in her seat at the computers, and once or twice I saw her head drop as though she'd fallen asleep. The third time she stood, motioning for Blake to take command for her while she trudged to the empty spot beside me. She immediately folded her arms over her chest and slouched down enough to kick her feet up on the seat across from us. I was just glad she was finally going to get some sleep, even if the drive was only a couple hours.

What felt like only a minute later we hit a bump in the road, and Genevieve must've already dozed off, because she fell sideways so that her head landed on my shoulder. I was afraid to move, not wanting to wake her or shift her, but I leaned forward just enough to look at her face. She was out like a light, and I couldn't help but let my lips curl into a fond smile. When I looked up again I caught Kellan's eye from across the vehicle, and my smile instantly faded. There was a scowl on his face that he made no attempt to hide when I caught him looking at me. In fact, it deepened. It had been obvious from day one that he didn't like me, but it seemed as though his attraction to Genevieve made him even more resentful. I wasn't exactly sure if he was intelligent enough to have

realized the way I felt about her, but when he looked at me, especially like he was now, it was obvious he knew there was something different about it.

Despite Kellan's expression, I didn't look away. I didn't want him thinking I was the type of person to be intimidated. Chiefly because in certain ways he reminded me of Decker, I wasn't going to take any shit from him. So I narrowed my eyes at him, and when in response his glare intensified, the grip he had on the rifle in his lap tightened simultaneously. That's when I looked away, because even though I had the urge to rest my head on the top of Genevieve's, just to tease him, I still didn't know him well enough to know how easily provoked he'd be.

I didn't make eye contact with him again the entire drive, and Genevieve didn't move a muscle until we got close to our destination and the voices coming over the radio woke her. She shifted her head a little and took in a deep breath, like she was still waking up and wasn't sure exactly where she was. Then she quickly lifted it up to look at me, and even in the dark of the vehicle I could see her cheeks tint, like she was embarrassed she'd been leaning on me. Instead of acknowledging me, or continuing to act embarrassed, she straightened up in the seat a little bit and rested her head back. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that she shivered, and after folding her arms more tightly across her chest I felt her start to lean into me again, only this time it was so subtle I wasn't sure she knew she was doing it. Kellan noticed though, and I'd underestimated the ferocity of his scowl.

For a supply run we had to drive the vehicles into the city, but fortunately the night seemed quiet, and as we pulled up there wasn't a Feral in sight. I jumped out right after Genevieve, and stood with her near the exit while the rest of the soldiers gathered around. Kellan hopped out shortly after I did, and I knew it was on purpose when he bumped into me so hard I shouldered Genevieve. Genevieve shot me a dirty look out of annoyance that I'd knocked into her, and with a defensive groan I motioned toward Kellan. She didn't seem to get it, or she didn't care, and when I turned to glare at Kellan he had a smug grin on his face.

Seeing as nobody was going to take my side on it, I decided to let it go. The first building we scavenged from was a large supermarket

The first building we scavenged from was a large supermarket. Genevieve and I guarded the outside like we usually did while the other nineteen guys cleared out the inside. Once the inside was empty of Ferals, Genevieve and I went in to help gather anything that would be of use back at camp.

As I followed her down the aisles, it was clear there wasn't going to be very much food to find, but there were other supplies. I'd silently trailed Genevieve down the cleaning aisle, and while she used the red beam of her flashlight to gather some soap I stopped at the batteries on the opposite end. I only managed to get a couple packs into my bag before there was a soft thud, and when I glanced over Genevieve was sprawled out on her back on the floor.

There were no Ferals around, nor anything I could see on the ground that she'd have tripped over, so I strode toward her with an entertained smile on my face. "And you think I'm the clumsy one," I whispered in amusement, but the moment I reached her I figured out why she'd fallen.

A bottle of liquid soap had been knocked off the shelf, broken, and now the fluid was all over the tiled floor. Too bad I didn't figure it out soon enough, because I'd hardly finished teasing her when I slipped in it too, and of course I landed right on top of her. Luckily, she didn't seem annoyed by it. She snorted with laughter.

"Dumbass," she chuckled quietly. "Are you okay?"

Falling on top of Genevieve had saved a majority of my body from hurt, but I was still in so much pain I could barely answer. "Smacked my knee," I managed in a half grunt. "I need a second."

"I get that you're in pain," she murmured, and then her hands landed on my hips to give me a questioning push, "But could you get off of me and then recover? My rifle is digging into my spine." The moment she touched me I completely forgot about the pain, and I pushed myself up a little to look at her. "What?" she asked expectantly, gaining a bit of the annoyance I'd been expecting. "You hit your head too?"

Was it weird that I wanted to kiss her? The urge felt weird, until when I

failed to say anything she sort of just stared at me. The annoyance disappeared from her eyes, and instead they wandered over every inch of my face curiously, no doubt wondering what I was thinking. She no longer appeared impatient, or mad, or uncomfortable that I was so close. Maybe it was all in my head, but I could've sworn I even felt her thumb absentmindedly stroke my hip.

It was the worst idea I'd ever had in my life. I knew she hated me, and if I did it then she'd probably at the very least smack me. But figuring how she hated me, what did I have to lose? Hell, maybe it would even confuse her enough that she'd stop acting like such a bitch all the time. I was about to go for it, but a deep, concerned voice carried down the aisle. "Genevieve?" It was Kellan. "Everything okay?" And then he appeared a few feet away from us.

Genevieve must've been embarrassed about being found in the position we were in, because she didn't wait any longer for me to recover. "Get off," she mumbled impatiently, finally pushing against my hips hard enough to roll me off of her.

I lay on the floor for another few seconds after she got up and walked away to let the pain in my knee completely subside. Then I stood to find that Kellan was still there, glaring at me as fiercely as he had been in the vehicle. I tried to ignore him and continue on my way, the last thing I wanted was any kind of altercation, but when I tried to pass him he stepped in front of me. When he refused to move I sighed, and slowly lifted my gaze to his face.

He didn't look like he was going to say anything to me. It appeared he was content trying to be intimidating. To let him know I wasn't afraid of him, I smirked and whispered teasingly, "Jealousy's not a good look for you."

His jaw clenched furiously as he stared me down, and I was just beginning to worry he might try something violent when he brushed past me and stomped off.

Seeing as all I really wanted was to avoid Kellan, I was ready to let the whole thing go. The rest of the night, however, I discovered he wasn't so

whole thing go. The rest of the night, however, I discovered he wasn't so eager to do the same. It wasn't just the dirty looks I got the whole time either. Whenever he handed me a box of supplies that we'd gathered to load up in one of the vehicles, especially if it was a heavy one of building materials for cabins, he roughly dropped it into my arms. Twice I dropped the boxes, and he kicked an item away as I was picking it up. Every time he passed me he bumped me like he did exiting the Stryker. All of these while Genevieve had her back turned. I hated taking shit from him. The only reason I put up with it was for Genevieve, and he seemed to know it.

We got back to camp at daybreak, and enough people were already stirring that there were volunteers to unload the supplies instead of us having to do it. Casey was even up and waiting for Blake at the fire between our tents. I was glad to be back, where I could avoid Kellan, and I thought he'd get over being a jackass when we returned. But on his way to his own campsite he tramped through ours, deliberately bumping into me one last time. I snapped.

"Hey, asshole," I barked before he got even four feet away. "Do we have a problem?" Blake and Casey had been hugging in greeting, and Genevieve had just entered the tent to set her backpack down, but when I said that Blake and Casey looked over, and Genevieve poked her head out of the tent curiously.

Kellan stopped in his tracks, turning back toward me with a pleased look on his face that let me know he'd been hoping for a reaction. "Do you want one?" he asked savagely, taking a step in my direction.

I wasn't afraid of him. I was fairly certain he wouldn't pull his gun on me – so far he didn't seem like the type – and I was almost positive I could kick his ass even though he was at least five inches taller than me. "You want to hit me?" I asked in response to his advance, taking my own aggressive step forward. "Go ahead. The only person it's going to be a problem for is you."

"You've got to be kidding me," Genevieve grumbled, moving between us and pushing me back. "Knock it off," she told me seriously.

"What?" I asked, in disbelief she was scolding *me*. "He's been harassing

me all night!" Kellan had that smug fucking grin on his face again, and it made me so mad that I tried to sidestep Genevieve to get at him. Genevieve just shoved me back again, harder this time.

"Let her try something, LT," Kellan told her, and now that he was fueling the fire I saw Blake start to come over. "I'll beat that raider attitude right out of her."

I tried to get past her again, and after pushing me away once more she turned on my rival. "Kellan," she said, pointing a furious finger at him, "Walk away." He opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off with a fierce glare. "That was not a request."

His eyes narrowed at me, but he turned the other direction, grumbling indignantly as he did, "Yes, ma'am."

Once he was gone Blake relaxed and sat with Casey near the already blazing fire, and Genevieve began to walk away. However, I was still so fired up that I yelled after her, "Hey!" She should've let me kick his ass.

She turned to face me, looking completely unconcerned about what just happened. "What?" she asked boredly.

I stammered, unsure of what to say since for once she actually looked prepared to listen to me. "I didn't start that," I told her, knowing how she loved to blame things on me.

"I know," she said, and then raised one eyebrow like she couldn't figure out what I was getting at.

"Well…" I was thrown. Did she know the whole night that he was trying to provoke me? "Why didn't you make him stop?"

"Do you want him to think I'm actually starting to like you?" she asked rhetorically. "How would that help?"

My eyebrows furrowed, and I couldn't help squinting at her in shock. Was she saying she'd knowingly done me a favor? She was right. Kellan already had the wrong idea about her and I, and if he thought Genevieve

actually liked me it would make things infinitely worse. But she hated me. Wouldn't she take satisfaction in Kellan's being a jerk and want to make it worse?

"Um," I mumbled, unconfident with how to respond to this. "Thanks?"

I was expecting her to reply with 'you're welcome,' or at least give my gratitude some sort of acknowledgment. Instead she turned to go back in the tent like we hadn't just had that conversation. All it did was confuse me even more. I trudged over to the fire, still so baffled I almost tripped because I was staring back toward the tent, and plopped down across from Blake and Casey.

"Are congratulations in order for making progress on the rival-front?" Blake asked playfully as I sat down.

My gaze slowly wandered to him, and then back to where Genevieve had disappeared. "I honestly have no idea what to make of that."

Take a Look

**Fast update 'cause I love you guys :)... And I've been neglecting homework haha*

Blueskies by Luke Cusato (SoundNet remix)

Take a Look

Dugan

"Chicken noodle soup, or the last can of Spaghetti-Os?" I asked Kara, digging through our duffel bag of food. We'd wandered into a small city last night and crept our way to the roof. It was a little after noon now, as good a time as any for one of our two daily meals.

Kara squinted thoughtfully at the cans I was now holding up, and then pointed her finger back and forth between the two like she was doing eeny-meeny-miny-mo in her head. "Chicken noodle," she answered eventually.

I chuckled at her decision-making method and tossed her the food and the can opener. For myself I pulled out a tin of mushy asparagus, seeing as Kara couldn't even swallow the vegetables. I couldn't say I blamed her, and it didn't bother me too much that she didn't eat the healthy stuff seeing as there probably wasn't much nutritional value left in it anyway.

"Okay," I said, continuing the game we'd been playing before pausing to choose food. "This one doesn't really have any words."

After she nodded I began whistling the tune. Kara was the same age as my daughter before the outbreak, and with a kid their age the thing that was on the television a majority of the time was cartoons. So for the past hour or so we'd been playing a game where we sang the theme songs from cartoons, and the other guessed. It was a surprisingly difficult game since it was so long ago, and it was even harder for me because I didn't pay nearly as much attention when the TV was on as Kara would have.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with recollection when I finished whistling, and she snapped her fingers as if that would help her guess it. "I know it," she whispered, and tossed me the can opener before slurping some of her soup. "Ed, Edd, and Eddy!"

"Hey," I praised with a laugh. "Nice guess!"

"I got one," Kara said with a grin. "But it's really easy so I'm only going to say the first line." I nodded for her to continue. "Who-o-o-o-o lives in a pineapple under the sea?"

I burst into laughter. I could imagine the tune of the next line perfectly, but what was that yellow thing's name? "Crap," I chuckled. "This was one of Christina's favorites. Give me a hint."

"He's a sponge…" Kara told me flatly, looking shocked that I didn't know it right away.

"Sponge…" I said slowly, it was coming to me. "Bob Squarepants."

"You have a pretty good memory," she laughed.

"Years of this stuff makes it hard to forget." I shrugged and swallowed down a piece of asparagus.

While we paused the game again to continue eating a gust of wind worked its way under the collar of my jacket, causing me to shiver. It was still early in winter, but I'd underestimated how cold a desert could get, and I wouldn't be surprised it if actually started snowing in the colder months of January and February. It almost made me miss Feral-infested Los Angeles, and it did make me reconsider when we should start cutting north. It might be safer to travel across the warmer southern states, and then head up toward New York once we were closer to the east coast and almost out of winter.

As I pondered what our plan should be, I saw Kara cringe, but it didn't look like cold. It looked like pain. "You okay?" I asked concernedly.

"My stomach hurts," she replied, glancing into her can of soup. "You think

the food's bad?"

I scooted closer, and when she held it out to me I took my own brief look into her can. It appeared fine, so I sniffed it. Smelled fine too. "I don't know. It looks okay." She cringed again, and put her hand to her stomach while she whined 'ow'. "You backed up from all this canned crap?" I asked jokingly to try and make her feel better.

"I don't think so," she chuckled, but she set her food aside and stood up. "Be right back." She disappeared for a few minutes behind the structure that the roof access door was set in. When she came back she didn't say anything, but she didn't sit down right away either. She sort of just stood there for a minute before saying, "I'm bleeding."

"What do you mean?" I asked worriedly, standing up in case she was injured. "Are you okay?"

"Um," she mumbled awkwardly, and her cheeks tinted. "I don't know, exactly." She cringed again and pushed her hand into her stomach. "My dad mentioned it one time, and said I should ask my uncle's girlfriend. All he said was, 'don't come to me. You talk to Martha if you start bleeding from your lady'-"

"Okay, okay," I cut her off, waving my hands through the air frantically. "Yeah, yeah. I got it."

"But Martha's not around, and I don't…" she paused, her cheeks tinting a little darker at seeing how uncomfortable it made me. "Am I sick?"

I sighed, glad my skin was too dark for her to tell how badly I was blushing. This was a conversation I never would've even had with my own daughter. It would have been Patricia's job. But this poor kid had no idea what was going on, she even looked kind of scared, and I was the only one around. Kara was fifteen… shouldn't this have been taken care of by now?

"You're not sick. It's normal," I said reassuringly, and she made a disbelieving face that almost caused me to laugh. "None of them ever gave you anything for when it would happen?" I asked, trying to find the

least traumatic way for both of us to go about this.

She furrowed her eyebrows and glanced toward her backpack. "Anything like what?"

I took that as a 'no,' and strode to the edge of the roof to see how many Ferals we'd have to avoid. I wasn't going to make the poor kid wait until nightfall to go searching for some hygiene products. But when I got to the edge of the roof and looked down at the street below, I completely forgot about Kara's dilemma.

"Hey, come here." I waved her over, and when she got to my side I asked, "What do you see?"

She leaned over the side to glance every direction. "Nothing?" she said questioningly.

"Exactly," I mumbled, squinting into the distance. "Where are all the Ferals?"

"Whoa," she whispered in shock, realizing it for the first time.

There wasn't a single Feral in sight. We were atop one of the tallest buildings in the small city – a few blocks of urbanized structures and a concrete shopping mall. The city was surrounded on every side with miles of empty desert. Isolated was an understatement, but there had to have been people here before the outbreak. Right? Where'd they all go? Or if they'd been turned, what happened to the Ferals? That explained why we'd had such an easy time getting to the roof of this building.

I strode back to our stuff and picked up my rifle, then carried it back to the edge. I peeked through the scope and scanned every corner of city I could see from our roof. Other than flags and desert plants blowing in the breeze, there wasn't a single movement to be seen. No people. No animals. No Ferals. It's like this place had been a ghost town for years. But that seemed impossible.

"What the hell?" I said, lowering my rifle and then handing it to Kara so she could look too.

"Do you think this town is safe?" she asked once she was finished scanning with the scope.

"Nowhere is safe," I answered seriously. When I met her gaze I could tell exactly what question she was going to ask next. She wanted to go out and explore. I couldn't say I disagreed, and it wasn't just the mystery of what was going on here that was appealing. It was the prospect of getting to walk around a city during the day, something we hadn't been able to do in six whole years. "Let's go," I told her with a small smile, but as we went over to gather our things I added, "Stay alert though." She nodded compliantly, and we started back down the stairs and into the building.

Kara held her axe at the ready, just like I did with my rifle, but we made it to the first floor without encountering anyone or anything. Even though it was pretty cold outside, it was such a beautiful day. Standing there on the sidewalk outside the main doors, one almost got the illusion it was a lazy Sunday pre-outbreak. But there were things that shattered the illusion. The stench of death that hovered in every city, letting me know there had been Ferals here at one point. The leftover cars on the road, their tires cracked and melted into the pavement, their paint faded and peeling. I'm sure the grass that had been planted in dirt plots around the city would've been overgrown if we weren't in a desert, but now they were just empty squares of dry, fractured dirt because no one was around to water them.

"Stay close to the walls," I instructed, not ready to believe yet that we were completely alone.

I figured the best destination to see if there really were no Ferals here would be the shopping mall, so we started in that direction. The whole time I was keeping my eyes peeled for clues about what happened here, and as we passed by a sporting goods store, I saw something curious. All the cars that lined the side of the narrow road looked like they'd been pushed out of the way by something massive, and when I strode to the center of the street I could see the paint along the sides of them had been scraped off. That's when something shiny beneath my feet caught my attention.

"What is it?" Kara asked, coming over and kneeling at my side.

I held the hollow piece of metal in my hand while Kara picked one up too. "Bullet casings," I answered. Massive .50 caliber casings, and hundreds of them littered the street. "From a machine gun maybe."

"A machine gun?" Kara repeated in awe, and she strode over to run her fingers across the scraped side of a car. "What do you think did this?"

I made my way to her to examine it more closely. In some spots some of the cars were even dented or crushed. "A tank," I offered unsurely.

I was so baffled. What if it was a tank? What if it was the military? I'd been convinced all these years that the government had collapsed, that there was no military left because almost everyone who tried to fight the Ferals was dead. If they were starting to clear the world of infected, wouldn't they have somewhere for survivors to go? Wouldn't they try to leave some sign, some sort of directions for getting somewhere safe?

"Like, an army tank?" Kara asked. "You think soldiers were here?"

"I don't know," I told her honestly. "It could've been soldiers. Or it could've been anyone else who got their hands on military equipment."

As I was answering I'd been trudging back toward the sporting goods store, of which all the front windows had been smashed. I stepped over the shattered windowpane, glass crunching under my shoes as I strode in. It was a small store, but there was practically nothing of value left. The gun section to the immediate left of the entrance had been ransacked. There wasn't a single box of ammo left. No camping equipment. No food or first aid supplies. No portable butane tanks. Nothing but rollerblades and baseball gloves.

"Dugan," Kara called from outside, and when I looked at her through the empty windows she waved me over. "Look."

She pointed to the ground of the street, where I had to squint to see what she was motioning to. A trail of blood, or… countless trails of blood. So dark and dried that they nearly blended with the black asphalt, but they

were all streaked, leading the same direction. We followed it around the corner, where it joined more crimson trails on the sidewalk. They led to an alley between two brick buildings, and when we got to the entrance of it I almost didn't believe my eyes.

The entire alley was filled with black, charred skeletons. One after the other piled on top of each other to form a gruesome stack of bones taller than I was. The stench was almost unbearable, but I pulled my jacket across my face to dull it some while I walked into the alley. When I got to the very edge of the pile I held my hand an inch above a skeleton. It was cold, not a bit of warmth left over from the fire that had destroyed them, so I couldn't determine how recent it was. At least we knew why this place was completely empty. I just hoped it was only Feral bodies in this deadly alley.

"You think that's every Feral in the city?" Kara asked from my side at the bottom of the stack.

"Unless they missed one or two," I answered with a nod, "Its got to be."

"Sweet," she laughed happily.

It *was* nice not to have to worry quite as much about Ferals, but I wasn't completely convinced we were safe. Whoever had done this was capable of maximum casualties. Whether they were military or not, they were dangerous, and if they were still around then I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to meet them. Something about it didn't feel right.

"Let's keep moving," I told Kara.

We headed back toward the main road to follow it to the shopping mall. On the way there we passed a convenience store, which I wanted to check to get Kara the items she needed. I hadn't forgotten. So I opened the front door, and when it dinged a bell overhead I cringed out of instinct. Kara cringed too, and she raised her fire axe to prepare for an onslaught of Ferals. None came, but we still checked every corner of the shop to make sure it was completely clear.

"Okay," I murmured, scanning the shelves for what we needed. Spotting

a package, I grabbed it and hastily put it into Kara's hands. "Here."

She turned it over with a confused look on her face. "What are these for?"

"For the," I paused awkwardly. "For your," and I motioned toward her body, "You know."

She opened the package and pulled out one of the smaller flat ones. "What do I do with it?"

"Geez, kid," I sighed with exasperated discomfort. She didn't appear to have a clue that most men didn't like talking about it, though I swear I could see something of an amused smile at the way I was acting. "I don't know what you do with it." And I risked getting closer to scan the package. "Here," I pointed, "There's directions."

Her eyes wandered over the printed instructions. "Okay," she mumbled unsurely, and then glanced to the back of the store where the bathroom was.

"I'll wait here," I told her with an uncomfortable nod.

She disappeared at the back of the store, so I occupied myself with browsing through the rest of the aisles. It appeared this small shop had been picked clean too. All the small boxes and bottles of medicine had been taken, along with any of the canned food that might've been on the shelves. Even the cigarettes, snuff, and dipping tobacco had been cleared out. Since there wasn't anything worth taking, I grabbed a lottery ticket from the counter and scratched at it with my nail. That one was a loser, but the next one would've got me twenty bucks before the outbreak.

"Find anything?" Kara asked, coming through the aisles toward the front of the store.

"Nope," I answered as she reached me, and we turned for the entrance. We were both quiet for a few minutes, and after a while I got the feeling Kara didn't really know what to say to me. Then I started feeling bad,

wondering if I should've sucked it up and offered more advice or explained better what was happening to her. I would've had to do it if she was my own daughter. Here goes nothing. "It's going to happen about once a month," I told her, and it seemed to take her a second to understand what I was talking about. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, it just makes most guys uncomfortable. Usually the mom explains it." I shrugged, refusing to look at her because I was blushing so bad now I was sure she could see it. "If you were my daughter, it would probably be accompanied by a sex talk and a rule about not dating until you're forty."

Kara furrowed her eyebrows. "Sex talk?" I felt all the blood drain from my face, and it must've showed, because she started laughing. "That was a joke, Dugan," she chuckled.

"You're the spawn of Satan," I grumbled teasingly. "That's a father's worst nightmare. If it was up to me, I would've banned boys forever."

"My dad used to tell me that too," she said, still giggling. "He'd say he had his shotgun loaded for if the day ever came that I brought any boys to the house." She shook her head amusedly. "I was only like eight."

"Eight," I chuckled knowingly. "Thirty. It doesn't matter. You'd have been his baby girl forever."

"It sounds like you were a really good dad," Kara told me with a grin.

"Thanks," I replied gratefully, scanning the parking lot for dangers as we reached the mall. "Your dad sounds like he was a good guy."

"He was a lot of fun." She nodded her agreement. "I think it's because he was pretty young when he had me. That's what my uncle used to say anyway. He was eighteen when I was born. We were always laughing together, and my uncle would just shake his head and say, 'that's what happens when children have children'."

That more than surprised me, seeing as whenever Kara talked about him I got the impression he was older. "If you ask me," I started, trying not to show my shock, "He did a better job raising you than a lot of dads who were older than him."

were older than him.

She gave me a thankful smile, but didn't say anything because we walked through the entrance of the mall, both of us raising our weapons expectantly. It was a pretty tiny mall, stretched out in two halls on both sides of us. I could see to the end of each hall even from the main doors, and the escalator directly in front of us led to the second, and final, floor. Every single shop on the first floor was closed, the barred gates pulled down to block the entrances, and it would be no use trying to get through them.

I nodded for Kara to follow me upstairs, and it was the same situation on the second floor. Every shop was barred. Except one, even though I wouldn't necessarily call it a store. It was an arcade, lit up on the inside because it wrapped around to take up two corners, and the entirety of its walls were glass. When I saw what occupied a majority of the back of the arcade, I got a giddy spark of excitement.

"You ever played putt-putt?" I asked Kara, leading the way to the employee counter to grab two putters and golf balls. She looked confused, so I clarified, "Miniature golf?"

"Once," she answered, taking the putter I was handing her with a laugh. "A long, long time ago." She trailed me to the first hole, watching as I set my ball down. "We're really doing this?"

I used to love golf, and that included miniature golf on the weekends Christina wanted to go. "We've been on the road for weeks now. I think we deserve a break."

"Sounds good to me," Kara agreed cheerfully, and motioned for me to continue with my first shot.

We played two rounds of mini golf before we figured we should search the city some more before nightfall. As nice as it was to be able to relax for the first time in a while, we couldn't stay here. It was a possibility that whoever killed all the Ferals might come back, and it was a possibility that they weren't friendly. The camp Kara heard about was our end goal, and I wanted to get there as quickly as possible.

So we left the mall about two hours before sunset and roamed parts of the small city for any stores that hadn't been ransacked. It wasn't until we reached a point furthest from our original hideout and the machine gun casings that I stopped our search. As we were passing by a house something caught my eye. A movement. The slightest flutter of a curtain from inside.

I'd stopped to stare as Kara continued on, but when she realized I was no longer with her she backtracked. "What's up?"

"I thought I saw something," I told her, pointing up to second floor of the house where I'd seen the movement. Then I heard something. "Listen." A faint but repetitive thump from inside the house, followed by the sound of a Feral, and a very human voice screaming 'help.' "Get your shotgun out," I said, hastily moving to the front door of the home.

"Dugan," Kara protested lightly, but she was already retrieving her shotgun from the straps of her backpack.

"There's somebody in here." I didn't waste a moment in kicking my foot flat against the door to break it open, but it was bolted so securely that I bounced off of it. "The axe," I requested, rushing to Kara to get it and then hurrying back to the door.

I smashed the blade into the wooden door repeatedly, throwing away precious moments in trying to help the person. Eventually I smashed a hole large enough to fit my arm through, and I made sure there were no Ferals right inside so they wouldn't bite me as I stuck my hand through and twisted the locks.

"Hey!" I yelled as the door swung open, trying to lure the Ferals away from whoever was inside. I could hear them on the second floor, but if any of them had heard me they weren't interested.

Since they weren't coming to me, I had to go to them, and I heard Kara's footsteps behind me as I ran into the house and up the stairs. I sprinted to a bedroom on the second floor where the noise was coming from. There were only three live Ferals, and two more dead ones across the room. There wasn't a moment's pause between when I first stepped foot

room. There wasn't a moment's pause between when I first stepped foot in the room and when I crossed it with Kara's axe in hand. They were eating a man alive. I swung it hard at the back of the first Feral on top of the struggling man. When I hit it another one that had its mouth clamped over the man's neck released him to rear up and roar at me. A loud blast put multiple holes through its chest, and a final swing of the axe buried the blade deep in the skull of the final Feral.

I glanced down at the man. He was bleeding profusely, gurgling from the terminal wound in his neck. He'd bleed out before he ever had a chance to turn. We got here too late. But it didn't make any sense. Why was he locked in this house with the last remaining Ferals in the entire city?

"Did you kill all those Ferals?" I knelt at his side, keeping some distance because I was wary of his tainted blood. I knew it was probably wrong to question a dying man, but something was so wrong about this.

Despite the fact that he was already pale with the loss of blood, he began to push himself up, coughing painfully through the wound in his neck as he scooted to lean back against the bed. "They-" He coughed again, spitting blood to his side like he was frustrated it cut him off. "They locked me in h-here with-" cough "Them. I tried to-" He spat again, and grunted with agony when he pressed his hand to his neck wound to try and slow the bleeding. "Run out when I saw you." When he finished his short explanation he leaned his head back and coughed some more.

"Who locked you in here?" I asked.

He took in a weak, raspy breath. "Dressed like soldiers," he whispered with difficulty. I could tell he only had a few words left in him. "Not soldiers. Used me as bait. Don't-" Only half of another weak breath. "Don't trust them."

I looked over at Kara, and she stared right back me wide-eyed. They used this man as bait for the Ferals. They were far more dangerous than I thought. "We're getting the hell out of here."

You Can't Choose What Fades Away

No Light, No Light by Florence and The Machine

You Can't Choose What Fades Away

Genevieve

I shot up in bed so fast that it even woke Echo up on the other side of the tent, and her eyes shot wide with panic at my sudden movements. But when she looked over at me, I grinned. I could smell it. It made me throw my feet over the side of the cot and into my boots. Once those were laced up tight I pulled on my sweatshirt and my leather coat, making sure to put on my hood. Echo was hardly sitting up by now, but I wasn't about to wait for her. Dressed in record timing, I practically hurled myself out the entrance, and once I was outside I spread my arms out and fell backward into it. Snow. Two fresh, soft, powdery feet of it. That was a lot of snow overnight, and I loved it. It made me wish so badly that someone had thought to save a snowboard during the outbreak.

"How did you know?" Echo chuckled, her face appearing above me as she finally came out of the tent.

"Can't you smell it?" I asked, waving my arms to make an angel. "So crisp and clean."

She shook her head, but before she could say anything I grabbed a handful and flung it up at her. "Hey!" she protested lightheartedly, laugh line deepening happily. "I don't even have my jacket on yet."

She turned to go inside and grab her winter coat, and I managed to get her in the back with another handful of snow before she disappeared. She came out a minute later in her dark green jacket and a black beanie. I already had a snowball prepared, and snorted with laughter when it spattered across her face. I was in the process of forming another when she got over the shock, and instead of trying to make her own she just started shoveling armfuls of the powder on top of me. Through the

laughter of trying to brush the snow off and trying to throw some back at her, I tried to push myself up, but with a giggle she playfully shoved me back down.

Then some of the snow seeped under the lining of my pants, and I couldn't help but shriek, "Cold!"

Echo didn't try to push me down again as I scrambled up, but she watched with an amused smile when I undid the button of my jeans to scoop the small amount of snow out. Once that was done I began to brush the rest of the icy flakes off of me, refusing to look at Echo again. I'd never been as playful with her as I had been just now. I hadn't meant to, I'd just forgotten, and now that I'd remembered I didn't know what to do. I felt a little uncomfortable, but the truth was that a lot of me was still too excited about the snow to care.

Deciding the easiest thing to do would simply be not to address it, I finally met Echo's gaze and asked, "Hungry?"

She nodded, and after we got our dishes from inside I led the way over to Blake's tent. "Knock, knock," I called cheerfully, and hearing a sleepy grumble from inside poked my head in. "We're going to get breakfast, you coming?"

He pushed himself up, turning for a moment to give me a tired stare, and then began to lift himself off his cot. He was being so slow that I couldn't resist. I pulled my head out of his tent just long enough to grab a fresh snowball, and then I threw it at his chest before he had a chance to even pull his shirt on.

"Shit, Gen," he laughed joyfully, "That's cold."

He barely finished his sentence before Echo leaned her head in too. "Hurry up," she told him teasingly, letting another snowball fly at him.

This one broke across his neck, and after scrambling to wipe off the ice he glared at us. "You guys have until I get my jacket on to start running," he threatened mischievously.

Both Echo and I reacted with laughter to that, [illegible]

Both Echo and I snorted with laughter, but we didn't waste a second in taking off for the food area. I started to think Blake was only messing around, because there was still no sign of him when we sat down with our food. I plopped down next to Kellan, while Echo moved across the table to sit beside Garcia. Even though I knew Kellan had started it, I wasn't sure what the fight between him and Echo had been about the week before, but part my motive in sitting here was to get one of them to apologize. They noticed each other, but it wasn't a friendly look that passed between them. My other motive for sitting by Kellan was my prior playfulness with Echo. I still didn't like her, and I wanted to remind her of it by taking some pleasure in the dissatisfaction she got at Kellan's presence.

"Did you go rolling in the snow, LT?" Kellan asked, purposefully leaning back and using his hand to wipe off the chunks of ice stuck to the cloth linings of my leather jacket. Normally I never let him touch me, since to him it was always flirting, but I noticed Echo's glowering intensify when he started, so this time I let him do it.

Before I got a chance to answer a snowball splattered across Echo's face, and hardly a moment later another smashed into the side of my head. "You guys weren't hiding very well," Blake said through a highly entertained laugh while he went around the sit next to Echo.

Despite a slight tension between Echo and Kellan, with Garcia and Blake here to help lighten the mood the meal passed pretty happily. Though, every once in a while I could see Blake glance between Echo and Kellan, and then somewhat thoughtfully his gaze would fall on me. I wanted to ask him what he was thinking. Especially because I respected his opinion, I was curious to see what he thought was the reason for the near fight a week ago. I could probably guess that he'd say Echo was completely innocent, if only for the fact that he was biased against Kellan for being such a flirt.

Needless to say, what with the fresh snow and a somewhat happy breakfast, I was in a pretty good mood. So much that it didn't bother me when Echo tried making conversation as we strode toward the borders of camp. "I had no idea you liked snow so much," she mused with a chuckle, seeing as I was practically skipping through it.

chuckle, seeing as I was practically skipping through it.

"Are you kidding?" I asked sarcastically, turning just enough to swipe my hand through the powder and smack some at her. "Anybody who doesn't love it is crazy."

"That's pretty biased," she laughed, brushing the snow off her coat and out of her hair.

She obviously wasn't as excited about it as I was, but the way she said that made it seem like she wasn't the biggest fan. "I already knew you were crazy," I told her teasingly. "I'm not surprised you don't like it."

I heard her give a huff of breath in amusement, but then she clarified, "I don't mind it right now. But when I was in the city it usually meant being cooped up inside for long periods of time."

"It'll be kind of a pain when we have night patrols," I admitted, knowing it got freezing up in the patrol towers at night. "So enjoy it while you can," I told her with a grin as I turned and fell into the snow again, picking myself up immediately to continue our walk. I don't know where all this energy was coming from, but I loved the cold tingling in my nose and cheeks from the icy air. It made me feel so alive.

Echo ceased her giggling at my antics to ask, "How do you deal with it then? Bring extra blankets? Cuddle up to your partner?"

"Just tough it out mostly," I told her with an amused chuckle. "I'm pretty sure none of the guys wouldn't be caught dead snuggling up to each other."

She snorted with laughter. "If the cold gets that bad then I'd take a little awkward snuggling over looking tough any day of the week."

"Yeah, but you're not a six foot manly man," I replied, letting her see my entertained smile.

Just then we reached our destination, and there was a sudden shift in mood. With all the random Ferals we'd been finding wandering around, we'd decided to set up some bait traps outside the borders of camp

We'd decided to set up some bait traps outside the borders of camp. That's what they'd been coming out here for anyway. Food. No doubt it was getting scarce in more urban areas, and out here there were plenty of wild animals if the Ferals could catch them. I was pretty sure the traps would attract more wildlife than Ferals, but anything that might help sounded like a good idea to me.

The moment we reached the trap we could smell it – the rotten stench of dirty Ferals. It seemed accentuated by the crisp cleanliness of the air around us. The piece of meat that was used as bait had been tied too high up in a tree for any Ferals to reach it, but not so high that they couldn't smell it. There were definitely some here, but we just couldn't see any yet. I immediately pulled my rifle around to hold at the ready, and since I still didn't let Echo carry her pistol, she pulled her pocketknife out of her cargo pants.

"Hey, Ferals!" I hollered loudly. "Come and get it."

There was an instantly furious roar, but the air was so empty and still around us that I couldn't exactly tell which direction it had come from. We didn't get long to try and figure it out, because moments later five of them came sprinting at us from three different directions.

I got my first shot off the second I saw one, and then turned toward the next one that was rushing at me. It reached me too quickly to be able to get a shot off right away, so as it got close I used its momentum to throw it off balance. The instant it hit the ground I shot it, and then I smashed the butt of my rifle across the next one's face. It stopped its running from the sheer force of my hit, but I made sure to shoot it before it got a chance to lunge at me again.

The third Feral had hardly hit the ground before I heard Echo yell, "Genevieve!"

I turned to find that she'd killed one with her knife, but the second one that went after her had her pinned, and she was barely keeping its teeth away from her with her hands against its shoulders. I raised my weapon to dispatch it, but before I pulled the trigger, I paused. I'd been so nice to her all morning – happy, and playful, and carefree. Now that I stopped to

think about the fact that she killed my family, the way I'd been acting all morning felt so wrong. All I'd wanted since she got here was for her to be gone. So with my rifle still aimed at the Feral, my eyes wandered down to Echo, and I delayed.

"Genevieve, shoot it!" she hollered frantically, having to turn her head away because the Feral was getting *that* close to taking a bite out of her. Her gray eyes locked on mine, like she knew what I was thinking and why I hadn't shot it yet. "Shoot it!" she yelled again, this time pleadingly.

The tone of her voice snapped me out of it, and my finger tightened over the trigger. With the loud bang the Feral collapsed, and Echo rapidly shoved it off of her. She just lay there though, breathing heavily, struggling for air. After a couple seconds I strode over and offered her my hand.

She shoved it away fiercely. "You hesitated?" she asked, pushing herself up.

Shit. I could tell she was mad, and I already knew it was wrong of me. "I didn't- I-" I was at a loss for words.

"You hesitated!" she shouted angrily, finally on her feet and brushing the snow off of her.

I could tell she was getting ready to storm off, so I stepped in front of her. "Echo," I said apologetically, trying to pacify her. "I'm sorry. It was an accident."

"Un-fucking-believable!" She began her storming off, shoving me out of the way so hard that I almost fell into the snow. "Get away from me."

"Wait," I called, already hurrying after her because her pace was so furiously swift it was a struggle even for me to keep up. "I'm sorry!" She continued back into camp with me trailing behind her. "Echo," I said, and I could see as we passed the medical cabin that Blake, who'd been standing with Casey, started watching after us. He must've been curious why it was Echo who was angry this time, because he immediately began to follow. Echo completely ignored me until she disappeared into our tent,

and she was so upset with me that I thought it might be better to wait outside until she calmed down a little.

"What happened?" Blake asked curiously, reaching me as I stood a ways outside the tent.

"We found some Ferals. She got pinned," I explained, but I had to break eye contact shamefully as I admitted, "I hesitated…"

It seemed he had to think about it for a few seconds, and then he practically sighed disappointedly, "Gen."

"I know," I groaned. It was bad enough Echo was pissed at me, I didn't need him to give me shit for it too. "I messed up." It was one thing for me to hate her, but whether I liked it or not she was my partner now. I knew I could trust her with my life, she'd proven it. But I'd just given her reason to think she couldn't trust me with hers.

Before Blake could say anything else Echo stomped back out of the tent. She had her backpack over her shoulders, and as she turned and headed past Blake and I toward the river I could see that she had her pistol strapped to her thigh too. That worried me instantly, and after I motioned for Blake to stay put I hurried after her. She was walking so fast still that she was already at the river by the time I caught up enough not to have to yell.

"What are you doing?" I asked, hopping off the final rock to get to the other side of the water.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm leaving," she answered bitterly, not even turning around to look at me. "I don't need this bullshit."

"Can you just hold on a second?" I asked, almost having to jog to remain even ten feet behind her. "Can't we talk about it?"

"You hesitated, Genevieve!" she shouted angrily, looking back to shoot me a fierce glare. "And after I saved your life in the same goddamn scenario!"

I could tell she wasn't going to listen to any kind of apology right now. So I tried something else. "You can't leave, Echo. You're not allowed to." Her only response was to flip me the finger. "Where are you even going to go?" When she gave no reply, a part of me started to panic. She was completely serious about leaving, and I don't know why, but that worried me. "Just wait," I said pleadingly, trying to get her to at least talk to me. "Hold on!" She wasn't having any of it. "Hayden, please!" I begged frantically, and at hearing that she froze in her tracks.

She stood with her back turned for a good fifteen seconds before finally storming over to me. My heart dropped a little when as she got to me she pulled the pistol out of its holster, but she immediately put the grip into my hand and pressed the barrel against her chest. "If you want me dead that fucking badly, then do it yourself."

"I don't," I told her, and tears welled up with how guilty the look she had on her face made me feel.

"This is your chance." She angrily shook my hand, eyes locked on my own, daring me.

"I don't," I repeated. "I know that now. I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"If you're going to kill me," she started, glancing down at the gun against her chest, "Then this is how I want it to happen." When her eyes met mine again they were watery, and she sniffled. "Don't let me get bit." A stubborn tear cascaded down her cheek, but she wiped it away defiantly. "Please, Genevieve. Anything but that."

"I won't," I told her, dropping my arm so the gun was no longer pointed at her. "It was a mistake. Just don't leave."

She blinked away the tears, challenging angrily, "Give me one good reason I should stay."

"Winter just started, it isn't safe," I offered.

She shook her head. "Strike one."

I wracked my brain for another reason. "Your raider buddies won't take you back."

"Strike two," she told me, sounding offended that I'd even mentioned it.

There was a reason that sprung to mind, but even though I was starting to panic again, I didn't want to say it. I didn't know why I even thought it in the first place, so instead I said, "You'll never survive before you get out of the woods."

I wasn't surprised when she sighed, "Strike three."

"I want you to stay," I blurted before she could turn away.

Her eyebrows rose with genuine shock. "You want me to stay?" she repeated in disbelief, and when all I could do was nod, her voice portrayed further surprise. "Why?"

That question was so much more complicated than it sounded. I wasn't even sure I could give her an exact answer. I hated her so much. Just being around her was painful. But she was my last remaining link to a world that no longer existed, to a time when things were better. Sure, I'd known Cap before the outbreak, but I'd never really spoken to him, or had a history with him, or cared about him. Echo was the last thing I had. It was nostalgia. No matter how badly I wanted revenge, no matter how badly I still wanted to make her pay for the things she'd done, I wanted her here. Stupid, irrational, contradictory nostalgia. And it was overpowering.

I couldn't even look at her because I was so confused, but this time, I shrugged, "I don't know."

"Look me in the eyes and tell me again."

It took a few seconds for me to lift my gaze to hers. "Stay," I said. I remembered what Blake had told me months ago. That he thought Echo would do anything I wanted if I just asked. He'd been so right. "For me."

Those pearly gray eyes bored into my own, then scanned over every inch

of my face. She was watching me so thoughtfully that I flinched when she snatched the pistol out of my hands. "I'm keeping this. Permanently." Then she muttered under her breath, "Since I obviously can't trust you." She'd looked away to make sure the safety was on and put the gun back into the holster, and when she met my gaze again she'd regained her anger. "And don't ever call me that," she said bitterly, shoving past me to start back toward the tent. "Hayden is dead."

She didn't say a single thing to me for the rest of the day. Nor did she speak to me the entire time we completed our night patrols. We woke up from our recuperation around dinner the next day, and I sort of expected that it had been long enough she wouldn't be as furious with me. But she stormed to the DFAC ahead of me before I could even extend a waking greeting. When I finally reached the table she was sitting at, she didn't so much as look at me.

I was done with my food by the time she finally acknowledged my existence. "Aminah asked if we could search for herbs before the sun goes down."

It would be difficult to find anything through the two feet of snow on the ground, but I nodded anyway. The moment I did she stood, swiftly striding toward the tent to put her dishes away. I scrambled after her, but she clearly wasn't in the mood to wait for me. Is this how it felt every time I stormed away from her? It was annoying. I followed her nearly two miles past the border of camp before the furious pace started getting to me.

"Are you seriously still mad at me?" I asked, jogging to catch up with her since she was walking so quickly that I was a good twenty feet behind her.

She stopped, instantly turning on her heels to glare at me. "Am I still mad?" she said. "Still mad?" she repeated furiously. "You were about to feed me to a Feral!" She was a lot more upset still than I thought.

"What did you expect?" I retorted defensively. Now I felt more embarrassed than guilty about it, but she kept acting like she'd forgotten how much I hated her. "You're a murderer."

Her mouth set in a thin line, and she inhaled angrily. "I expect you to stop judging me!" she shouted finally. "I've done nothing but try to prove myself to you. I deserve a second chance!"

"You deserve nothing," I quipped, feeling myself completely shut down. It was the only reaction I had left in me lately. "You killed my family."

"It was an accident!" she yelled instantly. "I'm sorry, Genevieve. I really am. But you're not the only one who's lost people. Everybody's lost someone!" She was huffing furiously now, chest heaving while she pointed an irate finger at me. "They're dead! You understand? Just like the other ninety-five percent of the world. Dead! So get over it!"

Maybe I did have another reaction left in me, because that made me so outraged I didn't even register it when my gloved hand connected with her cheek. I slapped her, hard, with the intent of shutting her up. Instead, hardly a moment after that thud rang through the air, there was a clap. She hit me with her bare palm, and the retaliation stung painfully against my own cheek. It did nothing but make me more furious, and while I might not have had the energy to yell at her anymore, I had the energy to react. So I grabbed the collar of her jacket in both my fists and whipped her to the side, throwing her back hard against a nearby tree. She let out a pained breath as she hit the trunk, but I didn't care. I released the grip of one hand to pull it back and wind up. She glared defiantly, knowing I was going to punch her in the face, and it was enough to stop me. Anytime we got into a fistfight, she won. If I hit her again she'd retaliate, and I'd been through it enough to want to avoid a bloody nose or some bruises.

I dropped my fist, returning it to clenching at her collar while I battled with myself over just how I wanted to release my rage without getting hurt. She looked shocked when I didn't hit her, and now she was staring at me, eyes curiously running over every inch of my face like she couldn't understand why I'd stopped. My grip tightened and released, tightened and released while I glared into her eyes and took in fast and angry breaths to try and maintain some level of control, because right now I wanted nothing more than to beat the shit out of her. A moment later, before I could make up my mind about attempting it, Echo's shoulders left

the tree, and she pitched forward just enough so her lips could meet mine. It was so unexpected that it took me a few seconds to even realize what was happening, and I just let her kiss me. Then my brain caught up, and it audibly knocked the wind out of her when I threw her back against the tree once more.

Now I was practically gawking at her, more confused than I'd ever been in my life. It didn't make sense why she'd want to kiss me in the first place, but even more baffling was the fact that when she did I felt slightly liberated from that consuming battle between anger and apathy. Echo was looking back at me, appearing just as surprised as I felt, but other than her own rapid breathing she wasn't moving or speaking. She was just watching me, like she was waiting to see how I'd react once it really set in what she'd done. I don't know why, but after a few more seconds something came over me, and then *I* kissed *her*. I shot forward so fast and met her lips so furiously I heard the back of her head knock against the tree. Despite how much I imagined it hurt, she didn't seem to notice.

What little control I'd previously had was gone. She'd just given me the outlet I'd been searching for. Echo kissed me first, and it wasn't confusing anymore. The way she looked at me sometimes, why she tried so hard to make me forget about what she'd done. It had to mean she felt something for me. And now I knew why I kissed her back. Why I dropped my gloves to the snow and why my hands flew to the button of her cargos. This was how I could hurt her, the easiest method of getting my revenge. There was no way she could retaliate now. No way she could fight back and make me bleed. The only one who'd get hurt from this would be her, and I was so lost in my rage I didn't care if it was a good idea or not.

My lips were still on Echo's as I undid her pants, and when I felt her hands cup my face I shoved them away fiercely. I didn't want her touching me like that. This wasn't romance. This was as much a fight as any other, and she resigned her arms to her sides without protest. Not a second later I dropped my own hand below her waistline, and in my irrational recklessness I didn't hesitate to push two fingers deep inside her. She instantly let out a yelp, a mixed cry of pleasure and pain, but I didn't care if it hurt. It was all the better if it hurt, and she didn't try to stop

me.

I thrust into her again while I dropped my mouth to her neck. Anything I could do harder and fiercer I would, so I bit into the side of it. It caused her to let out another sound, this time more moan than whine, and one of her hands tangled in my hair encouragingly. I didn't push her away this time. I was too focused on what I was doing, on forcing my fingers deeper while I sucked angrily at her delicate flesh, while I finally got a one-sided outlet for all my hate. And what did I care if she liked it? It was good if she liked it, because that would only guarantee that I could hurt her.

Echo stretched her head further to the side as she took in deep, erratic breaths and pressed my mouth even harder against her. But she had her back flat against the tree, and I used my free hand to set on her waist, pulling her hips closer to me so I could work easier with my other hand. Every other time I pushed into her she let out a satisfied whimper or took in an excited breath, and only minutes later she grabbed my elbow, stopping my motion while she let out one long, final moan. I ceased my sucking at her neck and simply rested my forehead against her shoulder, recovering from the already exhausted burning in my arm until she was done. Once she fell quiet everything went silent, all except for her heavy panting.

It succeeded. My anger was practically gone. But my mind was slowing enough that I was finally starting to fully catch up. In the lull I could still feel her tightening with continuous euphoria around my fingers. It brought my attention to a different kind of feeling I had. Frightened of it, I pulled back swiftly and took my hand out of her pants, trying not to let my face show the unnerved frenzy I could feel rising inside me. She was watching me in bewilderment, but I stared back defiantly as I wiped my hand off on her jacket and grabbed my gloves out of the snow. I turned without saying anything and started back toward the camp.

Now I was starting to panic. I was finally beginning to process *exactly* what I'd just done. I refused to turn, but once I knew Echo could no longer see me I started running. My heart was a hysterical rhythm of wild beats, and I was so horrified I could hardly breathe by the time I reached

the campfire near my tent. Thank God Blake was already sitting there alone and I wouldn't need to go looking for him.

"I did something bad," I told him the instant I burst onto our site. "Oh God, I did something so bad." I threw my hands to my head, then bent over and put them on my knees, gasping for air.

"What do you mean?" Blake looked genuinely worried, and he waved for me to come and sit on the log beside him. "What happened?"

I strode over and collapsed at his side, shaking my head in disbelief. "I did something bad."

"What did you do?" he asked impatiently, now seeming entirely curious seeing as I wasn't hurt.

"It," was all I could say, and when he didn't answer after a few moments I glanced up to see if he understood.

"It," he repeated, staring thoughtfully at the fire. Then his eyes narrowed at me. "If you finally slept with Kellan, I swear I'll kill him."

"Not Kellan," I whined, shamefully burying my face in my hands.

"Then who?" His eyebrows furrowed in confusion, but a moment later he sounded concerned again. "Wait, where's Echo?" I dropped my hands and looked at him expectantly, hoping he wouldn't need me to say it. He looked right back at me for almost a minute trying to figure it out, and then he snorted with laughter. I don't know exactly what kind of reaction I was hoping to get out of him, but it certainly wasn't that. "Stop screwing with me," he chuckled.

"I'm not kidding," I told him, my voice sounding borderline desperate.

"But," he said unsurely, like he still didn't believe me, "Yesterday you were going to let her get bit by a Feral." I bent over again, dropping my head between my knees and letting out a groan. "What happened?"

I straightened up, taking a deep breath to calm myself so I could explain,

and then giving a stealthy glance around to make sure nobody was near enough to hear. "We got into another fight, and I was going to hit her, but I didn't because she always wins. And she kissed me!"

Blake was laughing. He was downright buckled over like it was the most amusing thing he'd ever heard. "You guys are so damn twisted," he snorted, struggling for air.

"It's not funny," I said angrily, giving him a shove so hard it almost knocked him off the log.

"Okay," he said calmly, making an effort to stop. "She kissed you. How'd it turn into sex?"

"I just kissed her back," I said with a shrug. "And then I, you know…" He raised an eyebrow as though he didn't understand, and I sighed at the fact that he was going to make me explain. "I touched her."

"To climax?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Ew," I shuddered, glaring at him for making this explanation more graphic than I wanted it to be, and then nodded. He didn't seem to care that I didn't want to talk about it in detail, and he just stared at me for a minute with this far away look in his eyes. It took me a while to catch on, and then I shoved him again. "You perv! Are you imagining it?"

He burst into laughter once more, raising his hands defensively. "What else am I supposed to do with this?"

"Not enjoy it," I said indignantly.

"Fine, but I don't understand." He picked up a stick on the ground at his feet and poked at the fire with it, sending embers popping into the air. "I thought you hated her?"

"I do!" I raised my hands to my head again. Confusion and residual panic were starting to give me a headache. "Once she kissed me it just felt like such an easy way to get my aggression out. I couldn't stop."

He chuckled again, but when I glared at him he instantly dropped the

He chuckled again, but when I glared at him he instantly dropped the smile. "You hate-fucked her."

"Is that a real thing?" I asked, furrowing my eyebrows at him.

"You tell me," he said rhetorically, and after a few moments of silence asked, "Genevieve… are you gay?"

"What?" I asked in shock, and then added quickly, "No."

"So, this has never happened before?" he said, and then continued to interrogate when I didn't say anything. "Honestly? Because if not, then you just went from zero to sixty in record timing."

"It hasn't," I whined, but after a moment he cocked his head at me. I'd always been a bad liar. "Okay, I kissed a girl once in high school." He still didn't look like he was entirely trusting in what I was telling him, and after a few more seconds of silence to try and get him off my back, I confessed. "Fine, there might have been some…" And I turned my face away because I couldn't look at him, and I had to whisper it, "Fondling." Then I added in a rushed sigh, as some sort of excuse, "I was drunk."

He snorted with laughter, and even though it sounded like he was trying to control it, it swiftly turned into an entertained bellow. "Oh my God, Genevieve," he chortled. I was scowling at him fiercely, but he kept talking. "I'm sorry, it's not what you did. It's that you seriously just used the word 'fondle'."

"You're such an asshole," I grumbled, though the fact that he found this so amusing had curbed some of my immense panic. Now I was only annoyed with him.

"Okay, okay," he said, taking deep breaths and finally trying to stop his laughing. "Are you going to do it again?"

"No," I said defensively, and when again he didn't look like he believed me I added, "I'm not!"

"I mean I get it. She's really attractive. Plus she's got that whole bad girl thing going on…" His lips curled into another mischievous grin. "I'd be

perfectly understanding if you were into that."

"Fuck you, Blake." I stood, passing him a scornful glare as I started for my tent. The last thing I wanted was for him to make it seem okay. What I did was *not* okay.

"Oh, come on," he called after me apologetically. "I'm just messing with you."

I ignored him and threw myself onto my bed. I tried my hardest not to think about it, but it wasn't just the fact that I couldn't think about anything else. Right now I had no idea where Echo was. I couldn't bring myself to look at her just yet. If I went searching for her I wouldn't even know what to say. But if she got into trouble right now because I wasn't watching her, it would be my fault. So no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't sleep. I lay there for what felt like hours until she finally came in. It was long dark by that time, so I could only make out her silhouette. Her light footsteps strode over to her cot, and after taking off her boots she slipped in quietly, and then everything went silent again.

There was a tension in the air like I'd never felt before, and just a minute was like an hour in the thickness. For some reason I got the feeling she was *already* hurt about what happened, and even though that was what I'd wanted, it didn't make me feel better. As much as I hated her, I felt guilty. I wasn't sure if she was already asleep or not, but I couldn't fall asleep without saying something. "That's not going to happen again," I whispered in soft resolution. Did that sound like an apology? I wasn't even sure if I'd meant it to be. Plus, it felt like a lie. Despite the guilt that I'd used her in a way nobody should ever be used, she didn't try to stop me, and I didn't think she'd stop me if I were to do it again. Then there was that other feeling I'd had.

Echo didn't say anything, but I knew she'd heard me, because my eyes were adjusted enough to the dark that in response I could see her shift under the blankets and turn her back to me.

Intentions in the Air

Living Rooms by Revis

Intentions in the Air

Echo

I rolled over in my cot, barely cracking my eyes to look to the other side of the tent. Seeing that Genevieve was still fast asleep, I eased myself out of my blankets and put on my boots and coat as silently as I could. Practically tiptoeing, I exited the tent and then made my way over to the fire pit. It was early in the morning still, but the day was already so clear, and the still rising sun beamed through the breaks in the trees, warming me whenever I passed through one. Despite the warmth, I still grabbed some fresh logs out of the plastic bin near the pit, and after throwing them on I used a match to light the kindling I pulled out of the same bin.

It took a few minutes for the fire to get going, but once there were some decent sized flames I scooted closer to it. The heat made me want to go back to sleep, but the last thing I wanted to do was return into the tent. I finished gathering herbs after Genevieve left me in the woods yesterday, but the entire time I was just trying to figure out what it meant that she kissed me back, or that she took it even further. Of course I wanted it to mean something, but I was almost positive it didn't mean a damn thing. When I came back into the tent last night she'd told me it wouldn't happen again, and she'd sounded guilty, like maybe she thought she'd hurt my feelings. I wasn't upset about the sex. I was still furious that she'd almost let me get bit, though mostly my rage had cooled to hurt. But I wasn't about to tell her that. Part of me thought I could use whatever guilt she felt to figure out what her motives were. And until I could find out why she kissed me back, I wasn't going to be the first one to bring it up.

After a minute of sitting there, becoming increasingly soothed by the warmth, I folded my arms over my knees and bent over to rest my head on them. It was only a couple minutes later that Blake sat down next to me. "Morning."

I lifted myself to give him a friendly smile. "Hey." I'd leaned back to make conversation with him if he wanted it. I was going to let him speak first after my greeting, since it usually took him a little while to get going once he woke up. However, even though he appeared wide awake and alert, he hadn't said anything, and his eyes kept darting toward me and then looking anywhere else. It took me a while to figure out why, and then my face flushed red. "What did she tell you?" I asked through a whine, knowing Genevieve had said something about yesterday.

Blake looked at me again, his gaze lingering longer than it had the whole time he'd sat down, and he chuckled. "Enough that I can never look at either of you the same ever again."

"Seriously?" I groaned in disbelief, burying my face in my hands.

"Let's hear it, then," he said, seemingly unmoved by my embarrassment. When I raised an eyebrow at him he clarified, "Tell me your side of the story."

"What side?" I asked sarcastically. There wasn't much to tell. "I kissed her. I don't have a track record for making the best decisions."

"True," he said with a knowing laugh. "How long have you liked her?" At the shocked look on my face, he smirked. "Don't act surprised. Why in the hell would you ever want to kiss her if you didn't like her? She's not exactly your number one fan." I tilted my head side to side in agreement, but before I could respond he asked, "And that's what the fight with Kellan was about, right?"

I tried to hide my regained shock as I nodded. "He's a lot smarter than he looks. So are you, by the way."

"Should I be offended?" he laughed.

I just shrugged, holding back my own laughter so I could answer his question. "I'd been wanting to do that since I was thirteen." When I glanced over at him he was raising one eyebrow teasingly. "I mean, not

that," I said, catching the look. "The kiss. I wanted to kiss her since then." I glanced over at him again only to find he was snickering so furiously that no sound was coming out. "Shut up," I complained, giving him a lighthearted push. Regardless of whether or not I found it amusing, I let him giggle it out. "You're not going to…" I started hesitantly, and Blake passed me a curious glance. "Threaten me or anything, are you?" I asked, because I knew he hated the fact that Kellan was such a flirt, and he was protective of Genevieve like she was his own sister.

"Genevieve's a big girl," Blake answered with a smile. "She can do what she wants. Besides, this is totally the wrong word, but I'm pretty sure your intentions were far purer than hers."

I cocked my head at him, wondering if he knew the answer to what I'd been pondering all night. "Did she tell you why she did it?"

He sighed reluctantly, "I really shouldn't be talking to you about this in the first place." But at the pleading look on my face, he shook his head. "Not exactly. She just said she was so fired up from whatever you two were arguing about that it felt like a good outlet."

"Like rage sex?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Those weren't my exact words," he laughed, "But yeah." After that he studied me for a few moments, saying questioningly, "You don't look mad about it." All I did was purse my lips at him expectantly, and he seemed to catch on immediately, because he snickered again. "Right, because you liked it." Just then Genevieve came out of the tent and sluggishly dragged her feet to where Blake and I were sitting. "Morning, pipsqueak."

She nodded at Blake in greeting, but when her gaze wandered to and locked on mine, her face flushed the darkest shade of crimson I'd ever seen in my life. The incident yesterday had been far from innocent, but she was definitely embarrassed, and that was cute. Even though that made me want to tease her about it, I still wasn't going to say anything, since I wasn't quite ready to let her off the hook for the Feral.

After meeting my glance she quickly looked away, and sensing the sudden awkwardness Blake cleared his throat and stood. "Breakfast?"

sudden awkwardness Blake cleared his throat and stood. "Breakfast?"

Genevieve nodded, immediately turning to head back into the tent. I pushed myself off the log to follow, but the moment I stepped inside she was about to head out, and she nearly plowed into me. The moment we bumped into each other she froze, barely six inches from my face and eyes locked on mine. Up until now I'd been so calm about what happened yesterday. I'd even been considering teasing her about it only moments before. But I reacted the same way she did, and now I was just staring at her, my heart lodged in my throat like it had been the day before.

Genevieve was the first to recover. "You just going to stand there?" she asked impatiently, and I had to admit that not knowing what my boundaries were, it was kind of a relief she was the first to say something.

I made sure she could see me roll my eyes as I moved aside, and after she hurried out I grabbed my dishes and followed. We strode with Blake to Casey's small pop-up tent, and once she was tagging along we made our way to the DFAC.

"What are you guys doing today?" Blake asked as he sat down beside Casey.

Before Genevieve could answer, I purposefully plopped down close to her side, just to see what her reaction would be. She went completely stiff, and scooted over an inch so I wasn't as close. "There are a few cabins that still need sealing before they're winter-ready," Genevieve told him eventually. "You?"

"I was going to help some of the guys do maintenance on one of the Strykers," he answered. "I heard it was having engine trouble."

Genevieve shook her head, and then scooted another subtle inch away from me. "It wasn't a Stryker. It was a Humvee."

He furrowed his eyebrows at her. "I'm pretty sure it was a Stryker." All Genevieve did was shake her head again. "Yeah, it was," Blake said with a disbelieving laugh.

a disbelieving laugh.

"No," she responded slowly.

"Yes," Blake sighed, and then stopped two of the people who were passing by our table. "Garcia, is it a Stryker or a Humvee that Jarvis and Hunt are working on today?"

"It's a Humvee," Garcia answered, and while Genevieve gave Blake a proud grin my eyes wandered to Garcia's companion.

The moment my eyes met Kellan's his face twisted in a scowl, and he deliberately folded his arms over his chest to look more intimidating. The look I got just now was infinitely fiercer than the ones I'd received a week ago, and after he and Garcia walked away I looked to Blake. "Please tell me you caught that?"

Blake chuckled, nodding his head vigorously. "It's probably the massive hickey on your neck."

"What!" I exclaimed, and while my cheeks flushed with blood my hand immediately shot to my neck so I could cover it up. "Why didn't you tell me it was there?" I asked, glancing from Blake to Genevieve to get an answer out of either of them, and while Blake was laughing, Genevieve's face had turned that same mortified crimson.

"I thought you knew," Blake answered, the amused look on his face letting me know he wanted to get more entertainment out of this.

Genevieve saw the look too, because she whispered warningly, "Blake, don't."

He wasn't at all concerned with her embarrassment. "Couldn't you tell how hard she was sucking on you?" he asked me, still snickering.

"Who?" Casey asked in surprise, probably at hearing it had been a girl, and she glanced between Blake and I curiously.

"That wasn't exactly the feeling I was focusing on," I mumbled as I popped the collar of my coat up and pulled my hair forward to cover it.

"Would both of you just shut up?" Genevieve begged, though I could tell by the look on her face that she was getting angry.

It didn't help that at that moment Casey figured it out. "You two?" Her mouth dropped as she pointed to Genevieve and I, and then she covered it with her hands to hide an amused grin.

"I hate all of you," Genevieve glared as she stood, and leaving her dishes behind she began to storm off. I just watched her leave, in no mood yet to try and cater to her attitude. Instead I glanced into her bowl, and at seeing that she hadn't even finished her soup I pulled it over so I could eat it after mine.

"You're not going after her?" Blake asked, clearly surprised when I made no move to get up.

"No," I answered, nonchalantly slurping up the last bit of fluid in my bowl and moving on to Genevieve's. "She can stew in it for using me as Feral bait."

"I missed something big," Casey mused, shaking her head like this entire thing was overwhelming.

"I'm sure Mr. Smooth can fill you in," I told her sarcastically, nodding my head toward Blake. "Since he seems so eager to talk about it."

I sat there just long enough to finish the rest of the food, and then I took Genevieve's and my own dishes down to the river to rinse them off. After I'd put them back in the tent I wandered toward the cabins at the edge of camp. There weren't many people around. Everyone who lived in the few cabins were already at breakfast or working, and there were only a few men working on building a brand new one close by. I could see which structure Genevieve was in by the small amount of light that seeped out of the unsealed cracks between the logs.

The moment I walked in her gaze landed on me, and she still looked kind of mad. When I didn't say anything, instead picking up a small putty knife to begin working silently, she went back to work herself. Aside from the

light that poured through the remaining cracks from outside, the only source of illumination in the cabin was a small window at the back and a battery-powered lantern on the floor. It took a bit of squinting to make sure I wasn't missing any spots. I had to work at Genevieve's side, since there was only one small bucket of a mud and cement mixture of sealant, and every once in a while I'd see her briefly glance at me out of the corner of her eye.

It felt like nearly an hour before she finally said something. "Have you ever done that before?"

I knew what she meant, but seeing as I was still upset with her, I couldn't resist the opportunity to annoy her a bit. "We did this once a few weeks ago," I answered, talking about sealing the cabins.

"No," she said without looking at me, but even from where I was I could tell her cheeks were turning red again. "Yesterday."

"We've gathered herbs plenty of times too," I told her, my tone of bitter teasing.

"No," she said again, this time sounding exasperated. "I know you know what I'm talking about."

I waited a few moments so she'd know that when I answered I was addressing her original question. "Yes."

She looked over at me, seemingly in shock, but once she recovered from the surprise she swiftly went back to working tensely, like she was afraid to even look at me for too long. "In high school?" she asked.

"No," I responded brusquely.

"After the outbreak?" She once more sounded surprised.

I didn't answer that question. The last thing I wanted was for Genevieve to have some details, and to judge me for a romance with another raider. Especially since she didn't know the first thing about it, it would only make me furious if she decided it was something she could pick at me

about. She fell quiet when I offered no reply, and things were silent between us for at least another twenty minutes.

Eventually she asked in a murmur, "Are you mad at me?"

"You were about to let me get eaten," I told her impatiently.

This time she turned toward me, her eyebrows furrowed with that annoyance I'd been aiming for. "*That's* what you're still mad about?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I started sarcastically, tossing my putty knife to the floor. I wasn't still *just* mad about it. It still made me so furious that I was somewhat eager for an argument. "I didn't realize I was supposed to be okay with it."

"It was a mistake, Echo," she said. "I apologized."

"Huh," I mused, "Funny how when *you* apologize, I'm just supposed to accept it."

"Do not compare this to what you took from me!" she barked. All I could do was stand there glaring at her. "Damn you. What more do you want from me?"

"I want to know that the person I go on patrols and missions with has my back," I told her, poking her chest furiously. "How can you expect me to go into the city with you if I think you'll happily let me get bit?"

"At least I got it out of my system," she quipped hotly. "You're lucky I even shot it after the things you've done."

I groaned in frustration, and since I knew it had been making her uncomfortable all day, I said, "You really want to argue about this again, because you know what happened last time."

"You kissed me first," she said defensively.

I chuckled tauntingly, "And you took it to a whole other level." At the exact reminder she rapidly glanced away. "See, that look right there," I pointed out. "What is that? Shame?" She glared at me defiantly, a look I'd come

out, "What is that? Shame?" She glared at me defiantly, a look I'd come to know as a warning to shut my mouth, but I was too aggravated to stop. "Guilt?" The scowl deepened. "Excitement?" I asked teasingly, and her eyes narrowed viciously. "What? You can do it, but you can't talk about it?" I should've obeyed the warning look, because she roughly grabbed my collar and threw me back against the wall of the cabin. "Why'd you do it?" I asked with difficultly. Aside from the fact that her proximity made me want to kiss her again was the contradiction that now that the anger was fading I was really starting to feel how I should. Hurt.

"Why do you think?" she whispered rhetorically, and it was so quiet around us I was sure she could hear my heart pounding. "Because I hate you."

"You always do that with people you hate?" I asked.

Her eyes narrowed once more, and she answered more specifically, "Because I know I can hurt you." I scanned her face, hoping to find a lie in her eyes. There was none. That was the complete truth, but despite the fact that I knew I should, I couldn't bring myself to push her away. I kept telling myself to over and over again, but it was so much easier thought than done. When I didn't respond or push her away, her eyebrows rose with intrigue. "You don't care if that's why, do you?"

"How do you want me to answer that?" I asked, reaching up and carefully peeling her clenched fists from my collar. She didn't need to keep me pinned... I wasn't going to move.

"Honestly," she instructed. She let me remove her hands, but once they left they didn't fall to her sides. They stopped at my waist.

I struggled to breathe when she let them rest on the edge of my pants, and forced out truthfully, "Half of me doesn't."

"And the other half?" She glanced down at my lips, and at the same time I felt her fingers tighten over the button of my cargos, undoing it so slowly it was torturing.

"Thinks I have a chance," I whispered in response.

She knew what I meant. That I have a chance at proving myself to her, at redemption. At making this something more. "You don't."

Those dark brown eyes kept wandering to my mouth. It was wrong, it was a mistake, but it was the only thing I wanted right now. "Then why do you look like you want to kiss me again?"

"I already told you," she answered while she pushed down my zipper.

"I don't believe you," I challenged weakly. This wasn't fair. She was already using the seduction against me. I could never say no.

"That only makes it easier for me to hurt you," she said, so close I could feel her breath against my lips. "I've never lied to you, I won't start now."

She was watching me, waiting. Giving me a chance to change my mind because she'd just told me the only reason she was doing this was to hurt me. But I hadn't lied to her either. There was the physical part of me, the part that could feel her against me, the part that remembered what her lips tasted like, and that part wanted it no matter what. Then there was the part of me that didn't believe Genevieve would ever have done what she did if there wasn't some attraction, if there was no way she could ever feel what I did. That part wanted it in spite of everything. Either way, I was doomed.

"I'm not going to stop you," I whispered, holding back the urge to lean forward the few small inches it would take to kiss her. Her eyes scanned my own one last time before her the tips of her fingers slipped under the lining of my pants, causing me to draw in an excited breath, but without thinking I used that breath to hesitate. "Wait." Genevieve pulled back to look at me curiously, waiting for me to say something else. It took me almost a minute to figure out why I'd stopped her, and then I realized that if I was going to let her do this, I wanted her to know exactly what she was doing. "You know this will hurt me," I told her, and I waited for her to nod. "But do you know how much?"

Her eyebrows furrowed, and she pulled back a little more and removed her hand, as though she already didn't like what I was saying. "Don't say another word," she ordered, but she knew I wasn't going to listen

another word," she ordered, but she knew I wasn't going to listen, because she pulled back even further and made a move to walk away.

"No!" I protested fiercely, grabbing her by the coat and turning, throwing her back against the wall just as she'd done to me. I was mad again, still bitter about the Feral, but aiding that was the fact that this was already agonizing. "If you want this," I started, taking one hand off her jacket to point an angry finger at her, "Then you're going to damn well hear the consequences."

Genevieve looked shocked at my unexpected outburst, and maybe even a little afraid seeing as her eyes darted to the rifle she'd leaned in the corner, but she just stood there stuck between me and the wall, glaring with acceptance.

"These feelings aren't new," I growled. "Middle school, that's when I *really* started noticing you. I used to blush every time I thought about you. My parents used to ask about you for no other reason than I talked about you so goddamn much. That was before I even realized what those feelings were. But every time you caught me looking at you, and you'd just smile, my stomach fluttered so bad it made me weak." She'd stopped glaring into my eyes, she wouldn't even look at me, but there was still a rebellious scowl on her face. "Maybe you think this revenge is going to last a couple weeks, and then I'll get tired of it. But this goes too far back." Now I moved my face into her line of sight, forcing her to look at me. "You still want to hurt me like this? Go ahead. Kiss me if you want your revenge that badly. If you think the pain will ever make me give up. I know pain, Genevieve. Six years, it's been my closest friend. So kiss me if you think I'll break before you start feeling this way too."

She'd been looking at me in silent compliance, but at my last challenge her eyes narrowed viciously, and she took in an angry breath. She looked so offended about it that it felt like a small victory, like there really was hope for me because I'd struck a nerve, because she was offended that I'd hint she had feelings for me.

Genevieve shoved my hands off her coat so hard that the sheer force of it knocked me back a small step. "Suddenly," she mumbled, and when she continued she managed to sound disgusted with me, "I'm not in the

mood."

"What is the mood?" I asked without turning to face her as she strode toward the door. Despite everything I'd said, I *wanted* her to kiss me. Now that she was walking away I almost regretted telling her how deep this went. "Do I have to piss you off again?"

She turned to meet my gaze, looking completely apathetic. "Two hours," she said flatly. "Then you have to be back at the tent."

Once she was gone I let out a sigh. It hurt just knowing why she'd done it to me yesterday, but even then I was disappointed that she hadn't done it just now. There was a new resolve swimming at the back of my mind. I wasn't sure if she would do it again. Maybe now that she was aware of just how much it would hurt me she'd changed her mind. But if she would, if she did, I wasn't going down without a fight. If it happened again it would crush me every time, but I would deal with it because I was going to make her want me in the same way I wanted her. I'd play this game better than she ever could, because it was so much more than a game to me.

With that in mind I felt somewhat at ease. At least at ease enough to feel like I could relax with my two hours of freedom. After leaving the cabin I strode back to the tent to see if Blake was there. Hanging out with him usually killed time pretty quickly. He wasn't there though, so instead I grabbed a novel I'd finished off of my cot and started for Anthony's site to trade it for a new one.

Nobody was at the campfire when I reached the preacher's shelter, nor was he resting under his tarp. I stood at the middle of his area and glanced around, checking to see if he was nearby that way I could wave and motion to him that I was taking a different book. He was nowhere to be found, but since he'd told me that I didn't have to worry about asking him before taking another paperback I didn't hesitate to return the old one and pick something else. I took it back to the tent with me, and throwing myself down on my cot proceeded to fill up some time with reading.

I don't know how long it was, time always flew by when I'd buried my nose in a book, but after about fifty pages Genevieve stormed in

nose in a book, but after about fifty pages Genevieve stormed in, immediately grabbing me by the collar, as was becoming so normal for her. "What did you take?"

The very tone of her voice made me instantly aggravated, so I knocked her hands off and stood. "What are you talking about?" I asked, still more confused than irritated.

"Kellan saw you snooping around Anthony's campsite," she answered. "You get freedom, and you use it to steal from a preacher?"

The idea of her trusting Kellan over me caused me to chuckle with furious disbelief. "Is he standing outside to bask in the fallout?" I moved to poke my head out of the tent, and not seeing him around I turned back to Genevieve and added bitterly, "Or did he not follow you here because there was no merit behind his bullshit accusation?"

"What did you take, Echo?" she repeated angrily, even going so far as to take an intimidating step closer.

I strode the few feet to my cot, and once I grabbed the book I'd been reading I shoved it against her chest. "Here." She glanced down to examine it as it fell into her hands, and I explained before she started to believe I'd stolen it, "He lets me borrow them. I exchanged the old one for that one, and he gave me permission to even if he wasn't around. Go and ask him if you really think I'd risk my life for a stupid book."

She looked taken aback, like the truth was so incredibly shocking to her that she didn't even know what to think. The fact that it didn't even cross her mind to question Kellan's incriminating account only made me angrier.

"Jesus Christ," I swore in exasperated fury. "Are you bipolar? Because that would seriously explain a lot."

"Echo," Genevieve groaned in irritation as she tossed the book backward onto her own cot. "You're a raider. What the hell do you want me to think when someone tells me something like that?"

"I'm not a raider anymore," I muttered through clamped jaws.

"I'm not a raider anymore," I muttered through clamped jaws.

"You will always be a raider," she countered coldly.

I wanted to yell at her. Hell, I felt like punching her, but that wasn't going to get me what I really wanted, so I checked myself. "Fine, if you aren't going to give me the benefit of the doubt then at least come to me civilly and willing to let me explain," I told her angrily. "Innocent until proven guilty. Isn't it your job to remember that?"

"You *are* guilty," she growled.

"Right," I chuckled sarcastically, moving closer so I could get aggravatingly close to her face. "I killed your family, it's only logical that I'd steal a book." Genevieve's mouth snapped shut, and while she glowered at me she ground her teeth with fury. She looked mad enough that I was preparing to dodge a punch, but just when I expected to feel her fist crash against me, her eyes dropped to my lips. "Are you going to hit me or kiss me?" I asked with tense curiosity, completely and instantly stripped of all anger at the mere suggestion of it. Once more, all I wanted was her. "To be honest it's kind of intimidating not knowing whi-"

Her lips landed on mine before I could even finish, and all at once I felt relieved and tortured at finally getting what I desired. Relieved because I was desperate for it, tortured because I could practically taste her resentment on my tongue.

"Genevieve," I mumbled out the side of my mouth, and when she stopped kissing me to thrust me backward onto her cot I said, "Kellan knows something's up." She clearly didn't care, because after situating herself above me she made it impossible for me to speak. But this was important. I was pretty sure Kellan had the power to ruin my life here, and I at least wanted her to have it in the back of her mind the next time he accused me of something. So I pushed on her shoulders to stop her one more time. "He at least knows that I like you." At that she sighed with annoyance and pulled back even further, refusing to look me in the eyes again. "Why does it bother you so much when I say that? You know it. That's why you're doing this."

"Yeah, but, just stop saying it," she told me, finally meeting my gaze to give me her fearsome warning glare.

She seemed to be entering that mood where she was preparing to walk away from me. I shouldn't have opened my big mouth in the first place, and now the only way I could think to get her to stay was to keep making her mad. "Stop saying what? That I like you?" I asked, the slightest hint of teasing in my tone. "I used to daydream about you, you know. But you're a way better kisser than I ever imagined."

"Shut. Up," she growled through clenched teeth.

I wasn't going to. I could already tell I was halfway to getting her to kiss me again. "Make me," I challenged with a smirk, and then told her mockingly, "Or else I'm just going to keep saying it. I like you, Genevieve. I have a big, fat crush o-"

Once more she cut me off with her lips. It was a hard, rough, angry kiss, but this time I wasn't going to say anything that would make her stop. Wouldn't say another damn thing, no matter how much the emotional pain battled with the physical pleasure, because I was going to win this.

Seek You Out

*** I know Dugan's chapter is after Gen and Echo's this time. That was intentional :). Enjoy!*

Eyes on Fire by Blue Foundation (Zeds Dead remix)

Seek You Out

Genevieve

I filed out of the classroom behind the other students, trying to search over their shoulders for someone specific. I spotted her light brown hair through the crowd, and once I passed the door I jogged to catch up.

"Hayden," I called. At hearing her name she turned around, and seeing it was me, she grinned. "Is your next class this way?" I asked, pointing the direction she'd been heading.

She nodded shyly and resumed walking with me at her side. "Is yours?"

"Not really," I answered, and pointed the opposite way, "It's that way." She nodded again, and this time followed it up by glancing over at me awkwardly. "I got an A on that test," I told her, and she smiled proudly. "I think it's because you let me borrow your pencil. You're like a good luck charm."

"I doubt I had much to do with it," she giggled.

"I didn't even study," I replied with an easy shrug, glad when she giggled some more. Then I fell quiet, trying to find the nerve to spit out what I'd come to say. I'd done my planned segue perfectly, and the late bell for our next class would ring in a minute. "Since you're such a good luck charm," I started, and she looked over at me curiously. "I was going to see if you might come to the soccer game tonight."

"The soccer game?" she repeated unsurely. Worried I'd made her

uncomfortable by asking, I looked over to apologize. Her cheeks were tinted with a faint blush, but her laugh line was deep with her signature smile.

"It's an important game," I justified, hoping it might help convince her. I just couldn't read on her face whether or not she wanted to go, she was so quiet in her thoughtfulness.

"I could ask my parents," she said quietly, "Maybe."

"Maybe – I'll take it," I accepted hastily, glancing back toward where my next class was. "I got to go, I'll look for you tonight."

She gave a timid wave in departure, and I hurried to the opposite end of campus, arriving late. That night at the game I looked for her in the bleachers. The girls' soccer games were never that popular, so there weren't many spectators to search through. She was nowhere to be found. We won, but I was so distracted looking for her every couple minutes that the victory didn't come easy.

"Hey," I greeted, jogging to catch up to her again as we left our class. "I didn't see you last night, were you there?"

"Um," she hummed quietly, and when I looked at her she was blushing just like yesterday. Was I intimidating to her? "I didn't know if you were serious about wanting me there…" After only a split moment's pause she added, as if it was a more acceptable excuse, "And I don't have my license yet."

"Of course I was serious," I laughed, assuming by her shyness the first reason was the more honest one, and then I admitted more than I had yesterday. "Some of us went out for pizza afterward, I was going to invite you." For some reason she tinted an even darker shade of red after looking at me in shock, and I couldn't help but chuckle. "Thought it would be fun to make Naomi mad if you came, you know?" We'd been in classes together since grade school, but I barely knew anything about her other than what I'd merely observed over the years.

She huffed with amusement, but replied timidly, "I'm not really good in… with um… social… things."

I snorted with laughter, and then passed her an apologetic smile when I realized how serious she was. "Okay," I mumbled, trying to think of a solution, but when I saw that she was blushing more furiously I put my hand on her shoulder reassuringly, "No, no, don't be shy, it's okay. How about…" I glanced up thoughtfully. "What if it's just you and me then, and since you don't drive I can take you home after."

"Really?" she asked with obvious surprise. When I nodded her laugh line deepened with a nervous smirk. "Okay."

"Cool," I grinned happily. "I got to go. Promise you'll show up next time?" She nodded with rosy cheeks. "Bye."

But we never got to hang out, because two nights later Mr. Greely was in my living room with a gun in his hand.

…

"What are you reading?" I asked Echo, finally so bored of just lying down that I had to do something. Today was one of our off days, and since waking up from my post-patrol nap an hour ago I'd just been lying there.

"Some book about vampires," she answered, flipping the page. I was thinking about how that didn't sound like a book Pastor Anthony would have when, as if she could read my mind, she added, "I borrowed it from Casey."

I kicked my feet over the side of my cot and into my boots, and while I laced them up I asked, "Do you think they're real?"

"Why? Because zombies are real?" she said with a chuckle, but I narrowed my eyes at her. She knew I didn't like it when she called the Ferals that, because they aren't dead. They're sick. "I think with how few people are left in the world, if they were real then we'd have some unexplained deaths around here."

"Maybe they're eating the Ferals," I told her. I didn't really think so, but my boredom was speaking for me.

"Ew." Her mouth turned down with disgust. "Then I feel bad for them."

I smiled with amusement, though I kept from letting it turn into a laugh just so Echo wouldn't get the wrong idea about the fact that I was talking to her. It was one thing to have sex with her – with how much of a stubborn smartass she was, it shut her up better than punching her ever did – but it was another thing entirely to be overly friendly. Especially since she seemed intent on constantly reminding me she was trying to make me like her, the last thing I needed was for her to think it was actually starting to happen.

After I laced up my boots I pulled on my winter coat, and I strode out of the tent without saying anything else. Blake was sitting by the fire alone, so I made my way to him. "Hey, is your bath pot in your tent?" He hated bathing in the river even during the summer because he thought it was too cold, so he always washed up in his tent by heating water over the fire in a large cooking pot.

"Yeah," he answered, and knowing why I was asking said, "You can go grab it."

I smiled my thanks and walked to his tent, and when I had the pot I made my way back to the fire. I set up the support poles on either side of the pit so I could hang the pot over it, I filled some of it with snow, and once I'd hung it over the fire I plopped down next to Blake while it heated up.

"Is Casey going to come hang out with you today?" I asked him, pulling on my gloves and extending my cold hands toward the flame.

Blake kicked his feet up on the rocks that surrounded the pit and shook his head. "I'm probably going to go help her and April in the medical cabin in a little while." I nodded my acknowledgment, and in the following silence I could see him looking over at me occasionally, like there was something he wanted to say. Eventually he blurted, "I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend."

I squealed with excitement before he'd hardly even finished, and I threw my arms around him in a hug. "My Blakey is growing up!" I teased, giddily shaking him back and forth. "It's so good to see you happy."

"Thanks, pipsqueak," he laughed, watching while I gathered another handful of snow to add to what was now water in the pot. "I just can't decide whether I should try to be romantic about it or just straight up ask her."

I added more until the pot was full, and then stirred it around a little while I considered Blake's statement. "Beats me," I told him after some thought. It was hard to picture Blake doing something romantic since he'd always been like a brother to me, but he was such a softie that I knew he had it in him. "I'm sure you can think of something though." Then I added reassuringly, "And she'd love it either way."

"Yeah," he replied with a grin, already sounding far away like he was trying to plan it in his head.

I was so excited for him that I wanted to hug him again, but instead I sat there with him in content silence while I waited for the water to heat. After a few minutes I stood up to test my finger in it. Seeing as it was hot enough, I pulled the pot off the fire, saying 'see you later' to Blake while I carried it back to the tent with me. When I got inside I made sure to zip up the flap door so none of the cold air would seep in, and Echo was watching me curiously as I set the pot on the floor and threw a washcloth into it.

Sitting on my cot, I undid my boots and shrugged off my jacket, and it wasn't until I pulled my long sleeve shirt over my head that Echo asked, "What are you doing?"

"Washing up," I told her nonchalantly, undoing my jeans and slipping them off too. She nodded and returned her attention to the book in her hands, but when I pulled off the rest of my clothing she glanced back over. I ignored her for a couple minutes while I began to scrub dirt off my arms with the hot cloth, but after that I mumbled, "You're staring."

It didn't bother me that she was staring. What bothered me was that if I

It didn't bother me that she was staring. What bothered me was that if I didn't stop her, there was a chance she'd misinterpret my complacence. Just because I knew the sex was a way to get revenge didn't mean I was going to lie about what it meant to hurt her even worse. In some weird way, that felt like taking it too far… The guilt was bad enough already. So almost every chance I got I made sure she still knew I hated her, and that I never did anything to give her the notion that there was romance in it – aside from kissing her if she decided to think too much about it. I didn't take her clothes off, I always regretted it right after and hurried away before she could say anything about it, and I sure as hell didn't stick around to cuddle.

"Oh," she said apologetically, rapidly shifting her gaze back to the novel. But a few seconds later her eyes wandered back over.

"Really?" I asked in sarcastic disbelief, but this time she didn't go back to reading.

"Come on," she laughed, like it was ridiculous that I didn't want her watching me. "You can have sex with me, but I can't see you naked?"

"You've seen me. Now stop." I waited to see if she would. She didn't. "It's not like I can do this somewhere else," I said in a clipped breath, though admittedly I was slightly entertained by the fact that this was so clearly torturing her, even if that hadn't been my intention. "Besides," I added, "You have every right to turn me down. Just like I can say 'avert your eyes'."

"Make me," she challenged with that laugh line smirk, just like she did sometimes when I knew she was trying to get me to kiss her.

"*So* not happening right now," I answered, letting slip an amused chuckle despite my attempted shortness. "But nice try." She sighed with disappointment and deliberately went back to staring at her book, but it wasn't long afterward that her eyes fell on me again. "Echo," I scolded impatiently.

She pushed herself up like she was annoyed, and slipped her feet into her boots. "I can't stay in here then." She didn't bother tying them before

pulling on her jacket. "You're a damn tease."

I was trying not to laugh at how flustered she looked. At the fact that her cheeks were an almost-endearing pink, and that even as she shuffled around to try and leave, her eyes kept involuntarily darting to me and then anywhere else. When she got to the tent flap and began to unzip it, however, I couldn't resist complaining just to bug her. "You're going to let all the cold air in."

"Good." She walked out and purposefully made a wide sweep of the door to let in even more, and as she zipped it back up from the outside she grumbled, "I hope it freezes your nipples off."

That made me laugh, so I called after her teasingly, "Somebody's a sore loser."

She made no response, but the tent was close enough to the fire that as she sat down I heard Blake ask playfully, "Trouble in paradise?"

I scrubbed down my legs, listening curiously and almost laughing again when Echo whined, "She loves to torture me." I could almost picture it, her falling onto the log next to him with a sigh, slumping her shoulders with disappointment.

I wasn't surprised Blake was talking to her about it. What with entertainment being scarce, it was probably like watching a soap opera for him. "Don't act like you don't get it enough," he chuckled.

Echo mirrored his amusement, but it was like I could see her batting her eyes when she asked unassumingly, "What do you mean?"

"I happened to walk by the tent the other night," Blake answered, and even though neither of them could see me I felt a mortified heat rush to my cheeks. "And I know that wasn't the first time since the… first time." I heard Echo laugh, and I didn't understand how they could talk about it so candidly when I was blushing like mad. "Are you always that vocal, or is Gen just that good with her hands?"

I was so embarrassed that I would've covered my ears to tune them out

completely, but before I could Echo groaned, "My God, her hands." I could imagine her antics, falling back over the log euphorically, maybe exaggeratedly putting the back of her hand to her forehead, and it was a completely different kind of heat I flushed with then.

"No, no, no," I whispered frantically, flapping my hands in the air and taking a deep breath to try and will away *that* heat. Not okay.

The guilt that flooded me whenever I got that feeling was a thousand times worse than the guilt I got when I gave it to Echo. The excited flutter made my stomach reel in the best of physical and worst of moral ways. Like hot and cold air meeting to form a tornado, sometimes it got so bad it literally made me sick. It was the reason I desperately wished I could find another outlet for my anger, and at the same time it was the reason I wouldn't admit to myself that I refused to find another outlet. Not even a minute sexual attraction was okay. Not for the girl who killed my family.

I tried to get my mind off of it, to force away the guilt, so I worked hard at tuning them out and finished washing up. It was nice to have my clothes on again, because not even the canvas walls could keep out all the cold, and once I was dressed I took the pot outside to dump the water and put it back in Blake's tent. When I strode over to the fire Blake and Echo were both puffing on cigarettes, so when Echo offered me one I took it and lay on my back across the log perpendicular to theirs.

"Squeaky clean?" Echo asked.

Before I could respond Blake snorted, "Hardly," and both he and Echo laughed with amusement.

"Don't encourage him," I told Echo, lifting my head to give her a glare, thus scolding *her* for the innuendo, and then raising the cigarette to my lips when I laid it back down. I didn't want them making me blush again, not so Echo could see it and get the wrong idea, and especially while there were remnants of that guilt still fluttering around. At least I didn't feel as awkward about it now as I had after the first time.

"Oh, come on," Blake continued teasingly, reaching over and shaking my foot. "You think I'm funny." My lips curled as I sat up. I could never resist

giving Blake a smile when that's what he was after, and in response he gave me a toothy grin. "Ladies," he said as he stood, "I'm off to maybe get myself a girlfriend."

"She'll say 'yes'," I said reassuringly.

"Yeah, she's basically in love with you," Echo added with a giggle.

Blake smiled, already looking adorably nervous, and after saying 'bye' he left for the medical cabin. I lay back down across the log after he was gone, taking in another breath of smoke and entertaining myself with how thick it looked in the frosty air above me when I let it out. Things were quiet between Echo and I for a few minutes, during which I could feel her eyes on me. I didn't mind it at first. This revenge only worked as long as she had feelings for me, and the staring reassured me of that. But after a while it bothered me that I didn't know what she was thinking.

"You're staring again." I sat up once more, flicking the cigarette butt into the fire.

She stuck her feet straight out and leaned back on her hands, giving me a coy smile. "You have your clothes on."

Maybe I had my clothes on, but now I was almost positive that's not what she was thinking about. My gaze wandered from her eyes to her smile, and then down to her hands. Not okay. I narrowed my eyes at her in annoyance. "Are you trying to be cute, or are you trying to flirt me?"

"Um." She looked up thoughtfully, clearly pretending like she had to think about the answer. "Both."

"Don't do either," I told her seriously, trying to wipe the smile off her face. "The only person who can get away with trying to act cute is Blake, and flirting won't get you anywhere."

"Eventually it will," she argued playfully.

"It really won't," I said, and got up to start toward the tent.

She was following after me already, reaching my side a few steps later. "Why not?"

I looked over at her as we strode into the tent to see if she really wanted an answer. "Fine, you know what, flirt all you want. It'll just be a waste because I won't flirt back."

She waited to see what I was doing, and when I began to pull out my eating utensils she did the same. "You could say we're flirting right now," she said smugly.

"You're delusional," I mumbled, waiting for her to find whatever she was searching for under her cot, but when I realized she was completely serious my curiosity got the best of me. "What makes this flirting?"

She came up holding her spoon, and turned toward me as she answered, "Your smile."

"I'm not smiling," I replied flatly, disappointed she didn't have a more satisfactory answer, that way I could avoid doing it in the future.

She closed the two-pace distance between us, gently tapping me on the nose with the spoon. "Your eyes are."

So far today I'd been in a surprisingly decent mood, but now she was being too lighthearted, and it was becoming irritating. "Personal space," I mumbled, putting my hand on her shoulder and pushing her an arm's length away. She respected it, but her laugh line was still deep with an amused smirk, and her eyes flashed teasingly. It was like she was playing a game with me, or trying to provoke me. If the latter, it was working. I was annoyed. "And I'm not even going to merit that with a response."

"That *was* a response," she said, grinning cheekily.

"I swear to God," I groaned. "When did you become such a smartass?"

The grin disappeared as her lips met, but only because she was trying to hold back amused laughter as one eyebrow rose teasingly. "When did you become such a tight-ass?"

you become such a tight ass?

"Let me guess," I started with irked sarcasm. "This constitutes flirting?"

Again the smugness faded, and the only hint of a smirk now was her laugh line. She knew it worked to her advantage though, knew that line gave her an edge of sex appeal, and she followed it up by absentmindedly putting the spoon to her lips, further drawing my attention to her mouth. "Depends. Does it make you want to kiss me?"

It worked too – I was completely focused on her lips. Now I wanted to ask who'd taught her to flirt so efficiently. The girl from high school would've never had the nerve to act like this. Unfortunately for Echo's scheme, her succeeding in putting the idea in my head, while it worked, only made me more annoyed. Though I couldn't lie and say it didn't give me the impulse to kiss her. "Not happening," I answered instead, and turned for the door with my dishes in hand.

It was still pretty early in the afternoon, but I was confident that the DFAC would already be serving dinner. Sure enough, there was a line at the serving table, so I stood there with Echo and glanced around to see who was eating. That's when I saw Kellan, and my lips curled with an idea before I even consciously thought about it. I knew that whenever I was friendly with him it grated on Echo's nerves. If she wanted to see flirting, I'd show her flirting. Kellan wouldn't mind, seeing as the only thing he wanted from me was the only thing Echo was getting. A little playfulness couldn't break his heart seeing as he didn't have real feelings for me.

"Who brewed you some coffee?" I asked him as I plopped down at his side since they didn't serve coffee with dinner, and with a scowl already Echo sat down across from us and next to Garcia. Before Kellan could respond I picked up his cup and took a sip. "Whoa," I shuddered at the surprise of the taste. "Irish, I see."

Kellan chuckled amusedly, looking extremely delighted at how friendly I was acting. "Russian, actually," he corrected, scooting the mug toward me. "Help yourself."

I shook my head and held up my own cup of water. "Never been much of

a vodka girl." Then I scooped some salad into my mouth, and after I swallowed I nodded toward Echo and added, "And we have patrols again tonight."

Even at the comment Kellan didn't so much as acknowledge Echo with a glance or a scowl. "In what?" he started thoughtfully, a teasing smirk on his face. "Four hours? You're a lightweight, huh, LT?"

"Shut up," I laughed, purposefully giving his arm a sporty push, and then leaving one hand there to squeeze it. "Have you been working out?" With how attractive Kellan was, I would've thought it would be so easy to flirt with him. But at that obnoxious and overly cliché line I had to keep from rolling my eyes at myself. At least it was accomplishing what I wanted, because when I looked at Echo she squinted her eyes at me indignantly.

I kept up the flirting the entire meal, but it was anything but easy. Every word, laugh, and flirtatious touch was nearly impossible to force. To be honest, I was almost disgusted with myself. The only thing that made it even remotely worth it was the fact that it so clearly got Echo mad. She was so furious by the time we were done eating that she stormed off ahead of me to the tent, and when I walked in she glowered at me while I put my dishes away.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked, so innocently that I could practically hear her teeth grinding.

"You know what's the matter with me," she answered fiercely.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "I do?"

"Fuck you, Genevieve," she spat. "I get the point. You don't have to drag Kellan into this."

"No, you obviously don't get the point," I growled, unexpectedly irritated. "Because there is no 'this'." I don't know who made the angry advance, but somehow we always ended up so close when we argued. Now we were standing face to face, and I touched back and forth between her chest and mine to emphasize my point. "You don't own me. We're not dating. You don't get to be mad about the things I do because 'this' is

nothing." All she did was glare at me. "How can you still stand there and act like you keep forgetting that I hate you?"

For some reason I flushed with that not okay heat, triggered by her proximity, or the fact that I was starting to associate arguments with the way she felt. Even if I didn't yell as much anymore, it was always fights worse than this that led to sex. This was nowhere close, but it was the first time I wanted to keep provoking her. The first time that for some unknown reason I actually wanted the excuse.

Echo's eyebrows furrowed, but it didn't look like anger. It looked like curiosity. Something I did or said had melted her anger completely. "Try that again without looking at my lips," she challenged.

I stared her right the eyes, scowling while I repeated, "I hate you." But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep my eyes from dropping to her mouth.

Her laugh line deepened, and she threw herself backward onto to her cot, grabbing the novel she'd been reading earlier while she chuckled, "Whatever."

The only thought I had was why did she turn away? That wasn't supposed to be how things went. More than my disappointment that I didn't do a good enough job provoking her to give me an excuse was the fear that *me* wanting it and *her* turning away gave her some control. Maybe she didn't think I was really going to do it, that's the only thing that made sense. Because whenever I made it obvious that I was going to kiss her she never made any attempt to avoid it. It was always the opposite. She almost begged for it. However now, thinking she might be turning the tides and taking away my outlet, I was panicking. I had to be reassured that by flirting with Kellan I hadn't made her stop wanting me. I had to find something to fight with her about.

"Could you clean up your shit?" I asked, making sure I sounded overly aggravated. Echo glanced over, and I pointed to the backpack she'd set on top of the trunk, technically *my* trunk. She sighed and got up with unconcerned slowness, picked up the bag, and set it down beside her

cot. "Hello?"

I pointed to her black beanie, which had been lying underneath her backpack. She gave me a glare, and after picking it up put it deliberately and roughly onto her head while trudging back to her cot. I cleared my throat at her before I'd even found something else to nag her about, and as she stared at me expectantly I hastily searched the tent for something else. The only thing I could find were the undergarments she'd hung over a support pole to dry. It was where I hung my stuff too, but it was all I could think of.

"Get those out of here."

"Okay," she huffed in irritation. "What are you doing?"

"Your shit is all over my space," I growled.

"Our shit is always all over each others' space," she argued. "What's your deal?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, trying to think of how I could continue this argument. I couldn't. "You just pissed me off, that's all."

"I pissed you off?" Echo asked, finally seeming irritated enough that she wasn't going to let this go.

That was when I realized I'd been going about it the wrong way. Echo had a habit of running her mouth when she got upset, and I knew that sometimes she found ways to provoke me so I would kiss her. Now that she was annoyed, all I had to do was let her talk and provoke me so I'd have my excuse.

"You bathe in here to tease me and get annoyed when I even look at you," she started, beginning to give me what I wanted. "You flirt with Kellan for the sole purpose of making me jealous, but when we come back in here you tell me I'm not allowed to be jealous. Then you start bitching at me over pointless shit because God knows why. And *I* pissed *you* off?"

"Stop talking," I said with offence, knowing it would make her even angrier.

"Why? Am I making a bit of sense?" She was in my face again, and now I just had to wait until she continued ranting, then I could shut her up the way I wanted. "And you could flirt with anyone in this goddamn camp, Genevieve. Anyone." Wait for it. "But who do you pick?" Wait. "You have to pick the guy who already wants to kick my ass, because why not give him another reas-" Now.

I grabbed her coat collar and pulled her forward, and she stopped trying to speak the moment my lips touched hers. Since we were standing at the edge of my cot I whipped her to the side off balance and dropped her onto it.

"You can be a real bitch, you know that?" she said while I got on top of her, and I could almost hear a satisfied smile in her voice. She wanted it as much as I did.

I ignored her, and after I positioned myself over her I felt her hands fall on my hips. My goal from the beginning had been to make sure she never found romance in this, so like I usually did to keep her from touching me too much, I grabbed her hands with my own and lifted her arms above her head. There, I purposefully curled her fingers around the frame of the cot, and then moved back to her waist and lowered my lips to hers again. I never wasted time. I never wanted this to last longer than it had to. So the moment after I had her pants undone I slid my hand between her legs, and with my first series of strokes her fingers tightened on the frame, and she released a needy moan into my mouth.

I pulled away to look at her seriously. "You have to start being more quiet." If Blake heard just walking by, it was only a matter of time before someone else went walking by, and I didn't want anyone to know.

"I can't," she whispered to hold back another pleasured sound. While I didn't stop my motion against her, I narrowed my eyes to let her know I wasn't joking, and she responded to conflicting touch and glare by whimpering, "I hate you."

"No, you don't," I said with a smirk, and along with my reply I slid into her so slowly that she had time to draw in a long breath, which would've only been let out in another loud moan. "Don't," I warned at the end of the inhale, and as I pushed into her again and she bit her lip to prevent the resulting noise, her gray eyes met mine pleadingly.

When I shook my head to answer her searching gaze she grabbed at the pillow beneath her head, and I heard her gift a muffled sound to the thick fabric after she shoved it down over her face. I don't know why I couldn't resist teasing her like that, but now that I was done messing around I pulled out of her to begin the motion I'd already discovered would finish her the quickest. Slow, exaggerated, delicate. The way she liked being touched I knew there was at least a small part of her that was a romantic, and it was the only thing I'd do gently and indulge her in just to get it over with faster. I could tell by the pace of her breathing, by her muted purrs and their consequent silk against my fingers, by the depth of the arch in her back, and by the strength with which she squeezed the pillow she was holding over her face when my job was almost done.

"Quietly," I reminded in a murmur, just in time for her to take a deep breath and to release it in one drawn out, suppressed hum.

The last noise she made, however dulled, it brought on that not okay heat more compellingly than it ever had. She'd barely finished before I pulled away, terrified of it like each time before. I don't know what came over me when I did this to her, not this time or any time before it. I knew I'd get that feeling, and I did it anyway, fully aware of what the emotional consequences would be. Knowing how forcefully the guilt would rush upon me the moment it was done. I pushed myself onto my knees, and sat back on my feet between her legs so Echo could get up. But she didn't. She just lay there, breathing heavily, letting the pillow stay on her face even though her arms were thrown out limply on either side of her.

"Get off my bed," I told her impatiently, trying desperately hard not to sound as pleading as I felt.

She removed the pillow with exaggerated difficulty, like she was weak, and looked down at me. "Can't I get like thirty seconds to come off it?"

"No," I growled through clenched teeth, but I didn't wait for her to obey. I grabbed the shoulder of her coat and pulled her upright.

"Okay," she complied with an annoyed sigh, pushing off my cot and trudging over to hers. "Buzz kill," she complained, falling face first onto her blankets.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't even look at her because I couldn't make that feeling go away, and instead I hurried out of the tent and to the dying campfire. A couple logs from the bin nearby were enough to get it going again, but it wasn't heat from the flame I needed. It was the opposite of heat that I needed, so I pressed my already freezing hands to my neck to cool off. That feeling I got made me want to hate what I'd done, what I'd been doing. Only, I didn't. I couldn't. But I hated myself and how conflicted I already was, that I couldn't stop no matter how badly I wanted to, and the harder it was to push away the heat, the more readily I hated myself. Maybe worse was that the more I liked the sounds Echo made, the more I hated her for making them.

Defending in Suspense

Migraine by Twenty One Pilots

Defending in Suspense

Echo

From just a step behind Genevieve in the dark library I could see her raise her hand with a closed fist. I knew that was the signal for 'freeze,' and as I refrained from taking my next step I heard everything go silent behind us too. This was the first of these types of assignments I'd been on with her platoon, but apparently searching through libraries for books that might help them find a cure was somewhat normal. We'd entered the library only a minute before, and were still searching it for Ferals. Genevieve must've spotted some, because once we all came to a halt she peered around the next bookshelf aisle.

After looking down it she turned around and gave the hand sign for 'six,' and then touched the heel of her hand to the inside of her other wrist, meaning 'enemy,' or Ferals. After holding up her knife to indicate how to kill the Ferals she pointed to Hunt, Lee, and Powers, and motioned for them to move down to the opposite end of the aisle. Then she pointed at Blake, herself, and I, and motioned for us to follow her. I trailed her into the aisle, hearing the raspy breaths of the sleeping Ferals before our dim blue beams even illuminated them.

The hall was narrow, and the six Ferals were sleeping curled up together, making it impossible for us to surround them. When we got there Genevieve inhaled deeply, lifted her foot, and set it down slow and silent into the very heart of the group. I didn't like it that she was putting herself there, at the center of danger where any of the Ferals could turn its head and sink its teeth into her leg, but now wasn't exactly a good time to protest. With her in the middle of the slumbering creatures, we were each in perfect position to dispatch one. Genevieve held up her hand once more, her large knife poised in the other. She held up one finger, then two, and right after three every one of us dropped, skillfully plunging out

knives into the Ferals in such a synchronized way it was like we did it on a regular basis.

I wasn't sure why we'd come to this library when Genevieve had told me that they'd already searched the shelves at places like Harvard. We were in a library from some tiny medical college in the middle of nowhere, and I couldn't imagine what kind of books would be here that wouldn't be at a place like Harvard. Being relatively small, it didn't take much longer to clear out this and the second floor. There was only one more, smaller clan of Ferals that we took care of just as easily. Once we were sure there were no more threats, Genevieve leaned back against the checkout counter at the center of the building and motioned for everyone to get close.

"Spread out," she instructed quietly, "Look for any books you think might be important. Hatfield and Stackhouse, lock up the doors. We'll stay here in the morning, just make sure you aren't visible from the windows when the sun comes up."

She dismissed everyone, but I waited with her until she was ready to move. When Kellan passed by with Garcia I purposefully leaned away so he wouldn't shoulder me, accustomed by now to his provoking bumps – you'd think he'd have come up with a more creative way to get on my nerves. While I waited for Genevieve to make sure all her soldiers were going to perform their assigned tasks, I leaned my elbows over the counter to examine a stack of books on it. I knew April wanted them for research, but I wasn't exactly sure what specific kind.

"What are April's theories?" I asked Genevieve, setting aside the top text to scan the next one.

Genevieve strode over until she was close enough that her shoulder brushed mine, and I tried to hide my surprise when she grabbed my flashlight from me and held it over the book so I could focus on studying it. "About what?"

"The cause of the infection," I answered, and when she appeared curious about why I was asking added, "It would help to know what kind of book to look for if I know what she thought the infection was. Like a bacteria, a

to look for if I knew what she thought the infection was. Like a bacteria, a virus, a parasite…"

I'd started turning the page to skim the next section of the book, but when Genevieve offered no response I glanced up. She was watching me with a thoughtful look in her eyes, and upon being caught responded instantly to my question. "We've been on these missions a bunch of times," she said, letting out a huff of laughter. "And that's the first time I've been asked that question."

"That's probably why you've never had any luck finding something useful." I couldn't help but chuckle in shock as I straightened up to talk to her at eye level. "Do you have an answer for it?"

"Parasite," she replied with a slight shrug. "Brain parasite."

"Uh huh," I breathed, leaning back over to search the titles in the rest of the stack. Finding one that looked promising, I opened it up, chuckling again, "I can't believe nobody's ever asked. That's the most important thing."

Genevieve laughed, bending over and matching my position so she could be more comfortable while she held the light for me. "To be honest," she said quietly so nobody else could hear, "I think most of my soldiers don't believe in a cure."

"They're not the only ones," I mumbled, glancing through the table of contents.

"You really don't think there's a cure?" she asked, and at the distraught tone of her voice I glanced up to look at her.

I'd told her before I thought it was pointless to search for one, but the genuine disappointment on her face made me reconsider how bluntly I restated it now. "I don't think it's the solution we should stake all our hope on," I told her truthfully, giving an apologetic half-smile at the downward turn of her gaze. Despite the disappointment, she didn't look shocked. I took in a thoughtful breath while I considered the gentlest way to ask my next question. Straightforward seemed best. "Do you honestly believe

there *is* a cure?"

Her eyes locked on mine, and I could tell by the way she stared that she was seriously contemplating my inquiry. "I honestly really hope there is."

"Why?" I asked, sincerely curious about it.

But she didn't understand what I was asking. "What do you mean why?"

"Most people I've come across since the outbreak have one deep, base reason for how they've lived afterward," I told her, speaking softly so it wouldn't change the fact that she was actually talking to me intimately. "Like self-preservation, they think they can conquer the world, or they wish things could go back to how it was before the outbreak. So, for example, someone might look for a cure so they never have to worry about getting bit. Or they might look for a cure because it would guarantee power. Or if they wish things could go back, obviously a cure would help."

She considered my question for another silent minute. "I think," she said in a whisper, and it almost sounded like she was holding back some overpowering emotion. "I wish things could go back." By the forlorn expression on her face, I wanted to give some sort of comforting reassurance. But if I said the wrong thing it would change her compliant mood, and if I tried to touch her it would ruin everything. Before I could form an appropriate response she asked, "What's yours? Your reason for… how you've lived."

"The last six years," I sighed, not wanting to refuse her an answer. "You know the reason." Self-preservation. "But, the last few months-" I paused to judge by her mood whether or not I should finish this sentence, but we were being honest, and if she wanted honesty... "It's been you."

The way Genevieve just stared at me after I said that, I was worried I'd made her mad. That's usually what happened when I addressed my feelings for her, but something about the tone of this conversation kept her from reacting in her usual way. "That wasn't one of the options you gave," she replied eventually, eyes betraying an inward smile.

I gave a light grin at her acceptance of that, and shrugged. "I'm not most people."

"Echo," she said gently, losing the small amount of playfulness she'd had just a moment before. "It wouldn't… I feel like I should warn you tha-"

"Hey, hey, LT," Kellan said excitedly, interrupting Genevieve as he rushed toward us with Garcia at his side. In that split moment I grew extremely aggravated. He was always ruining *everything*. I'd almost gotten Genevieve to have a gods-honest, real heart to heart with me, and he had to fucking interfere. "Look what we found." When he reached us he held out a tin can of chocolate syrup triumphantly, and that pissed me off even more.

"Give me some more," Garcia whined, extending his finger toward the open can.

Kellan pulled it away. "Wait your turn." Then he held it out to Genevieve. "It's the sweetest thing I've tasted in years."

"Oh," Genevieve began nicely, "Thanks, but I-"

"She doesn't like chocolate," I cut in fiercely, and it took everything I had not to shout that.

"I wasn't talking to you," Kellan sneered.

"Guys it's okay," Genevieve said quickly, clearly trying to avert a fight. "Here," she motioned for the can. "I'll try it."

I rolled my eyes and irately strode away, even though I knew Genevieve was just trying to be nice. I walked to an aisle far enough away that I couldn't see them, and began scanning the book titles to try and get my mind off of it. Despite how mad I'd been, it didn't take too much of an effort to calm down when I reminded myself that this wasn't an instance where Genevieve was flirting with him just to get on my nerves. He came over to us, and she probably would've declined a taste completely if I hadn't gone and almost started a fight over it.

"You're my battle buddy," Genevieve whispered a minute later, finding me amongst the shelves. "We shouldn't leave each others' sight when we're on mission."

I was about to apologize for losing my temper, but recalling that saying 'sorry' made her mad I said, "I needed a break." All she did was nod, and she began to move her beam over the spines of books from beside me. I knew it was useless, the mood had shifted, but I asked anyway. "What were you going to say? Before the syrup."

She refused to look at me, but it seemed she was considering whether or not to tell me, because she stopped moving her light and stared straight ahead. "It's not important," she answered eventually, and then turned to face me. "How'd you know I don't like chocolate?"

I chuckled, surprised that she was surprised I knew it. "In high school, in the cafeteria at lunch," I began to explain, "You never got pudding when it was a chocolate day. Every year when people passed out Halloween candy in class you never took anything with chocolate in it. And you always had regular milk." Then I raised my eyebrow at her teasingly. "Who doesn't like chocolate milk?" She gave a light smile of amusement, but she didn't say anything right away. Instead, through the dark I could see her eyes look me up and down. "You're impressed," I pointed out with a smirk. "Is it because I noticed or because I remembered?"

She ignored my comment to tell me seriously, "You shouldn't start arguments with him over things like that. It's not worth it."

"Then you shouldn't flirt with him to make me jealous," I retorted matter-of-factly.

She leaned toward me with a slight glare, and then made a deliberate glance around as she whispered, "And you shouldn't say things like that when other people might hear you."

I wasn't interested in what other people knew or thought. What I was interested in was the way Genevieve had been acting since we got here. "You like it when I get jealous, don't you?" I asked, feeling my crooked smile grow despite trying to stay serious for the sake of teasing her.

"Yeah," she shrugged, "Because it bothers you."

"That's not in the way I meant," I told her, and when she refused to look at me again I chuckled and moved into her line of sight. "You do. Admit it."

"We're not having this conversation right now," she mumbled, and began to walk away to avoid having to give an answer.

But the fact that she wouldn't even deny it made me want to try something else. Before she got out of arm's reach I grabbed her wrist and yanked her back, pressing my lips to hers the moment she got close enough. She clearly wasn't expecting it, because her mouth was set for a protest, but hardly a moment later her lips softened against and began to move in perfect cadence with mine, one of her hands set against the side of my neck receptively, and she returned the kiss just long enough that I thought she might really risk it. Then her hand dropped to the top of my chest, and she pushed me away.

"Not here," she whispered with a scolding glare, holding me back against the bookshelf like she thought I'd try it once more if she let me go. At least she didn't look angry. "Don't do that again."

Attempting to hide my disappointment at being pushed away, I maintained a playful grin. "You still taste like chocolate."

"Then I don't know why you're smiling," she started, "You don't like it either." My eyes widened with genuine shock. I'd always remembered because it was a rare thing we had in common. Well, I liked chocolate milk, but that was a technicality. But… Genevieve hated me. "You're impressed," she said with an observant smirk, repeating my words. "Is it because I noticed or because I remembered?"

I took in an inquisitive breath, completely dumfounded about just how to respond to that, but I couldn't think of anything because all I wanted to do was kiss her again. I was beyond impressed. Was she flirting with me? It wasn't the first time. I'd caught her doing it when she wasn't even aware, but this time it seemed intentional, and I was entirely unsure of how to

but this time it seemed intentional, and I was entirely unsure of how to interpret it.

Her eyes flashed with another quip, but before she could say it Blake's voice came from just a few feet away. "I saw that."

"Dammit, Echo," Genevieve groaned, removing her hand so she could start walking away again.

"It's just Blake," I laughed, and when she continued to leave I called after her teasingly, "Hey, battle buddy, where you going?" If part of Genevieve's revenge plan was to confuse me by sending mixed messages, she was on her way to doing one hell of a job.

"Sorry," Blake apologized, offering a half-smile in recompense. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Don't worry about it." I gave his arm a friendly pat to make sure he knew I wasn't upset with him. "I don't know how I expected that kiss to end anyway."

He studied me with obvious curiosity for a few moments before finally deciding to ask, "How do you expect any of this to end?"

"You saw the whole thing, right? How long did it last, five… six seconds?" I asked, and he nodded side to side in agreement. That had been the first time *I* kissed *her* since the very first time in the woods. Even though she was confusing, it was obvious she was careful about the things we did together, about the things she let me get away with, and I was almost positive it's because while she was doing this to hurt me, she didn't want to be manipulative. Spiteful bitch, maybe. Dishonest and sneaky, no. That's why she wouldn't deny that she liked when I got jealous. "She was worried somebody might see, but she didn't stop me right away. She hesitated." Blake's eyebrows rose like he couldn't figure out what I was trying to say. "There's a part of her that wants me," I clarified, and he immediately chuckled. "Next she'll like me, and then she'll forgive me. Then," and I shrugged unsurely, "Then maybe she'll love me."

At my last hope his smile disappeared, and he took it in thoughtfully. "You're completely serious," he mused in shock.

"You're completely serious," he mused in shock.

"I know it's crazy," I told him with a light laugh. "But you want to know something even crazier?" He nodded with interest. "I think we're meant to be together."

Now he snorted with laughter, but then gave an apologetic smile and asked sincerely, "Like a star-crossed lovers kind of thing?"

I could still see a smirk on his face. "Shut up," I snickered, giving him a playful shove. "I'm serious."

"What makes you think that?" he asked with amusement.

"Okay, look," I started, knowing how stupid I was about to sound. "I've never been religious, or spiritual. I don't believe in a higher power responsible for orchestrating our lives to the sake of a divine purpose. I always thought life was just one choice after another." Blake nodded for me to continue. "But I've liked her forever, and of the few survivors left in the world, we're two. Of all the rooftops in all the damn cities in this country, Rochester. Of all the chances and reasons she's had to kill me… She hates me, but she wants me. Tell me that isn't like…" I paused, and at the look on his face I couldn't help but laugh, "Fate. I sound ridiculous."

"No, no," he said reassuringly, even though he was grinning. "I don't think you're ridiculous. I think," he took in a deep breath, and let it out in a sigh. "I think I want it to work out as much as you do."

"You do?" I asked curiously. "Why?" Blake wasn't just intelligent, he was intuitive, and he'd been one of the first people at this camp to give me a chance. That made me eager to hear what he had to say about this.

"Alright," he said quietly, glancing around and moving closer so nobody could hear. "I've known Genevieve for six years. She's my best friend. She trusts me, and she tells me things," he paused to laugh and added, "Obviously." I chuckled too, knowing he meant because she'd told him right away about her and I. "And I know she loves me like I'm family, but lately I don't feel like I really… *know* her, you know? The last six years I was convinced she was the picture of emotional collection. We've all

followed her into the city countless times, and we've been through a lot together. She has control. She's a natural leader, a great leader."

Blake stopped to collect his thoughts, and I felt like his hazel eyes could see right through me. "What I'm trying to say is that since you got here, I've seen emotions in her that I never knew existed. Everything that drives her since you arrived is…" and he glanced down as he searched for the word. "It's passion, Echo. I'll be the first to admit," one corner of his mouth turned up in a non-offense half-smile, "What's going on between you two, well, I don't understand it, and for your sake I don't necessarily approve. But I've never seen anyone penetrate her shell like you do. You understand?"

"I think so," I mumbled, staring thoughtfully at my feet, and then I looked up to give him a wide grin. "You think we're meant to be together too?"

Once he smiled with agreement there was a long pause, after which he said, "You're walking that fine line, you know."

"The one between love and hate?" I clarified.

He shrugged and chuckled, "The one between *like* and hate." I huffed with amusement. "But if you keep doing what you're doing, being an upstanding citizen and all, I think you could end up on the right side of that line." I smiled gratefully, more than glad that he was supportive of my desire for more. Seeing as I wasn't sure what else to say to him I was going to walk away to find Genevieve and continue our search, but as I began to he put his hand on my arm to stop me. "Does it hurt like she wants it to?" he asked softly.

I knew what he was asking, and the fact that he knew it gave me a pang of heartbreak. "Every time," I answered.

He gave no response, but I could see the sympathy in his eyes. Without saying anything else I strode away to look for my battle buddy. I found her strolling through an aisle, scanning books with the blue beam of her flashlight. After how my conversation with Blake ended, I didn't much feel like trying to talk to her. Instead I silently followed her through the aisles for a few hours until sunrise, ending up with one book in my backpack

for a few hours until sunrise, ending up with one book in my backpack that I thought April might be satisfied with. Because the whole exterior wall of the library was window from top to bottom, we'd have been visible to any Ferals if we stayed on the first floor. So at daybreak all of us headed up to the second floor and sprawled out on the ground.

I was tired, but more inviting to me than sleep was the way the grays and baby blues and soft oranges of sunrise reflected off the snow outside. In order to not be seen by any Ferals from the ground below, I stood a few feet from the glass walls, and folded my arms across my chest while I watched it peacefully. At least, it was peaceful until someone came to stand at my side, and I knew who it was by the fact that he didn't say a single thing. Kellan just stood there, close enough that the hairs of his arm were almost touching me. It seemed he'd finally decided to try a new method of irritating me.

"Can I help you?" I asked after a minute.

"I'm just watching the sunrise," he replied nonchalantly.

I risked a side-glance at him, and he looked so absorbed in the scene I would've believed him if he didn't have that smug grin on his face. "Can you do it somewhere else?"

As if he hadn't heard me he turned around, maintaining his observatory stance from the same spot at my side, but facing the other direction. A few moments later I grew curious enough to glance over my shoulder to see what he was looking at, and I followed his gaze to Genevieve, who was sitting at the far end of the sleeping group, talking quietly to Blake. Kellan was doing it for the sole reason of getting to me, I knew that, but I couldn't help that it made me furious. I wanted to tell him to stop looking at her, but I also didn't want him to know how much it pissed me off.

He stayed quiet for half a minute, probably to see if I'd say anything, and when I didn't he whispered so nobody else would hear, "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

For the sake of keeping some level of control over my emotions, I turned around to mirror his stance, and his gaze. "I hadn't noticed," I replied

casually.

"I expected you to be a better liar than that," he said amusedly. When I offered no response he added, "And you didn't ask who I meant."

"I know who you meant," I told him bitterly. There were only two other girls in the platoon that he could've been talking about, and I'd never seen him flirt with Hatfield. It was obvious by now that he wasn't just here to piss me off. He wanted confirmation, at the very least, of my feelings for Genevieve, and whether I gave it to him or not, he already knew. So I might as well be honest. "The way you look at her makes me want to push you over that balcony."

He laughed. "And you can't take the raider out of the girl."

"Being a raider has nothing to do with it," I sneered quietly. I knew what he wanted from Genevieve. "You have a reputation."

"And she has," he started, making sure I could see him staring at her, and then he sighed dreamily, "The most perfect ass." I clenched my jaw angrily, and when he glanced over at me he chuckled. "So you've noticed that much." *Deep breath, Echo.* "Every girl I've ever taken to bed begs for it again, and Genevieve's the kind of girl I would gladly give it to again."

It was my fist that clenched this time. "If you keep talking, you're going to regret it." Genevieve's gaze wandered over to us briefly, but at seeing the look on my face she continued to watch curiously, like she knew something was about to happen.

"When she finally gives in, I am going to wreck her." *He wants you to react.* "She won't be able to walk for days." *Don't do it, Echo*. "And she's going to love every filthy second of it."

My eyes locked on Genevieve's, and something about my expression must have spelled trouble, because she immediately began to stand. But it was too late for her to do anything. At the same time I bent one knee behind Kellan's legs I put both hands on his torso, pulling him backward so hard over my knee he went crashing to the ground. I threw myself on top of him leading with my fist, catching him in the cheekbone, and then

again in the jaw. He was a lot bigger than me, so he sat up with ease and grabbed my jacket in both his hands, turning to slam my back into the floor.

I managed to pull my legs up between us as he shifted our positions, and now my feet were at his hips. With every bit of strength I could I kicked out, throwing him away from me. He went tumbling backward, finally coming to a stop because he crashed into the floor-to-ceiling window I'd been staring out of. The fight had barely begun and it was already over. Genevieve had been rushing over to separate us, but Kellan hit the window so hard it cracked. Only, it didn't fall apart right away, and I felt all the blood drain from my face as the fracture traveled up and out, spreading through the pane until it finally shattered.

The tiny pieces of glass made a deafening clatter as they dropped. Some of them landed inside the library, but most of them hit the ground outside. Genevieve, Kellan, every soldier who'd been watching the fight, and I waited breathless. Hoping the noise hadn't been heard was pointless, and hardly a moment later there was a Feral roar, followed by pounding on the glass from the floor below.

"Everybody up, now!" Genevieve shouted, but she didn't need to give the order.

Everyone was already on their feet, and each of us sprinted down the stairs as there was another set of pounding on the glass from outside. As I reached the bottom of the stairs at the back of the group, I heard another crack travel through the window the Feral was pounding on. I glanced back just in time to see a second Feral join in, and right as we reached the back doors of the library they came bursting through.

"Stackhouse, the lock!" Genevieve yelled, because they'd chained the doors so we'd be safe for the day.

While he pulled the key out of his pocket I took my pistol out of its holster, firing at one of the Ferals while the soldier next to me shot the other one. Stackhouse pulled the padlock from the door at the same time more Ferals appeared at the empty windowpane. I pulled the trigger again, my heart pounding as I waited my turn to filter through the door to the college

heart pounding as I waited my turn to filter through the door to the college courtyard outside. The soldier in front of me went out, and I fired again before sprinting through the door after the rest of the platoon.

Luckily it was still early and not all the Ferals were stirring yet, but there were shots going off all over the place as we ran in formation behind Genevieve. She rushed to the nearest building with a set of stairs on the outside. A gated fence surrounded the stairs, and she stood at the entrance, motioning the soldiers inside and up. Soldiers fired at Ferals on the way up to the roof, and after I got in Genevieve slammed the door shut, and I helped her push on it to keep it closed against the onslaught of Ferals while Stackhouse wrapped the chain around it. Once it was secure we rushed up to the roof, but when I got there Genevieve instantly grabbed me by the coat and forcefully threw me down.

"Kellan!" she shouted irately while I backed up against the wall at the edge of the roof. "Get your ass over here!" He obeyed, passing me a scowl as he plopped down at my side. "What the fuck was that!"

"She started it," Kellan said, and I shot him an evil glare.

"I don't give two shits who fucking started it!" I'd never seen her so mad, not the entire time I'd been at the camp. Her face was a bright red because she was yelling so furiously, and I never knew she had that vein in her forehead. "You just endangered this entire goddamn platoon! Whatever issues you have, you leave it behind right now. The only thing that fucking matters the second we leave camp is the mission! Do you understand me?"

I was doing the smart thing for once by keeping my mouth shut, but Kellan mumbled under his breath, "It wouldn't have happened if you didn't play favorites."

"Favorites?" Genevieve huffed, and I was tempted to laugh at Kellan's being such an idiot. Genevieve turned to the rest of her soldiers, who were watching the spectacle with some amusement. "Who here thinks I favorite Echo?" Not a single hand went up. "Who thinks I treat her just like the rest of you?" This time a few hands rose into the air. "And who thinks I'm harder on her?" The rest of soldiers raised their hands for that,

and Genevieve turned back to Kellan with a scowl. "You have anything else to fucking say to me?"

"No ma'am," Kellan muttered.

Genevieve turned to the rest of her soldiers again. "Anyone else have beef with Kellan or Echo? Because we're going settle it right now." Everybody either shook their heads or kept their mouths shut. "If something like this ever happens again, there will be dire consequences. Understood?" Nods and a couple 'yes ma'am's, and Genevieve motioned for Kellan to walk away.

"Genevieve," I started apologetically once he was gone.

"You shut up and listen," she growled, squatting down so she was at eye level with me and could speak quiet enough that nobody else would hear. "I just chewed out my entire platoon because you have absolutely no self-control."

My eyebrows furrowed with protest. "He-"

"What did I say?" she interrupted fiercely, and I snapped my mouth shut. "I'm not blind, I know he started it, but frankly I don't care what the hell he did. You want to convince me you aren't a raider anymore, those are your chances to fucking prove it. This is the second time you've failed to walk away from him. You think Kellan's the only person you're going to have issues with for the rest of your life?" Her face wasn't so red, but she still looked pretty damn mad. "He's been a part of this platoon too damn long for me to be any more severe than I just was, unless you really want the soldiers to feel like I'm playing favorites. You're not with raiders anymore, Echo, there's a hierarchy. So you need to figure out another goddamn way to deal with confrontation. Got it?"

I nodded, but that was like a slap in the face, and not necessarily the bad kind. 'Reality check' seemed the appropriate term. In the following silent moments while I sat there stunned, she took a deep breath to calm herself. It appeared to have worked somewhat. At least enough that I finally ventured to speak. "He did it because he thinks there's a chance you'll sleep with him." Her gaze met mine, and despite the residual anger

it seemed she was considering my words. "Is there?"

At the question her eyes narrowed at me, but I wasn't sure if it was because of the implications if she were to answer 'no' or because I had the nerve to ask in the first place. Plus, I honestly wasn't sure if she ever would sleep with him or not. "I won't flirt with him anymore," she said eventually, instead of directly answering my question. Then she added sternly, "Next time, walk away."

I couldn't promise that, fighting had been hardwired in me for the last six years, but I would do everything in my power to walk away next time. I was almost positive there would be a next time. When I didn't offer an exact response, she sighed and strode away. Blake came over a minute later, dropping down at my side.

"That wasn't upstanding citizen behavior," he said teasingly, trying to lighten the mood.

"Trust me," I chuckled, glad he didn't seem mad for what happened. "You'd have done the same thing if I told you what he said to me."

"Really?" Blake asked intrigued.

I nodded, and then asked curiously, "Has she ever done that before?"

"Yelled in front of the platoon like that?" I nodded again. "She's never had to." I sighed at his response and stressfully massaged the heels of my hands into my eyes. "I believe you that it was justified, trust me, I do, but Genevieve has a point. I saw him talking to you, and I'm sure he was being a real asshole, but you struck first. That kind of stuff can't happen when we have things like Ferals to worry about."

"I know," I answered seriously. "I'm sorry."

"No hard feelings," he said with a grin, giving me a friendly nudge.

After passing him a grateful smile he walked away to get some sleep. I searched for Genevieve with my eyes, and found her lying down where Blake was setting up his backpack as a pillow. Then my gaze wandered

to Kellan, only to find that he was already glaring at me. Surely the way Genevieve treated us equally in her furious yelling grated on his nerves, since it was obvious he wanted her to blame me entirely for it. I'd even say, very surprisingly, that she was harder on him than she was on me. For that, there was no doubt about it – there would be a next time. I just didn't know if walking away would suffice.

The City it Sleeps

Stop and Stare by Fenech-Soler (Gemini remix)

The City it Sleeps

Dugan

"Six times nine divided by two?" I asked Kara in a whisper, my breath coming out a thick fog in the icy air, and she immediately sighed.

A few days ago during our usual travel conversation I'd discovered that Kara's guardians hadn't necessarily kept up with her education post-apocalypse. I'd tried to hide my immediate reaction from her, but being appalled is something uneasily concealed. It would've been somewhat excusable if they were always on the road, but it seemed they'd been moderately comfortable in the house they were living in before the attack. If Kara were my daughter, I would've made sure her education didn't end, at least until we reached the grade school things I could no longer remember myself. Degradation of society or not, there were still skills that were important, like basic math.

Since I'd made this discovery, and now that I considered myself Kara's guardian, even if we were equals in almost everything, I'd been drilling her on math problems. She recalled her multiplication tables pretty simply, but now that I'd started giving her mixed equations, she was slowing down.

"Six times nine," she mumbled under her breath thoughtfully, staring at the concrete beneath her feet for a minute. "Fifty-four… divided by two." Then she looked over at me, teasingly clicking on her flashlight toward my face with every syllable, "Twenty-seven."

"Good job," I praised, waving my hand at her to get the light out of my face. I had to at least give her credit for being a fast learner. "How's your reading?"

"I-i-i-it's," she started slowly, and then passed me a toothy grin, "Great

"I-I-I-It's," she started slowly, and then passed me a toothy grin. "Great. I'm a great reader." I tried to think back to the house she'd lived in, and I couldn't recall seeing a single book in it. So I cocked my head at her suspiciously. "What do you want me to say?" she laughed. "I read like a fourth grader."

"I guess that's good enough," I chuckled, not wanting to torture her too much, and also not having the means to improve her reading. We were striding through some city in New Mexico though, it probably wouldn't be too hard to find a library…

"Why do I need to keep learning anyway?" she asked through a light whine, making sure to click her flashlight on again, this time shining it up at her own face so I could see exactly how bored she looked.

"Because," I answered, though I was inwardly glad there were at least some things Kara was intent on being childish about. "Maybe in your lifetime things will get better, and it'll be important that you're educated."

Kara simply sighed again, still seeming uninterested, and a few seconds later asked, "You smell that?"

"Ferals?" I immediately reached for my knife.

"No, it smells wet." Kara lifted her face upward and took in a loud breath, and then her shoulders shook with a shudder. "I just felt a raindrop," she told me, wiping at her neck.

"Rain?" I asked with disbelief, holding out my hands with my palms up. "We're in the deser-" I stopped short when I felt one, and then held back a groan of disappointment as I felt a few more. "Come on." I hurriedly motioned for Kara to follow me to the nearest building. It may not have been cold enough here to snow, but it was cold enough that if we stayed outside and got drenched, we'd definitely catch some kind of illness.

With her on my heels, we silently jogged toward the nearest building, me with my knife in hand and Kara wielding her axe. A gentle twist on the door handle let me know the two-story structure was unlocked, so I eased the door open, passing it off to Kara once I'd crossed the

threshold. It was almost completely dark on the inside. The only source of natural light were tiny slivers of moonlight that slipped through the boarded up windows. There was also a dim greenish glow, coming from the other side of a shoebox-sized window in the only other door I could see in the dark. At least, those were the only two I spotted at first, until after Kara shut the door behind us my eyes were drawn to a blinking red dot in the upper corner of the room, above that dim greenish glow.

The green one was far from natural, and it only made sense that it was electrically powered. However, at thinking that the blinking red dot was a security camera, I felt a chill go up my spine. My first paranoid instinct was to dart back out into the rain, which was pouring down now based on the consistently static hum from outside. But I kept calm. If that was indeed a camera, someone could be watching us, and that would mean it was night vision.

I listened intently for a few second for the sound of any Ferals. Hearing no footstep patter or raspy breathing, I whispered, "Kara." Her searching hand found my shoulder a moment later, and I heard her hum curiously. "Flashlight," I prompted. She handed me hers, and I aimed it straight at what I thought was a security camera before clicking it on.

"Whoa," Kara mumbled in shock at the now illuminated video recorder. "Creepy."

"Sh," I instructed, suspicious that whoever was watching might be able to hear us even if the camera was being temporarily blinded by the light. "Hold that there," I told her, passing off her flashlight while I reached for my own.

Once I'd pulled my light out I turned it on and moved the beam over the room. I was immediately glad I'd decided to take a look around before venturing anywhere else, because it could've been dangerous. While the room was small and almost completely empty, every single wall had been veneered in hundreds of sharp objects. Knife blades, ice picks, five-inch nails and any other sharp object you could find in a city had all been stuck through various improvised layers of thin memory foam mattress toppers or thick exercise mats, which had then been tacked onto the walls. The one other door through which the green light shone was

walls. The one other door through which the green light shone was layered in sheets of steel, making it impregnable to the weaponless hands of Ferals. This place was a fortress, and there was no doubt in my mind now that someone lived here, and that that someone was watching.

A shift in the green glow coming from the other side of the door caught my eye. A movement, subtle enough that it wouldn't have been noticeable if the rest of the room wasn't so dark. Curious, I tiptoed over, making a second scan of the door for any hidden sharp objects before leaning my face toward the window. The glow was coming from a single colored light bulb in the hallway on the other side. The hall was only flat for a few feet before it turned into a flight of stairs, which curved around a corner and continued up to the second floor. I put my hand on the doorknob, and pushed down to see if it was open. It was locked, but the moment I took my hand off the head of a massive dog appeared in the window. The sight of the canine, along with its snarling and barking, was so sudden and unexpected that I gave a cry of surprise and stumbled back.

"Dugan?" Kara said concernedly, when after I tripped over my own feet and fell to floor I just sat there, recovering from shock.

Then I realized that even though the dog appeared and was still visible through the small window, and it was so clearly barking at me, I still couldn't hear it. Curiosity dulled my nerve, and I pushed myself off the floor and strode back over to the window. Ignoring the dog I glanced toward the walls on the other side of the door, for the first time noticing that they too were veneered in a dark foam padding. Sound proof. It was genius, but the genius behind it had yet to be seen, and this dangerous room presented more of a hazard than it was worth.

"Come on," I told Kara, immediately starting for the exit. Freezing rain might be safer than whoever had fortified this place.

She clicked off her light and began to follow me toward the door, but the second I reached it a deep voice asked in an unidentifiable Eastern European accent, "Where are you going?"

Both Kara and I turned on our heels, terrified by the suddenness of the

voice. There was nobody in the room with us, and despite the fear generated by the ominousness of being watched, I could tell the sound wasn't omnipresent. It was coming from a specific location directly in front of us, and in the dark I could vaguely guess that the location originated somewhere near that one other door. However, seeing as it was soundproof, it didn't seem likely that someone was speaking to us from the other side of it.

Whoever it was must've been able to read the searching look on my face. "There's an intercom to the right of the door."

I glanced at the security camera, and as if my gaze was enough of a warning for the speaker not to try anything, I strode to the intercom and pressed the 'talk' button. "Who are you?" The dog was still baring its teeth at me through the window.

My question was followed by a pause so long I wasn't sure if the person had even heard me, but just as I was about to repeat my inquiry he answered, "Van."

I assumed that was his name, though I wasn't sure if it was a first or a last. "I'm Dugan."

There was another long pause, during which I was positive Van was studying us through his camera, maybe deciding whether to continue this conversation or let us leave. "What do you call the girl?"

Even though I couldn't see her well, my gaze wandered back to Kara, and I felt a protective flare rise in my gut. I glanced back at the camera, narrowing my eyes in an attempt to convey further warning without making it an obvious threat. "Kara." The man didn't respond for another minute, so I asked, "Are you alone up there?"

More silence. "Show any weapons you have to the camera."

"We don't need to be here," I replied defensively, still entirely suspicious of the ominous voice.

"Yes you do," Van countered calmly, the fastest response he'd given us

yet. "You'll freeze to death." With a sigh I looked at Kara again, and when her silhouette shrugged in compliance I held up my knife and rifle to the camera. Van observed for a few moments. "The girl too."

"She's just a kid," I told him, hoping it might convince him to let Kara keep her weapons if he was planning on confiscating them upon letting us in.

"Holding an axe," Van said flatly. "What else does she have?"

Before I could say anything Kara turned around to show the camera the weapon sticking out of her backpack. "A shotgun," I mumbled into the intercom. Van didn't say anything else, and this pause lasted so long that I pushed the talk button on the intercom again. "Van?"

There was no answer, but a few seconds later the dog disappeared from the window, and I could see a pair of feet descending the stairs. I pulled my rifle around to have it ready, not sure yet what to make of this man. His plain white sneakers disappeared from my narrow window, then I could see his dark blue jeans, then a hand holding a pistol, the bottom of his black and blue striped t-shirt, collared I discovered a moment later, and finally his face. He appeared to be about my age, maybe a couple years younger, a white guy with crew cut brown hair and pale blue eyes. Van looked so clean-cut and well preserved considering we were living in a Feral infested world that I would've thought him immune to it. The only give away was that for such a tall guy he was unhealthily thin, and he had various faint scars on his face.

He unlocked the door from the inside, and then swung it outward. Standing in the opening like that he was eerily silhouetted by the green glow behind him, as was the enormous dog sitting at his side. The dog looked to be some kind of husky mix, and even though it was perfectly complacent to our presence now that Van was here, it was still terrifyingly wolf-like in both appearance and size. The only unintimidating thing about the canine was that, like Van, it was emaciated to the point of weakness.

After studying Kara and I for a minute, Van must've noticed my pitiful review of the animal, because as he turned to lead us back up the stairs he said, "It doesn't have a name."

A man of few words, clearly, and when I passed through the door I tossed a bizarre expression to Kara, and she shrugged with equal wonder. Kara locked the door behind us, and when we reached the top of the stairs we arrived to an open living area. The building may have been an office at one point, because a majority of the small desks were stacked on top of each other to section off areas of the space as rooms. The immediate room at the top of the stairs was where he ate his meals, as there was a desk with a camping stove set up on top of it, along with a fold-up table and some plastic chairs around it. One of my previous questions was also answered. Van was not alone.

There was a woman, Japanese maybe, and just as frail as man and dog, if not worse. She was younger than Van and I, perhaps in her mid to late twenties. Her smooth, black hair fell to the bottom of her shoulder blades, and from the space between the legs of the desk she was working behind I could see that she was barefoot. She looked cold too, judging by the thin blanket she had hung over her shoulders like a poncho. I don't know if she was afraid of Kara and I as strangers, or if she was just too intensely focused on whatever she was cooking, but when we walked in her eyes fell on us for less than a second, and that was the only time she even acknowledged we were there.

"Neither does she," Van said, trudging forward and plopping down in a chair at the table, setting his pistol on the surface.

It took me a few seconds to figure out what he meant, and then I recalled his previous statement about the dog not having a name. It took a strained effort to keep my eyebrows from furrowing with displeasure, but I couldn't keep my stare from following this strange man to his seat.

"Come here," Kara whispered cheerfully from my side, and I watched her bend over to coax the dog to her.

It came, and when she began to run her fingers through the fur along the sides of its head the woman finally looked over. Her face portrayed horror as she watched Kara, and for aid in interpreting her fear I glanced at Van. He looked so disgusted at the display that I began to motion for Kara to stop, worried that maybe he was offended by her friendliness toward the

animal – for all I knew, he wanted it to remain ferocious toward strangers. Before I could tell her to, however, Van noticed that I'd noticed his reaction, and he waved us to the table.

"Come. Sit," he said, and while his deep voice was still somewhat flat and emotionless, it was clear he was making an attempt at hospitality. "I was about to eat."

There was a flat screen television on the table in front of him. When Kara and I made our way forward to sit down with him I found it was connected to the security camera downstairs. I took the duffel bag full of food off my back and set it on the floor, and then did the same with my backpack before sitting in the seat adjacent to Van's at the four-seat, square table. As Kara sat down across from Van, the woman came over holding a plate with two charred lumps of meat on it, and she put it down in front of him.

"Hi," Kara said friendlily, sticking out her hand toward the woman. "I'm Kara."

The woman's eyes widened with fright, and without saying anything in response she hastily returned to the cooking desk. Kara was normally so much more observant, and usually she wasn't as straightforward with strangers, seeing as it took me a while to get her to open up completely. It wasn't until now that I realized she felt something was off here too. She'd told me before that she'd always been good at figuring out which type of people were which. She was playing the part of carefree, ignorant kid in order to figure these two out. At that realization I had to hold back a proud smile at her genius.

"Do you have food of your own?" Van asked, picking up the lump of meat on his kebab stick and biting into it. I nodded, reaching over to unzip the duffel bag and pulling out two cans of soup: one clam chowder, the other chicken noodle. "She'll heat it up for you," he said, tossing his head toward the Japanese woman.

"I don't mind doing it," I told him. I'd have rather eaten it cold than force this poor woman to cook our food for us.

Van gave me a blank stare and repeated flatly, "She'll heat it up for you." Without saying anything the woman came over and took the cans, carrying them back to the camping stove. I was watching her curiously, so when soon afterward Van threw down his meat, I could see her whole body tense with a flinch. "Bring me that knife," he ordered, his voice conflictingly void of emotion compared to the passion with which he put down his food. "I'll crack a tooth biting through this layer of charcoal." The woman stopped cutting open our cans to bring Van the knife, and then she rapidly returned to her task of heating our food.

My mind was working overtime trying to figure this out, so it almost scared me when Kara leaned halfway across the table with intrigue. "Are those *rats*?" By now my curiosity in the woman's reactions rivaled my curiosity in Van's, so at Kara's exclamation I looked over at her. Once more, the woman looked terrified, but it was obvious now that it was a terror *for* Kara.

Van continued to cut through the burnt meat, almost as if he hadn't heard Kara's question. I'd leaned my rifle up against the side of the table, but the woman's terrified reaction made me somewhat afraid for Kara too. So my hand made a subtle reach for the weapon, just in case Van had the negative reaction it seemed the woman was expecting. If he had a negative response, he didn't show it, and after cutting a piece of meat he put it into his mouth.

"Yes," he answered after he swallowed the bite. "I take food where it's available." I didn't like the way his eyes fell over Kara when he said that. Then he pointed to his dog. "I'd eat that if the rats stopped coming."

"He's too thin," Kara replied nonchalantly, stopping her leaning over table to resume her seat.

Van's eyes fell over her again, and this time his lips curled into the tiniest of smiles before he dropped his gaze to his food. "Yes, it is."

When Van stopped looking at Kara, she looked at me, finally giving me a lip curl of disgust that would've made me laugh if everything wasn't so tense. We sat there in silence for a minute before the woman brought over two bowls of soup, putting them down in front of Kara and I. When

over two bowls of soup, putting them down in front of Kara and I. When both of us said 'thank you,' an expression of terror passed the woman's features again, and without looking at either of us she busily began to clean up the cooking desk.

"Can I feed him?" Kara asked a couple minutes later, once she was finished with her bowl of chicken soup, pointing to the dog.

Van made another disgusted face, but nodded his consent. Kara glanced at the duffel bag, and then at me for permission. I shrugged unconcernedly, seeing as we had plenty of food and it didn't appear Van fed the poor creature regularly. At my consent, Kara happily pulled a can of beef stew out, and after opening it she dumped it's contents into her empty bowl. She whistled for the dog, and seeing that she was setting a bowl full of food on the ground it came over with excited speed. It buried its muzzle into the dish with such voracity that bits of stew went flying everywhere. In my next curious glance at the Japanese woman, I could see her staring at the disappearing stew with a starved, longing stare. It made me feel guilty, wondering if the woman didn't eat as often as Van did, and I would've offered her a can of food too if I didn't have the obscure and gut wrenching notion that it would offend our host.

"How do you have electricity?" I asked, trying to take my mind off of it.

Van took a deliberate gander behind him, following the extension chord connected to the TV with his index finger into the other room. "Generator," and then he motioned up toward the roof, "Connected to solar power."

After that he motioned for the woman to come over and clear his dish away. She came over and picked up his plate, still refusing to look at Kara and I. It was because she wasn't watching us that I could watch her so meticulously, and there was a hesitation she made when she reached for his knife that made me confident we were leaving as soon as the rain stopped. She didn't pick up the utensil like a woman clearing dishes. She gripped the handle so hard her knuckles went white, and held it with the blade toward her body like at any second she'd take a backhanded swipe at Van. She picked up the knife like a woman with a grudge. That was it though, that slight hesitation, and then she hurried away with the items.

"You need a haircut, my friend," Van said, interrupting me from staring at the woman. "She can cut it for you."

I was about to decline, but upon raising my hand to my head I realized for the first time how accurate his statement was. My hand sank a couple inches into the puff on my head. I needed a haircut badly. "I would really appreciate it," I answered, directing my statement at the woman.

The woman immediately headed into a separate room on the right, and Van motioned after her like I should follow, "Please." Then he turned his eyes on Kara. "Do you like movies?"

I stood hesitantly while Kara nodded at him, expecting her to do the same, but she just sat there. "Would you give us a second?" I asked Van politely, and then waved for Kara to come with me. I led her a few feet away, far enough that I could whisper to her without Van or the woman hearing. "I'm not leaving you alone with him."

"I don't like him either," she replied in agreement, "But if you're alone with the woman you can ask her questions. I'll keep feeling Van out." I pursed my lips unhappily, so she added before I could protest, "You'll be right there. I'll yell if he tries anything creepy." She reached up to pat my miniature Afro with a laugh. "You seriously need a haircut." Then, as if it was settled, she returned to Van saying cheerfully, "It's been a *long* time since I've seen a movie."

With a sigh of defeat, I trudged into the other room, sectioned off by a large stack of office desks. The woman was in there pulling out a cordless electric trimmer, and when she saw me she set her hand on the back of a fold up chair to instruct me to sit without making eye contact. The way she'd gripped that knife made me somewhat weary of her, so as I made my way over to the chair I scanned the desk she had the clippers laid out on, looking for anything she might attack me with. When I sat down she motioned to the different sizes of comb settings, silently asking me which one I wanted.

Seeing as it would probably be a long time after this that I got my next cut, I said nicely, "I'll take the shortest one you got." She picked up the

cut, I said nicely, "I'll take the shortest one you got." She picked up the trimmer without putting a length comb into it, immediately turning it on to begin buzzing my hair. "Do you have a name?" I asked, quietly so she'd know I was trying to ask without Van being able to hear. However, she made no show that she'd even heard me. "I'm Dugan."

Again there was no reply, and I let the silence hover between us for a minute to collect my thoughts. She seemed intent on not speaking. Whether she wasn't interested in making friends or was perhaps afraid of Van I couldn't exactly be sure. I was mentally preparing something else to say as she ran the trimmers along the hair near my ear, and got a shock when the clippers pinched the skin on the top of my ear. It startled me enough that I flinched, and my flinch scared the woman so bad she dropped the trimmer and jumped back. I'd seen reactions like this before, seen fear like it before. My younger sister had an abusive boyfriend for years, and she used to cringe every time he moved. This woman scurried away as though my reaction to the pain was going to be to reach out and strike her.

"It's okay," I told her calmly, touching my fingertips to where she got me. There was a little blood, but nothing worse than cutting myself while shaving. "It's just a knick." I reached down and picked up the trimmer, and then gently motioned her forward to try and reassure her. "Here you go."

She took a couple reluctant, untrusting steps toward me, reaching out for the clippers before she came within striking distance. When I gave them to her without making any sign of aggression she came a little closer, and a couple moments later resumed running the clippers through my hair.

"Do you have a name?" I asked again, softening my tone even more now that I was sure of the source of her fear.

She was quiet for a while, so much so that I was starting to give up on trying. Then I heard a delicate whisper near my ear, "Namiko."

Since I'd succeeded in getting her to tell me her name, I tried asking her other questions. However, that was the only piece of information I was able to retrieve. My hair was gone in a matter of minutes, and my time

was up. I strode back out to where Kara was sitting with Van, rubbing my head self-consciously. It had been so long since I'd had hair this short that I almost felt a little bit naked.

Kara tore her gaze from the movie when she saw me, and her face instantly lit up with a smile. "Looking good!" she praised joyfully.

"Thanks," I chuckled bashfully.

"Well," Kara exclaimed, hopping out of her seat, "I'm exhausted."

Van raised his eyes to her from the seat at her side, and something about his gaze made me seethe. Having the suspicions I did now about his relationship with Namiko, I didn't want Kara anywhere near him. Especially since she was acting overly friendly to try and figure him out. He might get the idea she was the trusting type, and he was looking at her like she was something he could break.

"It's still raining," Van said in his callous tenor. "You'll sleep here."

"Thanks," Kara grinned thankfully, and after grabbing her backpack off the floor she strode past me confidently to sleep in the next room.

I walked to the table, not enjoying the fact that Van's gaze had followed her away, and picked up my own backpack and rifle. "Thank you, Van," I forced out gratefully.

"It's no problem." He waved off my gratitude, and immediately went back to watching the movie.

I turned to follow Kara into the other room, giving Namiko a friendly smile when she gained the nerve to look at me as I passed her. Then I dropped my bag onto the floor next to Kara, plopping down at her side.

"Did you find anything out?" she asked quietly the moment I sat down.

"I don't think Namiko likes him either," I answered, and when she raised her eyebrows at the name I clarified, "The woman. Did *you* find anything out?"

"Not really," she said disappointedly. "But he's giving major creep vibes."

"Did he touch you?" I asked hastily, instantly furious at just the idea of it.

"Huh?" Kara's eyebrows furrowed, and she scanned my face like she was trying to decipher what I meant. Then she figured it out. "No," she reassured me seriously. "He doesn't seem like the rapey type to me." I disagreed, but since it looked like she had more to say I waited for her to continue. "He seems more like the psychopath serial killer type."

I could agree with that at least – everything about this guy gave me the chills. "We're leaving first thing."

Kara nodded in concurrence, but said simply, "But not without Namiko."

"Kara," I sighed reluctantly.

"I'm not leaving here without her," she argued. "We have to rescue her."

"We can't force her to leave," I told her, trying to put things into perspective. "What if she doesn't want to leave?"

Kara looked entirely skeptical, and her eyebrows furrowed as if scolding me for that. "Why wouldn't she want to leave?"

"Van might be weird," I started, "But we don't know that much about him, and she's safe from Ferals in here. That might be enough for her."

"Doubt it," Kara retorted confidently.

I sighed again, wishing I saw things as simply as Kara did. I really doubted that Namiko wanted to be here too, and I'd even go so far as to say she might be a sort of prisoner. But Kara was my priority, her safety came above everything else, and if Namiko really was a prisoner, I didn't see how Van would let her leave with us unless I killed him.

"Let's make a deal," I suggested after a minute of thought. Kara leaned forward with interest. "We need to make rules, about the things we can do... Morally, and ethically." Kara's eyebrows furrowed, but she nodded. "If it isn't self-defense when we hurt someone, then we have to know that

"If it isn't self-defense when we hurt someone, then we have to know that they're guilty of crimes against other people, and that they'll do whatever it is again if we don't stop them."

That caused her to let out a deep breath. "That means we have to find evidence against Van," she groaned knowingly. "I'm almost positive he's done things."

"Namiko won't talk to me," I told her, ignoring Kara's sureness to continue my terms. "I think she's afraid. I'll give you one day to get her to tell you what's going on here, and if she wants to leave, I promise you that we will do everything in our power to make sure that's an option for her."

"One day?" Kara asked with protest, but I set my face in firm decision. She studied me for a little, taking it in thoughtfully, and then she stuck out her hand. "Deal."

Only Way of Being

To Let Myself Go by Ane Brun

Only Way of Being

Dugan

"What's the plan?" Kara asked in a whisper. She glanced into her nearly empty bowl of vegetable soup, and then set it down in front of Van's large dog, which had been waiting eagerly ever since we started eating.

I leaned over just enough to glance at the makeshift entrance of the sectioned off room we were in, checking that nobody was listening. "At some point I'll try to lure Van away," I answered in a murmur. "When I do, you can try to get information out of Namiko." Kara nodded with satisfaction, but despite her character-intuition, I wasn't sure if she had the experience to know exactly how to deal with someone in Namiko's situation. "Try to be gentle with her, but stay on your guard."

"I will," Kara assured me. Seeing as we'd just eaten, I began to dig through our food-filled duffel bag to recount how much we had left. However, the number of cans that remained seemed lower than I remembered, like some were missing. Kara noticed the confused look on my face as I began counting again, because she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Did you fall asleep during your shift at all?" I asked, knowing I hadn't drifted off during mine. Kara shook her head. "I think some of the food's missing."

She must've known I was suspicious of Van, because she leaned over like I had a minute earlier, glancing toward the entrance. There was a point earlier this morning that we'd left the bag alone in this room to sit at the dining table and watch a movie on Van's television, but I'd kept an eye on his whereabouts the entire time. He hadn't entered this room once. Thinking I must've just been confused, I stood, knowing even if things were tense and Van was creepy, we'd have to hang around so I

could find my opportunity of getting Kara alone with Namiko.

I strode into the center room with Kara right behind me, however, when we reached it I froze in my tracks. Van was sitting down to his breakfast – a nice, hot bowl of *our* clam chowder. The empty can was still sitting right there on the table. It felt like such a blatant violation that my first instinct was to get furious. But he made no attempt at concealing it, and he didn't even give us an acknowledging glance, as though there was nothing wrong with it. The audacity of it had me in shock, and all I could do for practically a minute was stand there staring. Then I felt a slight betrayal, because I knew it was Namiko who had gone into the room and taken some of our cans. Though, that feeling was easy to force away when I thought about the fact that she didn't have a choice. Van probably would've beaten her if she refused to steal from us.

Kara was the first one to recover from an equal shock, and she took in a deep breath like she was preparing to make her anger known. When I heard the inhale, I put my hand over her mouth to stop her, and she released the breath with reluctant compliance. This situation had to be approached delicately, because Van was such a hushed man that I had no idea how easily angered he was or how he'd react to being accused, even if his guilt was undeniably obvious.

"Is that one of our cans?" I asked calmly.

Van looked up at me with a careless stare, and then went back to eating like he hadn't heard me. After taking another slow bite he finally answered in his rough accent, "You stay at my house. You share your food."

I clenched my fist, instantly irked by his answer. I had no problem sharing with anyone who needed it, I liked to think I was a compassionate guy. However, Van never asked, and the fact that he felt entitled grated on my nerves. "We never discussed an exchange," I said flatly, trying to keep my voice from portraying too much aggravation. Van didn't so much as look at me, and that made me even more upset. "How many cans did you take?" When an answer didn't come right away I glanced over at Namiko. She had her back pressed as close as possible to the far corner of the room, and when our eyes met she set to staring at the floor.

room, and when our eyes met she set to staring at the floor.

"Six," Van said eventually.

"No," I replied instantly, as if that would change the fact that he'd already taken them. "You can't have six." He took another deliberate bite of stew, his pale blue eyes locked on me challengingly. "Where are the rest of them?" I asked bitterly, my patience wearing thin. "You can have three." He still just looked at me, not saying a single thing. "This isn't a game, Van," I snapped, striding over to get in his face, thinking it would force him to say something.

He was so silent and reserved that it caught me completely off guard when he stood, grabbing the shoulder of my shirt and pushing me backward. It knocked me off balance enough that he could shove my back onto the surface of the table, holding me down, and before I knew it he had his pistol against the bottom of my chin.

"Dugan!" Kara shouted in panic, but when she made a move to come to my aid I held a hand out to stop her.

"Do I look like I want to play games?" Van asked menacingly. I held up my hands with my palms facing him in surrender, knowing this wasn't a battle I could win, and I shook my head. He eased off, releasing his hold on my shirt and straightening up even though he kept his gun pointed at me. "I will keep the other five."

When he sat back down I pushed myself off the table. The force of his shove had caused some of his soup to spill onto the shoulder of my shirt, so without saying anything I paced into the other room to both change my shirt and cool my rage. I dug into my backpack and grabbed my one other spare, and as I removed the one I was wearing Kara hurried into the room.

"Dugan," she whispered frantically. "What are we going to do?"

At her question I threw my t-shirt onto the floor with an angry grunt. "I'm going to get our food back," I growled quietly. There was no doubt in my mind now that Van was dangerous. "We're staying just long enough for you to question Namiko, and then we're getting our food back and

you to question Namiko, and then we're getting our food back and leaving."

While I pulled on my fresh shirt her eyes scanned me with surprise, undoubtedly because she hadn't seen me like this before, but I didn't like being taken advantage of. "Are you going to kill him?"

"I don't want to, but that's up to him," I told her, pulling a water bottle out of my bag to rinse the clam chowder off my clothing. Once it was cleaned I laid it out on the floor to dry. "Let it go for now," I said eventually, taking a deep breath to do the same. "The time will come." After Kara nodded I led the way back out to the center room, and when I reached Van I held out my hand. "No hard feelings, man. We can spare the food."

He looked up to scan me skeptically for a while, and then he took my hand in his to give it an almost distrustingly brief shake. Things settled to their previous amount of tension after that. Namiko kept herself a safe distance from Van in the corner, and Van finished his movie without saying another word. Even though his gaze remained focused on the television screen, I could tell he was a lot more alert than he let show. Sometimes I wondered if he was even really watching it at all, since occasionally it appeared his stare was blank, and he was either lost in thought or was so intently concentrating on what he could perceive from the world around him with senses other than sight. Meanwhile, I waited patiently for the opportunity to lure him away and leave Kara alone with Namiko.

It finally came when Van stood, and as he strode to the door that led downstairs and bolted it with a key he said, "I'm going to check the rat traps."

I tried to ignore the fact that he'd just locked us in, along with the curiosity of where he was going to check the traps if he'd bolted the only exit, and instead asked, "Can I come with you? To see how you catch them?"

The only confirmation he gave was a nod, and then he paced over to Namiko's corner. She tensed with a terrified cringe when he neared her, and it was only a moment later I figured out why. He put his hand behind her head and grabbed her roughly by the hair, pulling her ear to his

mouth so he could whisper something to her. I wanted to give Namiko the benefit of the doubt when I left Kara alone with her, but in all honesty, I wasn't sure how firm a hold her fear of Van had on her. For all I knew he could be telling her to attack Kara while we were gone, or to steal the rest of our food, and if she believed Van had the power to kill me then she'd probably do it because she was afraid of him.

So while Van was saying his bit to her I turned to Kara to whisper, "Don't let your guard down. She could be dangerous." Kara nodded, but I added earnestly, "Promise me."

"Yeah," she agreed reassuringly, "I promise."

"Let's go," Van said monotonously, and without waiting to see if I would follow he started into the room I hadn't been in yet.

While I trailed him into the room and to the window on the opposite end I did a hasty scan of the area. There was only one bed on the right side – a hefty pile of pillows and blankets – and some steel organization racks with various items like clothing, ammunition, and oddly enough grooming supplies. I'd just begun to wonder where Namiko slept, whether or not she was forced to lie at his side, when my eyes wandered to the left side of the room and fell on a heavy shackle, fastened securely to the wall. I would've thought it was for the dog if it weren't for the fact that the cuff was only wrist or ankle sized, much too small for the massive canine's neck. The very suspicion of it made my spine tingle, and I gritted my teeth to keep from making my disgust too obvious.

"After you," Van said when we reached the window, motioning out of it.

It was clear he didn't trust me enough to head out first, and even though I didn't trust him either, I sucked it up. I stuck my head out to see what he meant, and noticed a roof access ladder latched to the side of the building. Adjusting the strap of my rifle to make sure it was secure on my shoulder, I reached out for the edge of the ladder while keeping Van at the edge of my vision. I'd be lying if I said the height didn't frighten me. What probably made my heartbeat speed up even more was the fact that I didn't entirely think Van wouldn't push me, and if I didn't die from the fall I'd sure as hell die when the Forals down there got their hands on me. I

I'd sure as hell die when the Ferals down there got their hands on me. I could already hear a couple of them snarling from catching a glimpse of us.

So when my finger touched the ladder I tightened them around the metal as much as I possibly could, and then I climbed out the window. Keeping a firm grip I stuck my first foot toward ladder, and after taking a deep breath to work up the nerve I swung all the way out onto it. Forcing myself not to look down, I started up, hearing Van come out the window and work his way onto the ladder as if he wasn't concerned about the height one bit. His footsteps rang on the metal below me, and when I reached the top I turned to watch the rest of his ascent. As he reached the end, I had the vague but pressing thought that I really should push him off. I felt it in my gut. It was so pressing that it must have shown on my face, because Van refused to clear the final steps to the top of the roof, keeping his hands tight around the handles of the ladder until I took a few steps back.

When he finally came all the way up he motioned for me to follow again as he walked past me. He led me to the opposite end of the roof where he'd set up almost a dozen small cage-traps. There was only a single cage that had a rat in it, despite the fact that every one of them was baited with what I assumed was rat meat. At the sight of the single rodent Van growled with frustration, one of the first emotions I'd seen in him since we arrived last night, and he picked up the cage by its metal handle. The rat was shockingly huge – the only reason I could see for it's being so large was the lack of humans exterminating the creatures since the outbreak – and when Van picked up the cage it instantly started shrieking at him, baring its two long, yellow teeth savagely.

Van pulled a six-inch pocketknife from his jeans, extending the blade below the cage and carefully lining it up with the rodent's belly. Once he had the tip directly under it his hand shot up, piercing the weapon directly through the gray animal, and the thing screeched and squealed for almost thirty seconds before finally dying. I expected Van to pull the knife out right away, but instead he trudged to the edge of the roof behind the building and held the cage over the ground below. Before I even walked over to see what he was doing I heard ferocious snarls from the alley. Then he violently yanked the knife out of the rat, watching with an

Then he violently yanked the knife out of the rat, watching with an emotionless stare as the blood drained into the hungry mouths of the Ferals below.

I gulped down my horror, telling myself I needed to stall him in order to give Kara as long as possible. "Do you do this every time?" His chin rose with the slightest of proud nods. "Why?"

"The smart ones come every day," he answered calmly. "When I need, I hook one and bring it up. Bait for more rats. Food for the beast."

"The dog's immune?" I asked in shock. "He doesn't get sick?" Van shook his head. Even though his reasoning made sense, he didn't turn away like he was afraid of watching them fight over the blood he supplied, and he'd pulled his knife out of the rat like he loved the gut-wrenching sound it made. There was something sinister in his undisclosed enjoyment of it. "How long have you lived here?"

Van didn't answer right away, as he was preoccupied with reaching in to squeeze the last of the fluids out of the rat. When he finished that and while he cleaned the blade of his knife with a dirtied handkerchief he replied, "Four years."

"And Nam-" I stopped short, remembering that Van had told me the Japanese woman didn't have a name. He'd known what I was about to say, and there was a flash of fury in his ghostly blue eyes. "And the girl?" I asked hastily, hoping he wouldn't act on that anger, or take it out on Namiko for speaking to me.

He stared me down for a good minute, a keen thoughtfulness in his expression. "Three."

"Have you seen a lot of travelers pass by here?" I continued, trying to make conversation to buy Kara some time. He nodded. "You talk to them?"

"Yes."

"Any of them ever mention a camp back east?" I asked curiously, hoping he could validate the rumor. "In the woods."

he could validate the rumor. "In the woods."

After Van cleaned his knife he stuck it back into his pocket, and then he proceeded to put the rat into a small plastic bag he'd pulled out of his backpack. "No." He wasn't making my job easy by keeping his side of the conversation to a minimum, and I wouldn't be surprised if my questions were already starting to get on his nerves.

"They ever talk about anywhere they were going?" I inquired. This time he shook his head. "Do you ever leave this building?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "When I have to."

"What about the woman?"

Instead of answering that question he glanced at me while he cleaned his bloodied hands with the same rag he'd used on his knife. "How long have you been with your companion?"

"Kara?" I clarified, not liking how he refused to use her name. His head tilted in acquiescence, as if we were having an argument and he'd just agreed to disagree. "Some weeks, I guess. Over a month. I don't know exactly."

"And you're attached to her?" he asked flatly, reaching into his pack and pulling out another plastic bag of small cutlets of Feral meat.

My eyebrows furrowed, wondering if I should start taking offense or not. "What are you trying to get at?" I mumbled suspiciously.

"Only that maybe we could trade," he said casually, as if we weren't talking about another human being. "The woman has no spirit anymore, and I get bored with the same movies."

That was the most straightforward thing he'd said since we got here. So much so that it almost felt like he was testing me, checking where I stood in regards to the people I kept around. "Van," I practically growled, mentally telling myself to stay calm even though the protective rage that bubbled up inside me wanted to strangle him. In my entire life I'd never hated someone so much in so little an amount of time. "You so much as

hated someone so much in so little an amount of time. "You so much as even look at Kara like she's a bargaining tool, and I'll kill you. You understand?"

He didn't look concerned for his safety. He just stared at me, taking in my anger until a slow, fiendish smile curled the corners of his lips. Whatever he'd been trying to do by making me furious, it appeared he was satisfied with it. I was still so disconcerted and angry that I couldn't think of anything else to keep conversing with him about. Failing to stall him any longer, he reset the trap with the rest of them and then led the way back to the ladder.

Van climbed down first, and I followed after him. When I got back into the room my fury had calmed only slightly, so I refused to glance over at the shackle mounted on the wall for the sake of not losing my temper. In the center room, Van pulled the rat-filled bag out of his backpack and slapped it onto the table in front of Namiko. She obediently took the rat out to begin preparing it for storage in the three-foot freezer in the corner. While Van sat down at the table I immediately went into the room Kara and I had slept in. She was already in there waiting for me, running her fingers through the fur along the wolf-like dog's back.

"How'd it go?" I asked quietly, lowering myself to the ground across from her. However, when I sat down I realized that while she was petting the dog as though nothing was wrong, her face was completely pale. "What's wrong?"

"He's not going to let us leave, Dugan," she began to whisper frantically. "Just like he never lets Namiko leave. We're going to be stuck here, only we're not going to know it because he's going to kill us and stuff us up in that little freezer."

"Whoa, slow down," I said soothingly. "What?"

She leaned forward to grab the shoulder of my t-shirt, pulling me up to stand with her. "He eats people!" she hissed with terror, pushing me to the only window in the room and motioning for me to look out it.

It had been closed the whole time we were here, but Kara had been

prepared to show me whatever it was I would find outside this window, and now it was open. I stuck my head out, glancing side to side, the horror movie fanatic in me half expecting a creep like Van to string the skeletons up along the outside of the building. There was nothing on the sides of the window, but when I looked down at the street below, I saw what she wanted me to.

There were a couple Ferals wandering around in the narrow alley below, but it wasn't the Ferals that caused my blood to both boil and ice at the same time. It was what they were walking through. Bones. Human bones. A nice, layered pile of them. Seeing as Van had just told me that he used Ferals for bait and to feed the dog, I would've brushed this scene off as the discarded frames of the ones he caught. But that would've been wishful thinking, because there was evidence that these skeletons used to be people. Clothing cushioned the bony pile, along with shoes, backpacks, sleeping bags, and anything else these people might've been carrying with them that Van had no use for. I pulled my head back inside, completely speechless through the mixture of horror, rage, and disgust. I took a deep breath, trying to keep from panicking, and motioned for Kara to sit back down with me.

"What else did she say to you?" I asked in a tense murmur. "Does she want to leave here?"

"She was too afraid to say much at all," Kara answered. "But showed me the bones, and she said as soon as night comes we should make a run for it and leave without her." I stressfully buried my face in my hands, and then massaged my fingers over my eyes. "Dugan, I could see it on her face. She doesn't want to stay here. We can't leave without her."

I nodded in agreement, but asked, "Has she ever…" and I stumbled over the mere thought of it. "Eaten anyone?"

Kara's eyes fell, and at first I thought that meant Namiko had, but then her shoulders rose with a shrug. "I didn't ask."

Namiko was so thin, much worse off than Van or the dog. I could only imagine how tempting it would be when she was starving and Van made it seem okay. But it wasn't okay. "Kara, if she has, she can't come with

us." It had to make her dangerous, at least in some way I couldn't yet put into conscious thoughts. There had to be some kind of psychological side effects at least, not to mention the ethical ones. "It's too risky."

Kara didn't appear to want to think it was even possible. "What are we going to do about Van?"

I let out a heavy sigh at the question. Deep down, I knew what we had to do. Letting him live so he could keep trapping passersby like us only to kill and eat them would make us culprits. I hated violence, hated being forced to kill. That's why I'd remained fundamentally alone, and why for the most part I avoided people unless it was necessary. Plus, there was still that deeply ingrained doctrine leftover from before the outbreak. The one that said killing Van to prevent him from hurting anyone else, when he hadn't yet truly done anything to hurt me or Kara, that would make me a vigilante, and according to that pre-outbreak doctrine, being a vigilante was as good as being a criminal. Only, there was no law anymore. There was no one to take men like Van and lock them away. If we didn't take it into our own hands, nobody would.

"I need to think about it," I told her eventually, but what I really meant was that I needed to work up the nerve.

Before Kara could respond someone whistled for the dog, and she looked somewhat disappointed as it sauntered away into the next room. After it disappeared Kara seemed like she was about ready to say something, but such a silent stillness fell over the entire building that we both squinted at each other suspiciously. Previously we could hear Namiko working on the rat at the table, and the steady drone of the television and whatever movie Van was watching. Both of those had stopped, and now the only audible sound was mine and Kara's breathing.

"Where's your axe?" I asked Kara. I was going to tell her to hold on to it and keep it close in case something weird was happening, but she glanced around like she'd just realized it wasn't here.

"I must've left it out there," she whispered anxiously, pointing to the center room.

"Get your shotgun then," I told her urgently, and then I stood. "Stay here."

I stood, pulling my rifle off my shoulder and holding it in my hands so I could shoot from the hip at a moment's notice. Walking on my tiptoes, I crept to the desk-wall that created the barrier between this room and the center one, and then I barely eased my head through the empty opening to look into the kitchen area. Namiko was the only one visible in here, and she'd moved to her safe place in the corner, only now she looked so terrified you might think someone had a gun on her.

"Did Van leave?" Even though I'd asked my question in a hushed voice, Namiko flinched as if it had struck her violently, and then she turned to bury her face against the makeshift wall to the next room.

I continued forward in the direction of the next room, and when I got there I eased my head into the opening again, searching for Van. This room was completely empty too. Not even the dog was around. Next I snuck to the only door in the building, and found why I couldn't hear the dog. Van had locked it in the soundproof stairwell, and no matter how loud it kept barking I wouldn't be able to hear it. Not being able to account for Namiko's fright if Van really had left, I suspiciously made my way over to that little freezer, noticing that while Kara stayed against the far wall of the building, she'd crawled to the edge of the room so she could watch through the opening.

When my hand reached out for the freezer I heard Namiko give a quiet whimper, like she was afraid for me. My fingers tensed over the latch anyway, and then I slowly lifted it open. There were piles of meat in the freezer, almost all of it small portions of cut up rats or even whole ones. I continued digging, intent on doing a thorough search, and with a horrified breath I reeled back as my hand came in contact with a plastic-wrapped, very human thigh.

With renewed and exponentially increased disgust, I slammed closed the lid of the freezer. Then I turned to Namiko, intent on saying or asking something, but as I did the wall behind the kitchen area caught my eye. Like the two walls that separated the three rooms, this one was made entirely of desks and office furniture stacked on top of each other. In

between the spaces between items, however, there was light filtering through. I squinted at it as I took a step closer, and then strode all the way up to it to peek through the crack. I couldn't see much directly in front of me because a blanket that was hanging from the ceiling hindered my view, but it was completely obvious that the three rooms we'd been occupying didn't make up the entire second floor of the building. There was at least another half of the building beyond the wall that Van had built.

I shifted my eyes to look left and right, only to find that the blanket directly in front of me wasn't the only one. There were quite a few that I could see from here, each of them set at different angles and some connecting with each other. It was almost as if they'd been hung in order to form hallways, like some kind of a maze. But if there was an entire area behind this wall, that had to mean there was some way to get back there. I pulled away from the crack, and thinking that Van's room was the likeliest place for the secret entrance to the other side I was about to storm over there. Upon hearing a thud from the room Kara and I were staying in, however, I froze.

"Kara?" I called suspiciously. There was no answer, so I began to creep back toward the opening to the right room. "Kara," I called again. When I got to the entrance, my heart dropped. "Kara!" I breathed, rushing forward to where she was lying on the floor, a running stream of blood seeping from a gash in the side of her forehead. "Please, please, please," I mumbled in a panic, dropping at her side and instantly setting my rifle down so I could put my fingers against her neck and feel for a pulse.

Before I had a chance to find it Namiko's voice screamed deafeningly, "Dugan!" I simultaneously turned and stood just in time to see Van winding up with Kara's axe in his hands, and as he brought around his wide swing I instinctively dropped backward onto my ass, watching the weapon whizz through the air above my head.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" I snarled irately, and since the follow-through of his swing had him momentarily recovering I launched myself up again, charging him with my shoulder and plowing him backward into the makeshift wall to the kitchen

makeshift wall to the kitchen.

The force of my blow caused him to let out a pained huff of air, but I didn't wait for him to rebound. I pulled back my fist and sent it as hard as I could into his stomach, and I was so furious that I wound up and did it a second time. When I went to hit him a third time in the gut, however, he wrapped his hands around the back of my head and forced it downward at the same time he raised his leg, smashing my face into his knee. I fell to my hands and knees, choking and spitting up the blood that managed to flow back into my throat, but I ignored the pain and lack of air to wrap my arms around Van's legs, and then I pulled sideways to throw him down.

The moment he hit the ground I dragged him toward me, pushing myself over him and immediately raising my fist again. I brought it down against his jaw, and when it sliced the inside of his lip on his teeth his mouth turned up into a bloody grin, like he was laughing at what he did to Kara, and all those other people he'd killed. With an angry shout I pulled back to strike him once more, but as I brought my hand down he deflected it sideways, causing my clenched knuckles to smash into the ground at the side of his head. Hardly a moment later his own knuckles crashed against my skull, but despite the pain in my hand and head I wasn't going to make it easy for him to hit me again.

I tilted my chin down so the top of my head was level with his face, and then I dropped my shoulders fast, head-butting him across the nose severely enough that I heard it crack. I reared up, so ragingly bloodthirsty that I'd hit him multiple times with both fists in just a matter of seconds. He was desperate. In his desperation he raised both arms, and since I was sitting over him he brought his elbows down hard against my thighs. His bones dug deep into my muscle, hurting so much agonizingly more than I ever would have thought it could, and he kept doing it again and again, drilling his elbows into my legs until I made a distraught reach for his wrists.

He slipped out of my grasp and shot up, catching one arm behind my waist and swinging sideways intensely enough that I ended up on my back. Before I even realized it he'd switched our positions, but instead of drawing it out and attempting to punch me, his fingers wrapped around

drawing it out and attempting to punch me, his fingers wrapped around my throat. I swung upwards, trying to catch his face, first with my fists, then desperately with my nails. When that didn't work I dug my nails into his arms, but it was no use. I had no doubt he'd done this before, because there was a smug satisfaction that filled his pale blue eyes as the life in mine started fading.

Just when I thought it was all over a loud gunshot sounded through the air, putting a deep red hole through the center of Van's chest. He looked up at something I couldn't see, and when there was a second shot his grip began to loosen on my neck. It had to be Namiko, because I could still see Kara lying in the same spot, either unconscious or dead. I was sure it was Namiko a moment later, because there was a third gunshot, followed by a series of more. A fourth, a fifth, a sixth, until she emptied the entire clip of Van's pistol into his chest in one vindicating go. Then the gun clattered to the floor.

I shoved Van's body off of me and scrambled up. "Kara," I groaned through the pain, stumbling over to her and dropping once more at her side.

My bloody fingers pressed against the side of her neck, and I was already in such an adrenaline-fueled panic that I couldn't feel anything. Not feeling her pulse made it worse, and I felt tears fill my eyes as I desperately pressed harder. I forced myself to calm down and hold my breath, tuning out the pain in my body so I could focus only on the feeling beneath my fingers. There it was. I could breathe again. Her pulse was strong.

"Kara," I said, and I gave her shoulders a gentle shake. "Kara," I repeated, louder this time to try and wake her. "Please wake up." Even though her pulse was strong I still felt my eyes stinging with tears, and I had no idea how truly attached I was to this kid until now. "Kara," I pleaded.

Kara gave the lightest of groans, and her eyes shut tighter like she was beginning to come to. I gave her another soft shake, and this time when she groaned with suffering she rolled onto her side. "Ow," she whined softly, raising her hands to her head. When her fingers came into contact

with the still bleeding gash in her head she sucked in air through her teeth and rolled onto her back again, stomping her feet against the floor from the pain. "That douchebag hit me with my own axe," she mumbled a minute later, finally pulling her hands away from her face.

I was so relieved I couldn't help but laugh, and I carefully brushed her hair away from the wound. "Can you sit up?"

She motioned for my hand, and when I gave it to her she used it to pull herself upward. "Woozy," she muttered, squeezing her eyes shut as if to will it away.

Kara opened her eyes again, and as she did Namiko appeared at our sides with a small box in her hands. She knelt, leaning noticeably away from me, and opened the lid to show us that there were medical supplies in it. "I can help," she said softly, pointing to Kara's head.

"Please," Kara requested gratefully, and when Namiko began to pull out some items Kara looked at me and nodded for me to leave the room.

I smiled, knowing she wanted to be alone with the woman to ask those questions she never got to – namely the one about whether or not Namiko had ever taken part in cannibalism. Even though I was reluctant to leave Kara alone again, I did as she wanted, and took my water bottle to the next room in order to clean the blood from my face. I had a headache from being hit, but fortunately it was only my nose that had been bleeding, and it had already stopped. I was done cleaning up for a good five minutes before Namiko silently strode out of the room, and I went in to see Kara.

"Feeling any better?" I asked concernedly, taking a seat at her side.

She only gave a brief nod before moving on to the topic on her mind. "Namiko wants to come with us. I asked her if she ever ate anyone, and she said no, that's why she's so scrawny." I nodded thoughtfully, taking it in and briefly considering how long our food rations would last with a third person. "Dugan," Kara started when I offered no verbal answer. "Can she come?"

"Yeah," I answered, more at ease with her accompanying us seeing as she'd just saved my life in spite of how terrified she was of Van. "Yeah, she can come."

Kara grinned, but then a worried grimace crossed her expression. "Where's Wolf?"

I knew instantly she was talking about that massive dog, but then it occurred to me that she was definitely thinking of taking the dog with us too, and that was another mouth to feed. "Kara," I began in protest.

"Please," she begged, setting her mouth in a toothy grin.

I sighed thoughtfully. Aside from the obvious downfall with food, there were perks to having a dog around, instincts being one. It was also nice that the dog was immune to the infection, and if it were loyal at all enough to protect us, we wouldn't have to worry about it getting bit. "Alright," I grumbled in defeat, but at the ecstatic look on Kara's face I couldn't help but chuckle. "They can both come."

Struggle To Survive

The Warpath by Connor Youngblood

Struggle To Survive

Genevieve

"Genevieve." Echo's voice sounded like a whisper in the dark, but as I began to wake from sleep it got louder. "Genevieve," she repeated again.

"What?" I asked impatiently, turning my head to look over at her on her cot, even though it was too dark for me to really see her. What could she possibly want in the middle of the night?

"I heard a scream," she said quietly.

I was about to tell her she was just dreaming and to go back to sleep, but now that I was fully conscious I could hear that the camp seemed louder than it should for how late it was. My mind immediately came to a conclusion about what was happening, and I sat up. "Oh my God." Then came another bloodcurdling scream. "Oh my God," I repeated, this time stirring to action. I threw my feet over the side of my cot and into my boots, telling Echo hurriedly, "Ferals. Get dressed."

Echo shot off her bed, and while we both threw on our boots as quickly as possible, I heard the first bangs of gunfire. We tore out of the tent with our weapons in hand, not even bothering to don our coats and sprinting through the snow toward the commotion. It was coming from an edge of camp near the cabins, but not everyone who slept over there had a cabin. Some of them were in tents, or under lean-to shelters. They were exposed.

The chaos was getting closer. Terrified screams. Gun shots. The shouts of men. The snarls of Ferals. Only a few soldiers had already responded, but I could hear additional shouts coming from around us, others were on the way. It would have been too dark to see anything, except for when we got there we could see one of the cabins had caught fire. In the panic

got there we could see one of the cabins had caught fire. In the panic someone must have knocked over a candle or a lantern, and smoke was spewing into the air.

There were so many Ferals. Moving too swiftly for the civilians with guns to have even shot any of them yet. They were roaring with fury, hungrily tearing through anyone they laid eyes on. As we arrived I watched two of them lunge at a woman, rip into her, and then bolt after someone else who ran by before she even stopped breathing. They took down the second man, and once he was incapable of getting back up they moved on to the next person. It's like there was a method in their violence. Kill as many as you can, come back later to eat. But this couldn't be happening. Not here. It had been weeks since the last Ferals we'd seen, and we'd only been seeing a few at a time. There were too many now and they were moving around too much through the panicking civilians for me to even get an accurate count.

Echo and I split up to begin killing all the Ferals we could. I aimed my rifle and shot one that was about to bite into a child, and then smashed the butt of my weapon against another one that was charging me. I dispatched it with a bullet, and noticed the escalation of gunfire as more soldiers arrived on the scene. Then something hit me from behind so hard that my rifle flew out of my hands. I tumbled to the ground, and the only reason I could think that I was still alive was because the Feral that hit me did it with such force that it tumbled too.

It didn't even rise from the ground before coming at me again. It pivoted on its hands so it was facing me, and as its legs tensed for the next spring I reached for the knife at my thigh. It lunged, plowing into me again with so much impact that we summersaulted backward a few times, finally coming to a stop with me on top. It pushed its shoulders off the ground to snap at me, and I brought my knife upward with one hard swing, plunging it through the bottom of the creature's jaw.

I rose swiftly, preparing to be tackled again, and when nothing hit me right away I spared a glance around to reorient myself and search for my rifle. I got a glimpse of it nearby, and was about to run for it when a still figure only fifteen feet to the left of it caught my eye. The Feral and I locked gazes at the same time, and in the split second it roared at me I

locked gazes at the same time, and in the split second it roared at me I calculated my chances of defeating it with a knife. It was emaciated like all the others, but I could tell before the outbreak this guy must've been built like a linebacker, because even skin and bones it was still at least twice my size. If I tried to kill this Feral with a knife and went down, I was dead for sure.

The moment it took off, so did I. While it sprinted toward me I darted for my rifle, but I could tell we were going to intersect at the same time. *Think soccer*. I'd slid in soccer plenty of times, and even though it had been so many years ago, I still knew I could do it. I just had to time it perfectly.

The Feral roared again, only inches away from striking distance, and it extended its arms. The very second it made a starving reach for my head I dropped, using my momentum to slide feet first the remaining feet to my rifle. I grabbed it and rolled onto my stomach, knowing by muscle memory when the barrel was perfectly lined up with the Feral's chest. When it realized I wasn't in its grasp it turned, screeching at me furiously and crouching for the spring. My finger tensed over the trigger, and I would've stayed put to recover after it collapsed if I didn't catch sight of Echo nearby. I was about to yell at her to stay by my side so we could have each other's backs, but before I could she dove into the burning cabin.

"Echo!" I shouted in instant panic, even though I knew she couldn't hear me, and I pushed myself off the ground and began sprinting over. When I reached the entrance of the cabin I had to take a few steps back because of the heat, and my heart dropped. "Echo!"

There was no answer, and I working up the courage to run in after her when she finally came out with a kid in her arms. The child was wailing with fear, tears running down his cheeks. He couldn't have been in the cabin long – he didn't look like he was suffering from too much smoke inhalation. He must've been so terrified of the Ferals that he chose to run into the burning cabin instead, and Echo had seen him do it.

She saw me when she came out, but right when she did her face twisted with fear. "Turn!" she shouted.

At her warning I rapidly dropped, right in time for a Feral to go flying over my head. It landed in the snow in front of me, and I immediately put it down. When I stood back up Echo strode over. She was panting and coughing from the smoke inside the cabin, and a quick scan of her body revealed a single burn on the backside of her shoulder. We stood there, me with my rifle at the ready and Echo still holding the kid, looking around for any more Ferals. There were people all over the place, some wounded, many dead. But it was over already, and now people were shouting about taking the wounded to the medical cabin and bringing water to put out the fire.

"Is he okay?" I asked Echo, nodding toward the child. He couldn't be more than seven years old.

She tried to set him down, but he wouldn't take his arms away from her neck. "Kid's scared out of his mind," she answered.

"Hold on to him," I told her, and then I moved around her to look at her shoulder. The burn there was smaller than my hand, but while it wasn't too large it was severe.

"Piece of burning wood fell on me when I was picking him up," Echo explained, glancing over her shoulder at me.

Once the adrenaline wore off she'd be in a lot of pain, but she did it to save this kid's life. She could get it cleaned when we got to the medical cabin, so right now I scanned our immediate area, looking for anyone wounded that I could help get there too. My gaze fell on an older woman that I recognized from around camp, on her knees in the snow, clutching at her arm. "Mrs. Vanburen?" I said softly after I'd strode over, and I knelt beside her. "Are you okay?"

She looked over at me, so horrified she couldn't even speak. She was just taking in shaky breaths as she extended her arm to me. The limb was bleeding profusely, blood seeping from a spot where an entire chunk of flesh was missing. Bitten. And we both knew what that meant, though I wasn't sure yet exactly what our protocol was for the bitten.

"Let me take you to the medical cabin," I suggested, carefully setting her

uninjured arm over my shoulders and helping her off the ground.

I supported Mrs. Vanburen all the way to the medical cabin, with Echo at my side and still carrying the little boy. When we got there he still wouldn't let go of her, so she motioned for me to go in without her.

"Your shoulder," I protested. Pain was one thing, but if she didn't at least get it cleaned it could get infected.

"They have more important things to worry about," she said, motioning again to leave her behind.

I wasn't going to just forget about her burn, but I had to get Mrs. Vanburen in there. Once we got inside I could see all the chaos had shifted indoors, as soldiers and civilians brought people in to be treated. A majority of the injured had been bitten, but some had bullet wounds, shot by friendly fire in the pandemonium.

"April?" I questioned when I walked in. She was shuffling around hurriedly, giving orders to the others who'd come in to offer their services, Casey, Blake, and Kellan included.

She knew I was asking what to do with Mrs. Vanburen. Every steel table in the cabin was occupied, so she pointed to the back wall of the cabin where there were more people sitting on the floor. I could tell immediately that everyone sitting back here was bitten, and that's why they weren't being given priority over the shot or the bitten who had other injuries and were in a lot of pain.

After I set my charge down at the back I looked for Casey. I'd have done it myself, but I wasn't sure how to treat a burn as severe as Echo's. "Hey, can I steal you real quick?" I asked her, passing an apologetic smile to the person she was treating. "Echo's got a bad burn." Based on that she grabbed a handful of things she thought she'd need, and she followed me outside.

"Genevieve," Echo protested when she saw Casey. "This shouldn't be a priority right now."

"You want it to get infected?" I asked impatiently. The last thing I needed was for her to get sick. "Medicine is scarce, and this is preventable."

Echo groaned, but as Casey examined the wound she agreed with me. "Genevieve's right. This is pretty bad," she told Echo. We tried to get the kid out of Echo's arms so Casey could treat the wound, but he wouldn't let go of her. "Go get Blake," she requested after a few seconds of trying to peel the kid away. "Also, ask April for a tetanus shot. We should have some leftovers from testing on Ferals."

I did as she said, picking Blake out of the chaos inside and eventually managing to stop April long enough to ask her where the tetanus shots were. Blake succeeded in getting the kid from Echo's neck, even though the little guy immediately set to crying again, and once he strode a few feet away with the child Casey gave Echo the shot.

"There's a little bit of charring," Casey said gently, motioning for Echo to turn toward the side of the medical cabin since there was nowhere out here to sit. "I'm going to have to scrub it away."

"What?" Echo asked in a panic, immediately turning back around. When the only response Casey gave was an extremely apologetic pursing of her lips, Echo leaned both her arms against the side of the cabin to expose her back to Casey. "How bad is it going to hurt?"

Casey looked at me, maybe to judge whether or not I'd be able to stomach watching it, and then she replied softly to Echo, "Just brace yourself."

The moment Casey touched Echo's shoulder, Echo's fist clenched enduringly. But it only lasted a few more moments before Echo pulled back to slam it against the wall, grunting with pain, "Mother f-" and it tapered off to an agonized growl. That wasn't the last of it either, and watching the way Echo cringed with every rough wipe Casey made against her shoulder, hearing the groans and expletives of misery, it caused an aching twinge in my chest. Nobody should have to go through pain like this, not even Echo, and especially not for saving a life.

"Hey," I said amicably, leaning against the cabin at Echo's side. She had

"Hey," I said amicably, leaning against the cabin at Echo's side. She had her eyes shut tight like she was trying to tune everything out, so I put my hand against her cheek to get her to look at me. She did, but her brow furrowed with another cringe, and those pearly gray eyes filled with tears. I leaned back just enough to see what Casey was doing, and then told Echo encouragingly, "You're almost done."

I wasn't even sure if she'd heard me, because she growled miserably again and pulled away from my hand to bump her forehead against the wood. Watching this kind of suffering was torture, and I could only imagine how bad it was for Echo. I had an idea of how to lessen it, and I wrestled with the idea for a few seconds because there were people around and I didn't want her to get the wrong idea. But then she whimpered sharply, and I couldn't stand it anymore.

I forced her to look at me one more time, and then I pressed my lips to hers to try and get her mind off of it. She was in so much pain it didn't seem like she even noticed at first, and the only thing I could think to do was make it more sincere, so I did. I kissed her deep enough that I was sure she couldn't feel anything at all, because she began to return it eagerly. After a few more seconds I cracked one eye to check if Casey was almost finished. Seeing that she was in the process of taping a piece of gauze to Echo's shoulder, I pulled away.

"It still hurts," Echo whispered with a whine, but behind the pain there was the flash of a smile in her eyes.

I managed to suppress amused laughter, but couldn't help it that I smirked. "You'll live," I told her, giving her cheek a half-heartedly playful smack.

"Thanks, Casey," Echo said gratefully, though I was sure grateful wasn't exactly what she was feeling toward Casey right now.

While Casey nodded and gathered the dirtied medical supplies, Blake came back over with the kid. "He hasn't stopped crying," he said, and the moment he got close to Echo the boy stretched his arms out for her.

I watched Blake follow Casey back inside, and the reminder of all the

injured people in there made my stomach sink with realization. "I'm going to see if they need help. Are you okay waiting here for a bit?"

Echo nodded reassuringly, so I returned inside and made my way to April, who was digging around in a man's leg for a bullet. "How can I help?" I asked, refusing to watch.

"Casey, go get Genevieve the medicine I've been saving," she instructed without looking up from her work. Once she pulled the bullet out she pressed a piece of gauze to the man's leg, and while she applied pressure to it she moved close to my ear so nobody could hear. "It's for the bitten who are in a lot of pain. Tell them it's a sedative." She motioned to my arm where it bends at the elbow. "Try to get the vein if you can."

Casey came back and handed me two small glass bottles of a clear fluid, and one injection needle. "What is it really?" I asked, putting the bottles into my jeans pocket and carefully taking the syringe. April gave me a sad, grave look, and I nodded so she wouldn't need to answer. It had to be some kind of euthanasia.

I took the syringe to the first of the bite victims laid out on a table. He had flesh missing all over the place, but it seemed he was in so much pain that he was already in shock. "Sir," I said, touching his arm to get his attention. The only acknowledgment he gave was turning his eyes on me. "I'm going to give you a sedative."

If he heard me at all then he was in too much agony to respond. There was a drawn on line on the syringe, so I stuck the tip into a bottle and filled it to the line. The blue figure of the man's vein was visible through his skin, and since I'd never even held a needle before, I did my best to hold back a cringe while I pushed the pointed tip through his flesh and injected the fluid.

The man's eyes found me again, more alert than he'd been the whole time, and my heart sank. I'd killed before, but never an innocent. Never looking them straight in the eye. Anytime someone in our group got bit, I refused to be the one who killed them, because we'd find a cure, and we couldn't cure them if they were dead. I knew this had to be done, we couldn't have Ferals near camp, but it was still gut wrenching.

I could see this man fading. He wasn't focused on me anymore, even though he was still looking at me. He was seeing something else. Then he took one last breath, and his eyes fluttered closed. I couldn't tear my gaze away, I just stared at the body in front of me, at the life I took, wondering if it's what he wanted. Or if it hurt.

An agonized cry snapped me out of it. I glanced around to find the next bite victim, and then I steeled myself and moved on. Twice more I injected the poison into civilians' veins. I didn't know how many more times I could handle it, and it was almost with relief that I moved to my last patient. A young woman, in her late twenties maybe, with bites along her arms and a bullet wound in her abdomen.

"Ma'am," I began methodically, already holding the filled syringe in my hand.

"Please," she said frantically, putting her hand on my arm and squeezing. "My son. Please tell me they didn't get my son."

She was squeezing my arm painfully hard, and it was the first time since I started this that I *really* felt something. "What's he look like?" I asked. My heart was breaking. For her. For her soon to be motherless son. I knew what it was like, nobody should have to suffer it.

"Six years old," she said, and she coughed bloody because of the wound in her stomach. "He has black hair, and big brown eyes."

Now that she said it, I could see the child's face in hers. She looked so much like him. Like the child Echo was holding. "He's safe," I told her, and when she instantly released my arm and lay back with relief, tears flooded my eyes. "Does he have a father?"

She lifted her head and shook it. "Will you find someone to take care of him?" she asked, eyeing the needle in my hand. She knew the truth – that it was all over.

When I nodded she extended her arm to me willingly. "I'm sorry," I said, in a whisper to hold back more desolate tears as I stuck the needle into

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her.

She looked at me, already gaining that far away look in her eyes, and before she faded completely she gave me a thankful smile. There was no time to mourn these losses, because someone burst in through the cabin door, and Cap's voice carried over the crowded room.

"I want all my lieutenants and their platoon sergeants at the meeting tent in ten minutes," he called, and then I heard him address Blake more quietly. "McMahan, go find the LTs that aren't here and relay the message."

After he and Blake left I gave the syringe and bottles back to Casey and met Echo outside. "How's he doing?" I asked, noticing that the little boy was shaking.

"He's freezing," she answered, and her eyes scanned my face with concern at how dejected I'd sounded. Or maybe even looked.

The boy's face was buried in her neck, but when I pulled my gloves out of my back pocket and began to put them on his hands he raised his head. I tried to give him a comforting smile. "You can keep these, okay?"

He sniffled, but immediately stopped shivering so bad with the gloves on. "I want my mom."

It was like a stab in the heart, and my eyes filled with tears again. I sniffled too, trying desperately hard to clear them away. Echo heard it, and turned around to look at me worriedly.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine," I told her, almost impatiently because I didn't want her to ever see me vulnerable. "Let's go."

I turned to start leading her to the person I was hoping would look after the kid, but she gently grabbed my arm. "Genevieve, wh-"

"Don't touch me," I interrupted sharply as I pulled away, but I was

teetering on an emotional edge, and it ended up coming out more of a whimper. She opened her mouth to make some kind of protest, but before she could I repeated pleadingly, "Don't." It didn't matter if we were in the middle of a crisis, and it didn't matter what kind of physical relationship we had, it didn't change anything, and I managed a small glare to remind her of that. Echo nodded compliantly, so I proceeded to lead the way to a familiar campsite. When we got there, I was beyond relieved to see a small blonde head, looking healthy as ever. "Madison."

"Genevieve!" she shouted happily, running to me and jumping up into my arms.

I gave the girl a long hug, and I would've been glad to stay like that until I had my emotions under control, but the night wasn't over, and I had responsibilities. "I'm glad you guys are okay," I told Madison's mom while I set her down.

"And you," she said, fondly running her fingers through her daughter's hair when Madison took her side.

I smiled gratefully, and then made a deliberate glance toward the child in Echo's arms. "He lost his mom," I said quietly so he wouldn't hear. "Could you take care of him? At least for tonight."

"Of course," she answered willingly, and strode over to Echo to take the kid. It took some prying, but eventually they managed to move his arms from Echo's neck to Helen's.

I expressed my gratitude, and then motioned for Echo to follow me back the other direction. "What now?" she asked, taking stride at my side.

"Cap wants the LTs and their sergeants in the meeting tent," I told her, adjusting the rifle over my shoulder.

"Okay," she said, pausing thoughtfully. "I'll go see if April still needs help in the medical cabin."

"I want you there with me and Blake." She wasn't included in Cap's invitation, but normally, as my sergeant, Blake was supposed to be my

partner in everything. Since Echo arrived she'd taken his position as my partner, though he still maintained the sergeant position. Seeing as Echo was my battle buddy, she was supposed to be everywhere I was.

"Is that okay?" she asked, looking over at me in shock. "I don't even have a rank."

"I'm making it okay. Just don't cause any problems." She nodded compliantly, and a moment later I mused quietly, "I haven't seen a clan of Ferals that big since the outbreak."

"You think they're grouping?" Echo mumbled thoughtfully. "Maybe to make hunting easier."

We reached the tent, but that made me stop before we wandered in. "If they're smart enough to do that," I said, looking at her and not bothering to conceal the fright that it instilled in me. "Then we have things worse than their numbers to worry about."

It hadn't quite been ten minutes yet, but Echo and I were the last to arrive. When Cap saw us walk in he motioned for everyone to come to his table. "Gather round." We all shuffled to the table, where he'd already laid out his map of the country. "First off, I want you to extend my thanks to your soldiers for responding so quickly tonight. Things could've been a lot worse than they were." He was acknowledged with nods all around. "It's obvious doubled patrols aren't working anymore. I wanted you all here because we need a new solution. Go."

Every one of us glanced up and looked around at each other, and for the first time I noticed that Kellan had snuck in. I ignored it, thinking it couldn't hurt to have more ideas. We stood there in silence for a few minutes, thinking to ourselves.

Finally Home Squad's lieutenant offered, "We could build a wall around camp. We have the man power."

"Pros?" Cap prompted.

"We'd be protected," the same lieutenant responded.

"It's an easy solution," added his sergeant. "And we're in a forest of building materials."

Cap met each of our gazes to see if there was anything else to add. "Cons?"

"It'll take too long," said the sergeant from Second Platoon.

I saw Echo look at me out of the corner of my eye, and then she added timidly, "Evacuation would be limited if there was a fire."

Cap waited another few seconds before rolling his hand in the air. "Okay, next idea. Keep spitting 'em out."

"Go deeper into the woods," suggested Second's LT. There were immediate rejections from everyone.

"Why can't we go underground?" asked Home's sergeant.

"Hey, yeah," Kellan agreed, and he searched the map on the table for a moment before pointing. "There's an entire business building underground here. Access is through a one story parking garage."

"We can't go underground," Echo said immediately.

I was surprised when Home's sergeant answered hostilely, "What do you know about it, raider?"

I looked at Blake, reading his preparedness to stop a fight in his expression, but Echo stayed calm. "Down there the only thing that keeps air circulating is electricity. It's not just Ferals we have to worry about if we go into a city."

"Yeah," Home's LT mumbled, "Fucking raiders."

"Exactly," Echo said, ignoring the insult behind the remark. "If anyone cuts our power we're in the dark and fresh air will be out in no time. Plus we can't grow food underground, we'd be completely reliant on scavenging."

"If you're such a genius," Home's sergeant said sarcastically, "Then what do you suggest?"

Echo glanced at me for permission, and seeing as Home Squad and Kellan were the only ones who looked angry about her input, I nodded her on. "Military bases are fenced, right? I say we go in and clear one out. If we can find a way to electrify the fence then it'll be protection enough, and we can see threats coming from any direction."

"You want us to lock ourselves on a base with 'x' number of Ferals, and kill them all without any more casualties?" asked Kellan impatiently.

"She didn't say it would be easy," Blake countered in her defense.

She gave him a grateful smile and continued, "At the start of the outbreak everybody tucked tail and hid. I know you guys are looking for a cure, but at what point do we start taking things back?"

I couldn't help but look at her with surprise. She'd never before mentioned wanting to reclaim anything from the Ferals, but she was right. Someday, somebody was going to have to be brave enough to start purging the world of the infection, with or without a cure. Why not us? Starting with a permanent home. "I agree with Echo," I said.

"Of course you do," Kellan muttered under his breath.

"Excuse me?" I asked, instantly offended by his tone, and even more so when he rolled his eyes. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Echo had mentioned more than once that Kellan was suspicious of us, and I knew for a fact that's what he was getting at now. What made me even more furious about it was that this was no time for jealousy games. We were trying to have a serious meeting, and I was willing to listen to Echo's input because the safety of everyone at this camp was at stake. It had absolutely nothing to do with sex. I still hated her.

"Why don't you tell me," Kellan challenged.

Second's sergeant sighed impatiently. "What's he even doing here?"

Even Home's LT felt like he needed to chip in. "Yeah, get him or the bitch out of here," he said, nodding toward Echo, and I knew he really meant get Echo out.

I was not in the mood for this bullshit, and Kellan was making me look like a jackass in front of the camp's leadership. "Kellan, go help at the medical cabin," I commanded.

He gave an angry huff and stomped toward the door, turning at the last second and pointing at Echo. "What about her?" he asked expectantly.

"She stays," I said flatly.

"LT," he protested. "She's not-"

"She stays!" I yelled at him angrily, and when he stormed out of the tent I looked particularly at Home Squad, challenging them to argue it. Nobody said anything in protest, so I resumed deliberately, "Pros of clearing a base?"

"Protection," listed Blake. "Real buildings, actual houses, or at least a hotel. A hospital."

"Grass fields to grow crops," added Second's LT. "Maybe a stocked armory."

"Cons?" Cap asked, and we all looked at each other, nobody having anything negative to say. We all knew the risk of securing it, but it would be worth it. "All in favor?" Everyone agreed, so Cap leaned over the map, and studied it in silence while we all watched him. "It's a long ways away, but I think we should take Fort Mayor," he said eventually, pointing to a spot of land off Interstate Seventy near Pittsburgh. "It's got all the buildings we want, but it's small enough that it will be the easiest to clear and the easiest to guard. If memory serves, it's even got a river that runs right through it for a fresh water source." Once more there were nods all around. "Barns," Cap said to Second's LT. "I want you to prepare your guys to scout the base. You can leave first thing in the morning if everyone's ready. Strictly recon, don't engage unless you have to."

"Yes, sir," Barns nodded.

"You're free to go," Cap said to everyone.

But I wanted to stay, so I glanced at Blake while everyone filed out. "Will you take Echo back to the tent?" And so only he would see it I mouthed 'Kellan.' It was becoming increasingly clear that Kellan's issue with Echo wouldn't be resolved, and whether I hated her or not, I wasn't sure how heated he still was. I didn't want her being left alone.

After the tent had emptied Cap gave me a small smile. "How you holding up?"

"Okay," I answered with a shrug, and trying not to sound argumentative, asked, "Why aren't you sending us to scout?" My platoon almost always handled the more dangerous city missions. This definitely seemed like one of those.

Cap appeared to know what I was thinking, because he chuckled. "You're still my all-star platoon," he reassured me. "Which is why I need you guys here, protecting the camp while Second Platoon is scouting. I'll send you guys in for the sweep, don't worry." I smiled embarrassedly, trying to think of what to say. "What was that about? With Kellan?"

I felt my previous frustration flare back up, but unlike the last months, it wasn't at Echo. It was at Kellan. "He has issues with Echo," I answered vaguely. "I'll talk to him." Cap nodded, and seeing as it didn't look like he had anything else to say, I stood and said goodbye.

The moment I left Cap's tent I marched to the medical cabin to look for Kellan. The more I thought about it, the more furious I became, but I had to remind myself that I had to keep controlled. He wasn't Echo. I couldn't be as brutal with him. He'd obeyed my order to help in the medical cabin, and when he saw me standing near the entrance I motioned for him to follow me. I led him around to the side of the cabin, out of earshot from the bustle inside.

"Spit it out," I told him brusquely, but he raised his eyebrows at me like he didn't know what I was talking about. "The issue you have with Echo. Or

the one you have with me. What is it?"

"I don't have an issue with you," he said calmly.

"Then what is it with Echo?" I asked impatiently. I already knew, but I wanted him to say it so I could tell him it was none of his goddamn business. He didn't say anything at all. "What'd you say to her on mission the other week?" I prompted. He'd obviously said something to provoke her, but by his following silence he clearly wasn't comfortable enough to say it to me.

Instead of responding to my question he chuckled dryly. "Look at you, defending her. What's gotten into you, LT?"

I pursed my lips angrily and took a deep breath to maintain composure. "I'm defending her in the same way I'd be defending you, or anyone else who was being provoked in the ways I see you provoke her." I wanted so badly to yell at him so he'd get the point, but I kept quiet so nobody would hear. "What are you trying to get from it, Kellan? What do you want?"

"I want to take you fishing," he said with his signature grin.

I knew what fishing entailed. It was secluded, just the two of us. It was a date, or just a good place for him to try and seduce me. But I was so thrown that he was using this opportunity to hit on me that I just stared at him for a few seconds. Then I recovered. "I've already told you, we're never going to happen."

"Because of her?" he asked seriously.

"No," I huffed angrily. Or defensively. I wasn't exactly sure how to identify the emotion that struck me. "I told you 'no' before she ever got here."

"But I actually had a chance before she got here," he retorted shortly. "I can see it on your face, you know. I'm not stupid, Genevieve. I know you were flirting with me to make her jealous." I squinted at him, half in shock, half in curiosity, trying to figure out what he was attempting to accomplish with this conversation. "Do you just know that she wants you? Or are you actually having sex with her?"

Now I was mad. I'd stopped flirting with him, I wasn't leading him on, especially if he'd known the whole time why I was doing it. He had no business asking those kinds of questions. "If she wants me," I said apathetically, trying to keep from giving anything away. "It's not your place to care. Same goes for if I was having sex with her."

His eyes scanned my face, clearly trying to decipher in my expression an answer to his question. It didn't seem like he could figure out the truth, because he tried to be smug again. "I'll let you fuck me to make her jealous."

I blinked at him a couple times. "You aren't joking," I mused in shock, but it instantly turned to rage. That was the most offensive thing he'd ever said to me, if for no other reason than that he was serious, and that he really thought I'd accept. "Listen to me, Kellan, and listen good, because I'm only going to say this once," I said angrily, doing everything in my power not to shout even though I was furious. "My answer now is no, my answer will always be no. You don't have to like it, and you don't have to like Echo, but keep it to yourself. I won't tolerate it interfering with the mission any more. And don't you ever make another display of insubordination like that stunt you pulled Cap's tent. Do I make myself clear?" I could tell by the look on his face he had another smug, flirtatious comment lined up, so I growled, "The only words I want to hear out of your mouth right now are 'yes ma'am'."

His upper lip curled angrily as he muttered, "Yes ma'am."

I strode away without saying anything else to him. As I walked to my tent the anger faded, and it gave way to the stresses of the more pressing emotions of the night. The lantern was on when I got there. Echo was up waiting for me with a novel in her hands. I went straight to my cot, collapsing onto the edge so I could take off my boots. How was it possible to feel overwhelmed and completely empty at the same time? I couldn't believe that our camp was compromised. Couldn't believe we'd lost citizens that I'd sworn to protect. Couldn't get over the sinking, icy knot in my stomach at the lives I had to take.

I could feel Echo's eyes on me as I slipped off my boots, and then leaned my rifle down against the trunk. When I finished that and set my elbows on my knees, resting my head in my hands without so much as making a sound, she whispered, "Genevieve?" I gave no response, and a moment later I felt her sink down at my side. "Are you okay?" All I could do was shake my head, because I didn't want to talk to her and I didn't want her to see me vulnerable. But despite the kind of anti-relationship we had, Echo always seemed to know what was going on. "What happened in the medical cabin?"

I took a deep breath, battling with whether or not I wanted to say it. Whether or not I'd break down if I said it. This was too much to keep in. "I had to give the bitten a shot," I answered without looking up.

Echo was silent for a few moments, and then her hand landed on my thigh. "They were dead the moment they got bit," she said gently. "That was a mercy."

"Innocent people, Echo," I argued weakly. I was mad that she was justifying it for me, but at the same time it's what I'd expected her to do. I felt so confused at those different needs, and guilty for killing them, and furious at the Ferals for doing it, and that muddling was frustrating. "They didn't deserve it."

"Nobody deserves it," she offered, and in response I pushed her hand off my leg. "You did what you had to do. It's not your fault."

"Is that what you tell yourself?" I snapped, crushed under the weight of emotions, and I glared at her. "Is this how you feel, day after day? How do you live with yourself?" Her face fell, but not with anger, or offence. I'd just wounded her. Deeply. And she immediately stood, aiming for the door. "I'm sorry," I apologized hastily, grabbing her hand in both my own so she wouldn't leave. "That was uncalled for. Please don't go." I pressed the back of her hand to my forehead in some form of begging, but when I sniffled to clear the tears my nose was flooded with the smell of smoke from her skin. "I'm so sorry," I whimpered. That smell made everything worse. I couldn't protect them, and that's why it was my fault.

She slipped her hand out of mine and tenderly ran it down to my cheek

so she could cup my face. When the first tear dropped from my eye she cleared it away with her thumb, and then she tilted my chin up so I would look at her. "What do you want, Genevieve, if you don't want me to tell you it's okay?" My gaze fell away from hers unsurely. "Do you want a shoulder to cry on?" she asked softly. "I won't tell anyone. Or do you want to be alone?" I was so miserable that I didn't reject the affection when her thumb caressed my bottom lip. "Do you want an outlet?"

I had no idea what I wanted, or what I needed. My brain was frozen, locked up on the image of a needle. "I don't want to be alone." That was all I knew for sure, and that I didn't want to gift Echo with any more emotion.

Not being able to find anything else to say, or any other way to express what I was feeling and what I wanted, I simply lay down on my cot, and Echo's hand fell to her side. I sniffled once more as I lay there, watching while Echo strode over to grab her pillow off her bed. As she turned off the lantern and everything went dark, I was about to protest her lying down with me.

Only, that's not what she did. She already knew, just like she always knew. Instead I heard her sit on the floor at the side of my cot, and after setting the pillow on the edge she leaned her head back against it. I knew it was uncomfortable. The ground was hard, there was no support for her back, her burn probably hurt, and the pillow would only cushion her head so much against the metal frame. To express my gratitude I had the overwhelming desire to set my hand over her shoulder, to let her know that I noticed. To let her know that in spite of how I felt about her, I appreciated it. But I couldn't complete the motion, no matter how many times I extended my hand, and the conflict within me soaked my pillow with a few extra tears.

Miles On the Other Side

Let It Be by Blackmill (ft. Veela)

Miles On the Other Side

Echo

My fingers jumped from key to key, and even though I had my eyes closed I could see each one before I pressed it. I always played better when I couldn't see. When there were no distractions. I knew by heart which note I'd hear next, knew by heart that the song I was playing was almost over. It was because I had my eyes closed that I wasn't aware my mother had come in, so when I finished her voice scared me.

"Sounds like you're lovesick," she mused, chuckling when I started.

Once the surprise wore off I couldn't help but laugh. "How do you always know?"

Her dark, soft blue eyes took me in with a fond smile as she strode across the basement to her painting easel. "You're an artist, sweetheart," she answered, and when she sat down at her stool she nodded toward the piano in front of me. "Your soul is in the product. You get that from me." She stood up just enough to lean over and plant a kiss on my head. "This big brain of yours that memorizes those songs, you get that from your dad." I smiled amusedly, thoughtfully pushing down on a key a couple times. "Is it Genevieve still?" I chewed the inside of my cheek dolefully while I nodded. "She get another boyfriend?"

"No," I replied, laughing at the scolding way my mother asked that. "There was a soccer game last night. She asked me to go."

"Why didn't you tell me?" my mom asked with surprise as she dipped two different colored paints onto a palette to mix them. "I would've taken you."

I shrugged, completely unsure of why I didn't go. Now I regretted it.

Especially since she invited me to the next one, and now that it would be just the two of us afterward I was more nervous than yesterday. At least with other people around I could keep from being noticed and try to blend in.

"I didn't know what it meant," I admitted, absentmindedly picking at a thread of the cushioned piano bench. "I thought I'd be sitting there, she wouldn't notice me the whole time, and then I'd come home."

"Mhm," my mom hummed. As she dipped her brush into the paint she asked, "Is that what it really would've meant?"

"No," I answered with a sigh, staring into the darkness outside the small basement window near the ceiling. "She wanted me to go for pizza with them afterward."

"Seven years you've known her," my mother started with a teasing grin, "And finally some progress."

"Wait 'til I tell you the next part," I mumbled, and she watched me with curiosity. "I sort of gave her the excuse that I'm shy. So next week she said it can just be me and her that go out afterward."

"Then what's with the melancholy?" she observed, clearly confused, but after watching me for another few seconds she understood somewhat. "What are you afraid of?"

"Years of expectation," I grumbled honestly. "At least in my daydreams things go the way I want them to. She's never given me any reason to think she thinks of me like that. She's never given me any reason to think she thinks of me at all."

"You want my opinion?" my mom asked, and I shrugged my half-hearted consent. "I think she's finally starting to realize that my baby's too shy, and that she's going to have to come to you."

I huffed with entertained gratefulness. "I just wish I was braver, like Becca." My sister never had trouble with romance. When she wanted something, or someone, she got it. Easily.

"*Let me tell you something about Becca," my mother started, pointing her paintbrush at me for emphasis. "When she was your age, and to this day, your father and I spent many sleepless nights worrying that her bravery was going to get her into some boy trouble."*

I couldn't help but laugh at that, and told my mom with a playful shrug, "At least I couldn't get pregnant."

She chuckled with equal amusement for a minute, and then her face grew more sympathetic. "But you could still get your heart broken."

She turned back to her easel, and I watched every brushstroke with wonder. I wished she'd given me the painting gene. "Your painting's turning out really good," I told her after a minute of silence.

She leaned back to give it a critical scan. "Yeah?"

"*Yeah. It might be one of my favorites," I assured her. "You should hang it in the living room."*

"*Then I think I will," she agreed happily.*

Since I was done playing piano for the night, I turned around to pull the fallboard over the keys. "How's Dad?"

"*He's sleeping," she answered. "Has a pretty bad fever. I'm sure he just needs some rest." I nodded, and when I couldn't help giving another lovesick sigh, she looked over at me with an affectionate smile. "Did you know your dad had a girlfriend when we met?" I shook my head. "We were friends for a long time. I waited and waited, hoping that sometime in the future the stars would align."*

"*And they did," I observed cheerfully.*

My mom nodded, and added encouragingly, "Patience, sweetheart." She made a final stroke before pointing the brush at me again. "That's the foundation of real love."

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"What's the plan?" I asked Genevieve as she strode through the entrance of the tent. She'd just returned from meeting with Cap.

"Cap wants the civilians to take the day off to be with their families, to try and keep morale up," she answered, sitting down on her cot and leaning back on her hands to wait while I got ready.

She looked better than she did last night, albeit a little sleep deprived, and I could still see the pain in her eyes. It was just like her to feel as though she had to protect everyone, and now I was discovering what happened when she felt like she'd failed. I wished I could tell her she was being too hard on herself, that she and everyone else had done everything they could, but I knew that would only upset her. She didn't seem ready to try confiding in me again either. Sleep had recovered just enough energy for her to close herself off and bottle it up.

"Second Platoon already left to scout that base," Genevieve continued. "So we'll be stretched thin today. Home Squad's running patrols, most of our guys are out digging graves, and the rest are rebuilding the cabin that burned down."

"And you and me?" I asked curiously, finished tying my boots and securing my gun holster around my thigh. After I stood I stretched my neck side to side, trying to work out the crick from how I'd slept against Genevieve's cot last night. I would've asked her for a massage if it weren't for the fact that there was no non-flirtatious way of mentioning it, and for the fact that I knew she'd refuse. Plus, I didn't want her hands anywhere near my burned shoulder. Just having my jacket on was irritating.

Seeing that I was ready, Genevieve stood, answering as she led the way out of the tent. "First we got to see April. Then the roof of another cabin caved in from that snow a few days ago. We're fixing it."

I glanced upward, taking in the gray of the mid-morning sky. "It looks like it's going to snow again."

"W[illegible]

¨Which is why we have to get it done today,¨ she replied impatiently. I looked over at her, trying to figure out what about my statement had aggravated her, and when she noticed me watching her she asked shortly, "What?" Not knowing exactly how to respond, and unable to figure it out, I simply shook my head. Maybe she was just being touchy because of last night.

When we got to the medical cabin we strode in, and I could see Genevieve visibly cringe at the sight of all the injured people still inside. None of them were bitten though – it seemed all the bitten had been taken care of. The people still recovering in the cabin were the ones who suffered from other types of injuries. April was making her rounds checking on all eight of them when we walked in, and at seeing us she waved us over to the corner of the cabin furthest from any of the patients so we could talk privately.

"How you doing?" Genevieve asked April. Her eyes kept darting halfway to the patients, like she wanted to look at them but didn't want to feel the pain that would accompany it. For having survived the last six years, I had to admit it was a shock to me to see Genevieve react so severely to the attack. It was almost like she was taking it personal, but she hid it so thoroughly that the only reason I even noticed was because I knew her so well.

"Better now that there's room to breathe," April answered, giving only a half-relieved smile. She looked exhausted. Then she nodded toward Casey. "We just need to keep an eye on the patients in here to monitor their wounds for infection."

"You have enough antibiotics and stuff?" Genevieve asked, to which April nodded. I absentmindedly picked up a small, empty medicine vial from the counter beside us. When she saw me glancing at the label her eyes widened with an almost painful fright, and she scolded in a panic, "Put that down!" I set the vial back on the counter, raising a surprised eyebrow at her. She had that inexplicable, annoyed impatience again, but after that she ignored me to look at April. "Cap said the number you gave him last night wasn't accurate?"

April let out a disappointed breath, and I wasn't sure what 'number' they

April let out a disappointed breath, and I wasn't sure what 'number' they were talking about until she replied. "Some of them were hiding their bites. We didn't catch it until the fever set in."

"How many total?" Genevieve asked. I'd been around long enough to know that when she was conducting official business, she used the lingo. However now, when I expected her to say something like 'casualties' or 'losses,' she seemed to purposefully avoid the words. It was part of her suppressing, that's why she hid it so well, and when April responded with 'seventy-three,' the only sign of anguish Genevieve gave was a subtle swallowing back of emotions. But I noticed.

"How did they kill so many that quickly?" April asked when neither of us said anything.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Genevieve said, and after finally glancing around the cabin she moved closer to April to speak quietly. "There were twenty-four Ferals in that clan. I've never seen one bigger than fifteen, and even that's rare."

April must have been stunned, because she glanced back and forth between Genevieve and I for a minute while it sank in. "So they're not just wandering into the woods," April started thoughtfully. "You think they're… organizing?"

Genevieve shrugged, pursing her lips skeptically. "When you say it like that it sounds crazy."

They were quiet for a bit, so I cut in. "What if it's not that crazy?" I asked, and they both looked at me curiously. "Think Darwin."

"Survival of the fittest?" Genevieve clarified, appearing a little doubtful.

"I suppose six years is long enough for there to be some level of natural selection," April mused.

"Think about it," I said hastily, leaning forward with an agitated excitement. "At the beginning of the outbreak it was a mad scramble for the Ferals to eat whatever they could. They didn't have to compete for food."

food."

"And now that food's getting scarce…" April mumbled. "They're adapting." I glanced over at Genevieve to see whether or not she agreed. She must have, because she was pale. "No," April shook her head with disbelief. "Adaptability necessitates cognizance."

"April, they sleep," I said urgently. "They're still diurnal. Since the beginning they've displayed similar social patterns as the uninfected, and last night they plowed through civilians with a *process*. If that's not even slight cognizance, I don't know what is."

"Slow down," Genevieve cut in impatiently. "In layman's terms, please."

April and I locked gazes for a moment, and then she looked at Genevieve. "The Ferals are climbing their way to the top of the food chain."

"They're getting smarter?" Genevieve asked more specifically.

"Or they're just starting to use it," I told her.

In response all the blood drained from her face again. "April," she said in a near whisper, "Will you take this to Cap? Tell him the moment Second Platoon gets back we're going to clear that base. We're sitting ducks out here."

After April nodded, Genevieve turned to lead me out of the cabin without saying anything else. As I began to follow her to the structure we were supposed to fix today, however, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"What if it's true?" I considered out loud. Genevieve shot me that familiar, 'shut up' warning look, but I was too interested to take much notice. "What if they're capable of problem solving? Or communication?"

"Stop talking about it," Genevieve begged.

I was too caught up in it to even have really heard her. "That can't be possible though, at least not communication, maybe not even problem solving. There can't be anything logical left in there. But if they're

adapting-"

Next thing I knew Genevieve had stopped and grabbed my coat in her fists. "Echo, stop talking about it," she growled pleadingly.

"What's the matter?" I asked with concern, taking in her worried expression.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and looking scared, she mumbled, "You're freaking me the hell out."

"I'm sorry," I told her sincerely, setting my hands on hers to get her to let me go. "I won't mention it anymore."

She released her hold on me, and like earlier she seemed to get annoyed for no apparent reason. "Whatever," she grumbled angrily, turning in the direction of the cabin again.

I ignored the fact that she was being overly sensitive today and trailed behind her. When we finally reached the cabin we were supposed to be working on and I got my first glimpse of the damage, I was almost afraid to go in. A whole half of the roof had collapsed, and now there was broken wood and piles of snow littering the inside. It would take us at least half the day to make repairs. By the looks of this place it seemed almost lucky the camp got attacked last night, because if the family had been inside when this happened, they could've been killed.

"Here," Genevieve said, grabbing the shovel that was leaned up against the outside. "The diggers could only spare one, we'll have to take turns."

"Yeah, make me start the bitch work," I protested quietly, taking a cautious step into the cabin. When I got close to where the roof had collapsed I stretched the shovel upward and poked at what remained, testing it's stability. "Is this even safe?"

Genevieve came in after me pushing a wheelbarrow, and once she'd positioned it near the start of the snow pile she hopped up to sit on the single table in the cabin. "The guys already cleared off the rest of the snow up there. It's fine."

"Okay," I mumbled unsurely, and as I made my first stab at the debris I looked over at Genevieve. "You just sit there and look pretty," I told her sarcastically.

"I'll dump the wheelbarrow after you fill it," she replied flatly, not even looking entertained by my teasing. "And who's the boss here? Stop complaining."

"You're not the boss of me," I playfully muttered under my breath.

"You're a soldier now aren't you?" she asked seriously. Maybe taking it out on me was her way of dealing with the drama from the Ferals, or with having to kill some of the infected last night, but she sounded impatient again. "And you'll work faster if you stop talking."

Either way, I rolled my eyes and tossed my next scoop of snow and wood into the wheelbarrow. When it was filled Genevieve pushed it outside to dump the contents, and then she returned it to me. I filled it once more, and by that time I could already feel the burn in my arms. Work like this was new to me, and frankly, I'd never been robust or muscular. In need of a break, I handed the shovel to Genevieve, and she took it with something of a scowl on her face. I ignored the look even though it gave me a slight twinge of aggravation, and raised myself up onto the seat she'd been occupying during my shoveling shift.

Genevieve made a powerful stab at the snow, lifting a large scoop, dumping it, and immediately going back for another. She wasn't just using her arms and back like I'd been. She was putting her whole body into it, and she certainly did have the most perfect ass. It was because of her long, athletic legs. She was toned for someone so scrawny. Then she caught me looking at her, and made a deliberately annoyed motion to the full wheelbarrow.

With another roll of my eyes I carted it outside, lifting it to dump the debris into the pile Genevieve had started at the side of the cabin. After pushing it back in I resumed my position, watching her begin to fill it once more. She only filled it halfway before giving an irritated sigh and turning to me.

"Will you stop staring at me?" she groaned.

I hadn't necessarily been checking her out that time. I was just bored. "What else am I supposed to look at?" I asked, growing even more irked by the random instances of attitude she'd been giving me all morning. I was there last night too, and I'd had to kill bitten before. I wasn't acting like a bitch over it.

"Anything," she grunted, stabbing her shovel under another scoop, "Else."

I purposefully moved my eyes around the rest of the cabin, doing such a thorough job of not looking at her that she had to alert me to when the wheelbarrow was full again, which she did grudgingly. After I'd returned from dumping it she shoved the shovel into my hands and hopped up onto the table.

It was silent for a few minutes, and then Genevieve mused scornfully, "How is it you can take a guy like Kellan down, but you can't shovel snow worth shit."

"Fighting isn't all about strength." I scowled at her, feeling another bar of my tolerance meter wasted. "And not everyone's a star athlete like Genevieve Moretti."

"It doesn't take talent to use a shovel," she laughed.

This time, I glanced over at her with amusement, because it had finally dawned on me why she was being so hot-tempered. The laugh gave her away. Last night I'd offered myself if she needed an outlet, and since she'd pretty much declined I didn't think she'd want it anytime soon, especially since I could tell she hadn't completely recovered from the attack. But I'd caught on to the fact that sometimes she provoked me so she'd have an excuse to kiss me. Now that I thought that's what she was doing, I decided it might be fun to hold out on giving her what she wanted as long as possible. The only problem with holding out was that it irritated me she thought starting an argument was the only way she could get it, successfully making holding out counterproductive.

When I didn't respond, Genevieve was quiet while she thought of something else to say. "I'm surprised you remembered my last name."

"I remember a lot of things about you," I huffed, panting a little since I was exerting myself to try and get her off my back.

"I remember yours too," she said gently, appearing not to be trying to aggravate me by saying it. But it did, more than anything she'd said so far, because that part of me was gone, and I'd told her that.

"I don't have a last name," I grumbled while I turned to dump a final scoop on the now full wheelbarrow, and I could see her eyebrows furrow with annoyance at my annoyance.

She got off the table to grab the cart, but stood there before pushing it away to argue, "Yes you do."

I looked straight into her rich brown eyes, growling seriously, "Don't say it."

Her gaze dropped to my lips, and I almost thought she was going to say it just to piss me off, that way she'd have her excuse. Instead, she began to push the cart outside, and I propped my hands on the end of the shovel to wait for her to return. Once she got back she set the wheelbarrow beside me, and as I turned to shovel another scoop I heard her say mischievously, 'Blair.'

"Would you knock it off!" I shouted angrily, hitting my tolerance limit as I threw the shovel down and turned on her. It wasn't just that she was being annoying, but hearing that word, hearing a part of my name, it made me feel guilty, and defensive, and furious, all in one overwhelming rush. It stung worse than Casey scrubbing my burn did. "I know you're trying to make me mad so you have an excuse to get in my pants!"

She looked surprised that I'd pointed it out, but she still managed to sound offended. "Screw you."

"Yes, that's exactly what happens!" Even knowing why she was doing it didn't help curb my temper, and I stepped up to her furiously. "But what

the hell do you want in return? Because you always walk away before I can try to give back. I already told you, you won't break me." She was beyond surprised now, and she took an intimidated step away. "Do I have to yell like you do?" I shouted, advancing irately. "Do you want me to push, and shout, and shove!" I pushed her shoulders repeatedly, following her backward to the rear of the small cabin. "Do I have to back you into a corner," I said as her back hit the wall, and when she put her hands on my shoulders to try and stop me from advancing I grabbed her wrists, slamming them to the wall above her head and pressing my body against hers. "Keep you there so I can fuck you and then walk away like you mean absolutely nothing to me?"

"Don't think you-"

"Shut up, Genevieve!" I ordered impatiently, and her mouth closed with emphasis.

Her eyes set to scanning my face with complete shock, and she wasn't the only one who was shocked. I was surprised at myself, and at the fact that the sex was having a bigger effect on me than I thought. I said she wouldn't break me, but that outburst was nothing but building frustration, and I regretted it instantly. Especially because now I wanted to know what she'd been about to say, and it was too late to ask.

I took a deep breath to calm down, to let the regret sink in, and in those moments I glanced upward to where I was still pinning her hands against the wall. I could see from here that her knuckles were already an angry red from me slamming them so hard. In recompense I watched my thumb run over them tenderly, trying to rub out the pain, and I felt so bad for getting that mad that my lips pursed in an apologetic smile.

"It's just," I sighed, releasing the last of my frustration, and after caressing her knuckles one more time I pressed my palm flat against hers. "You don't have to start a fight whenever you want me."

I finally met her gaze, and she didn't look intimidated anymore, or upset, or annoyed. Her eyes delved into mine, then fell to my mouth, and instead of saying anything the only response she gave was that her fingers slipped between my own, and they curled gently around my hand

fingers slipped between my own, and they curled gently around my hand. It was more of a response than I'd been expecting, so after scanning her face for any sign of protest I tilted my head forward, pressing my lips to hers in a careful peck. It felt like only a moment later that she urgently pulled her other hand out from under mine, and at the same time she wrapped it around my neck to pull me closer her lips parted, and the kiss deepened.

I'd never felt more instantly consumed by anything in my life, and despite all the times we'd been together since this started, she'd never kissed me like this. There was something so bewitchingly raw in the desire behind every movement of her lips, behind every touch of her tongue. Something pure in the pouring forth of her longing that was so tangible I could taste it. I wanted to indulge in it forever, wanted her to kiss me like this every time, because she was kissing *me,* and she was doing it like she couldn't get enough. Like this was her art, and her soul was in it.

But I doubted we'd be alone for long, and I didn't think whatever mood had struck her would last. This was my chance to see just how much she truly wanted me, and maybe to make her want me even more. My free hand immediately dropped to her waist, and after deftly undoing the button of her jeans I set it on her hip for only a moment to give her a chance to deny me. She didn't hesitate, not in the way she was pulling me closer, not in the way she was kissing me, so I let my hand wander beneath her clothing. The moment I touched her the grip in the hand holding mine tightened, and she took in such a jolted breath that she didn't let it out again until nearly ten seconds later.

I didn't know what to expect from Genevieve, whether she'd be overly accepting of my touch, whether she'd be as vocal as I was, or if her body would express how much she wanted me with the same intensity her kiss did. She was so quiet, but everything else about her was begging me not to stop. Her breathing was rapid, and labored. I had to press myself harder against her to keep her in place, because she was so earnestly pushing her hips into my hand. If it was possible she kissed me even more passionately, more desperately. And every other second there was a pleasured twitch in the fingers against my neck.

But of course it wasn't going to last

But of course it wasn't going to last.

"Genevieve?" At the deep, familiar voice, Genevieve instantly pushed me away and frantically rushed to redo the button of her jeans. "Everything okay?" She had them done right as Kellan appeared in the doorway. "I heard yelling."

She looked both panicked and flushed. Her cheeks were rosy and she was still struggling to breathe, but she managed to force out, "Everything's fine." As she looked at me she pressed the back of her hand above her upper lip, subtly trying to dab away the excited sweat that had formed there. She was definitely panicked at almost being caught, but now there was an unfamiliar fear in her eyes. After taking a few more seconds to compose herself she leaned close to whisper in my ear, and she sounded unexpectedly angry. "Don't ever touch me like that again."

I pulled back to look at her in confusion, but she didn't return my glance, and instead hurried across the cabin, passed Kellan without so much as looking at him, and disappeared out the door. My confusion was instantly replaced by frustration, and I turned to kick my boot against the wall.

"Dammit!" I hissed angrily.

I didn't care if Kellan was watching me. It was his fucking fault Genevieve ran away in the first place. Always getting in the goddamn way. I had to go after her. I paced toward the entrance of the cabin, intent on ignoring Kellan completely, but as I passed him he grabbed my arm to stop me. My first instinct through the frustration and my hatred for him was to put him on his ass, but at the back of my mind I could hear Genevieve telling me to walk away.

"You keep your hands off of her," Kellan sneered, squeezing harder for emphasis.

"She's not your girlfriend, Kellan," I told him savagely, meeting his eyes with a glare. "And what I do or don't do with my hands is none of your fucking business." I tried to walk away after that, but since he still had a grip on me he pulled me back. *Walk away.* I was going to do everything I

could not to fight him, but I was sure as hell going to defend myself if he tried anything. I let him stare me down for a few seconds to let him know I wasn't afraid of him, and then I scowled fiercely. "Let. Go."

It seemed he wasn't intent on making the first move toward starting a fight. With a rebellious glower he gave me a rough push as he released my arm. I stormed off before he could say anything else to me, and hurried to the tent to see if that's where Genevieve had gone. She was there, but the moment I burst in she sighed like I'd been annoying her and made for the exit.

"Don't walk away," I begged, stepping between her and the door. She stopped and folded her arms across her chest, looking at me expectantly. Only, I hadn't thought of what to say, and I had no idea how to start. In so many ways, what just happened was unlike every other time it happened, but I had no idea how to put those differences into words.

When I couldn't find the words, Genevieve made a move to pass me. "I have nothing to say to you." I scooted over so I was standing directly in front of her again, and then carefully took her face in my hands to get her to look at me, to will her into the temperament I'd experienced in the cabin. She looked at me, but it was with a glare as she ordered, "Take your hands off me."

I obeyed, and dropped my arms to my sides with a disappointed sigh. "Why are you mad at me?" Her brown eyes lost the defiance and fell away, either unable to come up with or refusing to answer. "Did you not want me to?" I'd been confused immediately after the fact, but now that she wasn't even answering me the confusion was so bad it hurt. "Can I kiss you again?"

"No," she replied instantly. I'd never seen her look so guilty, but I didn't think she had anything to feel guilty about.

"Then what do you want?" I entreated desperately. Nothing in my life had ever felt more right, I couldn't understand what I'd done wrong.

Still unable to meet my gaze, she glanced toward the door. "I want to leave."

leave."

"Look at me, Genevieve," I requested pleadingly, I couldn't read her when she wouldn't, and none of this made sense. "Look at me!" She took a deep breath before finally looking into my eyes. "What are you afraid of?" Now she wouldn't look away, but she didn't want to answer that either. "Are you afraid of me?" The Genevieve I was talking to now was a complete one-eighty of the Genevieve that had been kissing me, and it hurt so bad I was on the verge of tears.

"No," she said confidently.

"Then…" I had to sniffle so none of them would fall. "Then what?"

She was silent for nearly a minute like she was thinking about how to answer. "I want to leave," she eventually repeated quietly.

I just couldn't let her walk away, not without her giving me some kind of explanation. Without her acknowledging too that it was different. "Do you want me?" She nearly glared, but it was where her unfailing honesty betrayed her, because she was persistent in keeping a lie from me. "Dammit, Genevieve, say something!"

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice rose out of sheer exasperation, but despite the incomprehensible anxiety in her expression, she forced away the exasperation so she could say coldly, "There's nothing to talk about. You're reading too much into it."

"I'm reading too much into it?" I repeated in disbelief, doing everything in my power to ignore the stab that put in my chest.

"Yes," she sighed. "It's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal," I countered impatiently, finding the strength to make the tears dissipate upon the rise of fresh frustration. "You made it a big deal when you freaked out enough to tell me never to do it again."

She shrugged apathetically. "Maybe I didn't like it."

"Bullshit," I spat instantly, and even though I knew it, my voice didn't

portray my confidence, "You want me."

"Jesus," she groaned. "Why are you trying so hard to make this more than it is?"

"You know why," I responded, growing aggravated that she wouldn't say anything straightforward. "Is this part of your game?" I asked bitterly, addressing the only other reason I could think for her shifting so dramatically between the ways she treated me. "If it is, it's messed up, even for you." Just thinking about it turned my bitterness to anger. "If it is, it's cruel, and you know that… And fuck you."

"You want to know what I was going to tell you on mission, before you got in a fight with Kellan?" she said, her eyebrows furrowed defensively, but she didn't wait for me to consent. "It's the same reason I didn't want to let you touch me, because I know you're convinced you can make me fall for you, and I knew if I let you do it then you'd react like this. But I have *nothing* to give you." She patted her hand flat against her chest, "There's nothing here."

I wanted to tell her that was bullshit too, because I knew she was capable of feeling for me if she'd just forgive me. Instead, trying to get her to admit it was different, I asked, "Then why'd you let me do it this time?" Revenge or desire, those were the only two reasons I could think of, but she wouldn't admit to either one.

She tried to bypass me so she wouldn't have to answer, but I moved in front of her again. "You're not going to let me leave until I say something?" I shook my head, and she sighed impatiently. "Fine. I'm only human, okay? I get urges and I make mistakes, just like everyone else."

"We both know that's a fucking copout," I told her gravely, feeling that despair set in my chest again.

"It is what it is, Echo," she answered, and I could tell by the cold, distant look on her face that she was done talking about it. "If you don't like it, then don't let me fuck you anymore. But at least do yourself a favor and let it go." She started forward to pass me once more, and when I stood in place she met my gaze sternly. "Move."

place she met my gaze sternly. "Move."

"Will you just," I started, swallowing past the severely let down lump in my throat. "Answer one yes or no question. Please." She raised her eyebrows, impatiently prompting me for the question. "Was it about revenge?" If it was then she was one hell of an actress, and it was working like a charm.

She scanned my face for a thoughtful moment, and when she did I felt that confusion again. She was honest, I believed her when she said that she'd never lied to me, but her actions hadn't matched her words. Her voice was cold, and cruel, but when those dark brown eyes met mine they were full of a pain so visible it broke my heart. I could see the split. There *was* something there. She just didn't know it because it was masked by a more powerful hatred, and even if she never lied to me, I was convinced she was lying to herself. The worst thing about it was that I couldn't point it out to her. Whatever part of her that was starting to like me paled in comparison to the part of her that still hated me. I did have to let what just happened go, because she'd slipped. She'd forgotten herself for a moment, and I'd taken advantage of it.

"Which part of it?" she asked, but before I could respond she said, "I'll let you speculate about to which the answer is no." I opened my mouth to protest, to tell her that wasn't a fair response, but as she brushed past me to the door she added, "We still have work to do," and then she was gone.

I hovered around inside the tent for a little while, recovering from the agony it seemed I'd never escape. When I felt more composed, when I bit back the emotion and felt like I could talk to her again without getting upset or angry, I made my way back to the cabin. Genevieve was shoveling when I got there, and if it weren't for a slight pause in work the moment I walked in, I would've thought she didn't notice me. I hopped up onto the table to wait until the wheelbarrow was full, and on her next turn to dump the shovel's contents she passed me a brief glance.

It appeared the time apart had given her time to compose herself too. Now that she wasn't panicked she didn't have to be defensive, and when she finally spoke she sounded at ease. "I'm sorry I let it go that far," she

said candidly, making another stab at the debris.

"I don't want an apology," I told her glumly.

She was quiet for a few seconds, making another scoop. "It's the only card on the table."

I could do metaphors too, especially if it meant teasing her, but I was still so let down from our conversation that my voice didn't come out playful. "But it's not the only one you're holding." It came out pleading.

"Echo," she sighed gently, finally stopping her work to look at me, "I told you, I-"

"Don't," I interrupted, not wanting to bare another pang at hearing her deceive herself. I was pretty sure I understood better than she did, and for so many reasons I didn't want what we had to end, even if it was killing me. So, tensing one side of my mouth in a forgiving smile, I told her reassuringly, "You won't break me."

She made to bury the spade into the snow, but stopped short to give me a glare when the implications of what I said sank in. "I still hate you."

There was such a playful glint in her eyes that it almost sounded like an endearment, and I couldn't help but chuckle as I jumped down to cart the wheelbarrow outside. "Well, I still think you're a bitch." Then I called over my shoulder sarcastically when I started for the door, "No offence."

Patience. That's what it would take. Even if my progress the last few months had been painfully slow, it was still progress, and two things I was completely sure of now. The first was that whatever I was doing, it was working. Genevieve could say she hated me, but there were things about me that she liked, because there wouldn't be progress if that weren't true. The second: progress or not, I couldn't push her any harder than I was. What I was doing now, being myself, it was working, and from the conversation in the tent it was clear that trying to get her to admit to anything would only make her defensive. I had to tough it out, no matter how bad it hurt. Guess it's a good thing I was no stranger to pain.

Out in the Dark

*** I sincerely apologize for the obscene delay with this update. I'm happy to say that the semester is basically over, so I won't have any more essays for a while cutting into my writing time. On the other hand, I'm visiting family for the next month, and since my brother has a playstation I'm finally gonna get to play The Last of Us :D. Needless to say my priorities might be a little shifted haha.*

Also, I finally caved and created a tumblr. It's more of a personal than professional one, but I'll use it for updates about publishing and stuff too. So if you want you can follow me there at mezoereed (still discovering the ins and outs though, so…), and if you want me to follow you just let me know :)

That's all for now. 'Til next time!

Hands by Koda

Out in the Dark

Dugan

"Are you sure you're ready?" I asked Kara worriedly, my eyes running over the wound on her head.

She dropped her chin to look at me scoldingly, because I couldn't even count the number of times I'd asked on both hands. We'd hung around Van's place for a couple days to let the slight concussion Kara sustained subside. The whole time it was obvious that both she and Namiko were impatient to leave, and I couldn't blame them. This place was still creepy even without Van lurking about. But I wouldn't risk running into danger and not having Kara healthy enough to run.

"Yes," she groaned, and then, motioning toward me, she glanced over at Namiko playfully, "You see what I have to deal with?"

Namiko's gaze met mine, and even though there was a spark of

Namiko's gaze met mine, and even though there was a spark of amusement in her eyes, she appeared too afraid to laugh openly. Kara had been trying the last couple days to make the woman feel more comfortable, and I chuckled at her teasing to let Namiko know it was okay, but it seemed she was terrified of offending me.

"Okay," I consented with an amused smile, and then set to scanning the weapons we'd laid out on the table. They were all here, along with the ammunition I'd stuffed into our slowly emptying duffel bag, so I handed Kara her axe and shotgun. "I know you know how to use this," I said lightheartedly, picking up Van's pistol and extending the grip toward Namiko.

She looked from me to the gun, but a whole minute passed without her taking it from me. I couldn't be sure whether she didn't want the weapon, or whether she just didn't trust me enough to reach for it and put herself within striking distance, so I put it back on the table to give her a chance to grab it on her own. Then I put my own rifle over my shoulder and shoved the knife into the sheath clipped to my belt. I'd forgotten about my jacket, which I'd thrown over the back of a chair, but when it caught my eye I hesitated.

Our first stop after leaving this place was to get Namiko a heavy jacket and some tennis shoes. Both of these Van had taken from her years ago so she'd be less inclined to run away – something I discovered from Kara, who Namiko at least said a few things to when I wasn't around. With some difficulty we'd convinced her to wear Van's shoes until we got her a pair that fit properly, but it was uncertain how long it would take to find what we needed, and everything about Namiko was delicate. Her gentle face and small features, her fair skin, her long, thin limbs… With how little meat she had on her bones, she needed the jacket more than I did. I could stand the chill for a few hours.

Pulling the jacket off the chair I held it in my hands toward Namiko, offering to help her into it. "You can use mine until we find you one." But I must've extended it too quickly, because she took an intimidated step back and shook her head. "It's okay," I assured her gently, but thought it might work better if I phrased my request as more of a question. "Please? I don't want you to be cold when we leave."

Namiko's dark gaze wandered past me, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Kara nod at her encouragingly. She turned just slightly, looked at me with clear distrust, and then slid her first arm into the coat. She swiveled around to put her second arm through, turning enough to watch me guardedly again. It made me afraid to even touch her accidentally, so I pulled the coat up and set it on her shoulders more soft and slowly than I'd ever done anything in my life. When it was done she pursed her lips in the smallest of grateful smiles, and trying not to make her too uncomfortable I gave a brief nod and looked at Kara.

"Are you sure you-"

"Dugan," Kara interrupted with an entertained giggle. "My head's fine. I'm ready to get on the road again."

Laughing my own amusement, I glanced around one last time to make sure we hadn't forgotten anything, and noticed that Namiko had taken the pistol I'd set on the table for her. We had all our belongings, so without saying anything else I opened the only exit with the key I'd taken from Van's pocket, and Kara's new dog went bounding down the stairs ahead of us. It was colder outside now than it had been when we'd first arrived, and it made me both glad and disappointed that I'd given Namiko my jacket.

"Do you know anywhere nearby that we could find you shoes and a coat?" I asked the woman, hoping she'd been around the city before Van captured her, that way we wouldn't have to spend all night searching.

She'd come out of the building a few paces behind Kara and I, and now she was standing near the door, staring in every direction wide-eyed. I couldn't decide whether she was terrified or relieved at finally being out in the world again until she tilted her chin up and took in such a deep breath that her chest visibly rose under my baggy jacket. Kara and I walked nonstop in the open every night, but it was such a beautiful thing to see Namiko appreciating something so simple as fresh air. It made me think I'd been taking even the bare act of living for granted.

Her wonder was cut short by a shiver. As she pulled the coat tighter

Her wonder was cut short by a shiver. As she pulled the coat tighter around her she looked up and down the streets thoughtfully, like she was finally considering my question. It had clearly been years since she'd been outside, so I doubted if she could even remember where exactly a store was if she'd known in the first place. After a minute her lips moved, and it sounded as though she'd barely whispered the word 'maybe.'

"We'll follow you," I told her when she glanced over at me for instruction.

She took a couple hesitant steps eastward and then paused, peeking back over her shoulder to make sure we were coming. Kara immediately took place at Namiko's side when she noticed the unsure search, and in response Namiko continued with her next few steps. I matched pace at the opposite side of the woman, though I maintained a couple feet's distance to keep from making her nervous. Even Wolf, who had grown attached to Kara because she'd taken it upon herself to feed him, trotted close to her leg so that we were making our way down the sidewalk in a neighborly row.

I'd like to have said the night was quiet, but a softly howling wind cut around the corners of every building. It whipped through my thin t-shirt and chilled me to the core. After about fifteen minutes of walking I folded my arms over my chest to try and preserve some heat. That only worked for a little longer, and then all I could do was hope that we were getting close to the place Namiko seemed to be taking us. Eventually she slowed, though by the fact that I couldn't see a clothing store and that her head was turning searchingly I figured she didn't know exactly where we were.

"Is it close?" I asked through a shiver.

Namiko gave the smallest shrug, still peering around inquisitively. Another minute passed, the swivels of her neck growing more and more frantic, and then she whimpered, throwing her hands behind her head in a panic. At first I didn't know what to make of it. At the back of my mind there was the slightest wonder about her mental stability. It only lasted a moment until I realized she was terrified I'd be upset.

"Hey," I said in hasty reassurance, "It's okay. We'll find it."

I undoubtedly felt sympathy for her – it wasn't her fault Van had abused her – but at the same time I felt a hint of frustration stemming from my own fear. This wouldn't do. That old saying from my childhood sports years echoed in my ears. You're only as strong as your weakest player. Kara was everything. My priority. I could do my best to protect them both, but I had to be sure Namiko would do her part. I had to be sure I could rely on her. The mere thought of me being upset was almost too much for her. How would she hold up under worse pressure? She didn't have to talk to me if she never wanted to, but she had to trust me enough not to have a panic attack every time I might get impatient over something.

"Namiko," I started gently, making my way to her. She composed herself a little, but she was still too afraid to make eye contact. "Don't worry about it, we'll walk around until we find it." She gave a hurried nod. "It's okay to look at me," I told her amiably, though there was an urgent sternness in my tone. "Can you do that?" It took a few seconds, but gradually she turned her eyes to mine. "I won't ever lay a hand on you, I promise," I said seriously. "You're part of our group now, we're a team. You have thoughts, and a voice." Her gaze dropped insecurely. "I'd like to hear them. It's your right to use them."

She looked at me again, timidly studying my expression before she set to searching the area once more. She hadn't nodded or said anything in return, but it appeared she understood because her examination was calm and thoughtful.

I began searching too, specifically for a bus stop to see if there was a map of the city at it, but it was too dark to see too far in any direction. "If you aren't sure which way is likely, we can wander."

It was silent for nearly another minute, and then her hand came out like she was going to set it on my shoulder to get my attention. Only she didn't touch me, still too apprehensive, and her hand hovered an inch away. When I gave her my attention she had a pleased almost-smile on her face, and she pointed down one of the streets nearby. I grinned approvingly and motioned her on, Kara and I striding once more at her sides. We followed this road past two more streets, and then veered a

block northward. When we came to a stop it was right in front of a small thrift store.

Using my palm I smeared a thick layer of dust from the window, then cupped my hands around my brow to peer inside. I could just make out the shimmer of circular clothing racks and the dark framework of rows of shelves. Sometimes shops had bright linoleum floors, and you could see the outlines of Ferals before even stepping foot inside. This little store, however, had what appeared to be dark carpet, and the shadow masked nearly everything below waist level from sight.

"Got your axe ready?" I whispered to Kara while I pulled my own knife from its sheath. After she'd nodded I turned to Namiko. "Try not to use the pistol." Even though she had unaccounted for years before being with Van and therefore probably already knew, I added anyway, "The Ferals are attracted to noise."

As if to make me feel like a complete dumbass, the second I began to pull open the door it made a metallic ding against a bell hanging on the inside. The sound was immediately met by a sleep-disturbed snarl.

I instantly let the door fall shut, moving to the side while each of us crouched down beneath the view of the windows, but I kept my head close to listen for the sounds that filtered from the shop. "How many does that sound like to you?"

Kara's lips pursed with concentration. "I don't know. Three?"

It wasn't until she answered that I realized I'd been mistaking some of Wolf's own growling for the sound of Ferals, and when I noticed that my heart dropped. "Shut him up," I whispered frantically, daring to peek over the low wall through a window to check if any of the Ferals could hear him.

Kara put her hand on the dog's neck, shushing it repeatedly until it quieted. All the while my mind was turning. Three wasn't so bad. We could handle that. "Kara, post yourself on the other side of the door, I'll tell you when to swing. Swing hard." While she moved across the entranceway to the other side I looked again at Namiko, who was

breathing heavily but sitting still with a surprising amount of composure. "All I need you to do is hold the door open."

When she consented with a tentative nod I stood a good eight feet from the entrance, made sure Kara was prepared with her axe already wound up, grabbed the scruff of Wolf's neck so he wouldn't charge in while I held my knife in the other hand, and then I gave Namiko the okay. The bell chimed as she pulled the door open, and the sound resulted in more vicious snarls that were instantly reciprocated by the canine at my side. The growls were getting closer, but it wasn't fast enough for my wildly pumping heart. I let out an exposing whistle. In response there was a swift thud of feet against the carpet inside, and the first Feral appeared through the doorway. It didn't seem to know where the sound was coming from, only that it had come from somewhere nearby.

So I whistled again, a sarcastic wolf-whistle that made Kara huff with amusement, and called, "Hey." The creature's head turned at the same time that four others reached its side. "Oh shit," I mumbled at seeing the extra bodies, and my grip tightened on Wolf's neck as he lurched forward ferociously. Three of the five Ferals roared, and each of them came sprinting toward the door. But I waited, counting down the seconds. "Swing!"

Kara brought her arms around hard, burying the head of the axe deep into the first Feral that came through the door. The creature buckled over in the doorway, causing the ones behind it to bottleneck. The instant I released the canine it rushed forward, vaulting over the buckled Feral and planting its teeth firmly around the throat of the one behind it. Kara yanked her axe out of the first Feral, and when it dropped to the ground Wolf followed with a second limp body, still shaking his massive head back and forth. The third Feral was shortsighted, so as it threw itself down on top of the recovering dog Kara swung again, catching the next monster on its way out.

Now I shot forward, knowing Kara would already be heartbroken if something happened to that dog. I made the briefest slash with my knife at the back of the Feral on top of Wolf, and when it reared up furiously I buried my blade into its chest. Kara had hit her second Feral so hard that

she was struggling to pull the head of her axe out, so when I glanced up I could see that the final Feral had its sights set on her. At the same time its knees bent to jump for her, I sprang leading with my knife. I buried it once more into a creature's chest, but I'd hit it so hard that we went tumbling back into the store. When we came to a halt I instantly rolled away from it in case it was still breathing, preparing to counter another attack.

After I was sure it was dead I did a hasty scan of the interior for any remaining Ferals. "All clear," I called hurriedly, knowing it was possible that Ferals in the surrounding buildings had heard the commotion. "Get inside quick." The fight had been short, but that didn't mean I wasn't out of breath. So I shrugged the duffel bag of food off my back before standing up, too tired to rise with the additional weight.

All three of my companions entered, but Kara didn't come all the way in. "Dugan, the bodies are blocking the door."

I grabbed the first article of clothing I saw, a t-shirt from a nearby rack, and strode over to the dead Ferals. Touching these things any more than I had to was the last thing I wanted to do, so I used the shirt to create a barrier between the flesh of my palms and the Ferals' ankles. I dragged the first one outside, and as I made to step back into the store to grab the next one I heard a rumbling growl from a nearby ally. My heart started pounding all over again. There was no time to drag them all outside and risk being seen. I had to pull them inside, and I did it so rapidly and almost insufficiently that they were piled on top of each other just an inch past the barrier. But it was enough for the door to shut, and I pulled it closed and backed away from the windows.

"Try to keep your lights off for a while," I told my allies. "Namiko, the store is yours."

Even in the dark I could see her eyes wander to the lifeless bodies near the entrance. "Thank you," she said eventually, and even though she'd spoken so quiet I almost didn't hear her, it had sounded like there was an overwhelmingly emotional amount of gratuity in her voice.

I grinned my courteous response. While she wandered off to begin her

I grinned my courteous response. While she wandered off to begin her search I glanced around, wondering what else was in here that we could take. The shop was small enough that I could see Kara had already made her way down an aisle near the back, and even from here I could hear her give an excited cry.

"What'd you find?" I asked curiously as I made my way over. It took everything in me not to roll my eyes when she held up a dark leather dog collar, but I couldn't repress a chuckle.

"It's even got an I.D. tag on it already," she beamed.

I held my hand out for it. "What's it say?" When she gave it to me I took the tag between my fingers and angled toward the windows until the moonlight from outside played off the engraving enough for me to read it. 'Rocky'. "I thought the dog's name was Wolf?"

"Semantics, shmemantics." She waved me off and took the item back to place it around the canine's neck. "He needs a proper collar."

I smiled my amusement as I continued down the aisle to check out the various knickknacks. At the end of it I reached a selection of posters and artwork, and one in particular caught my eye. It was a movie poster for an old zombie film. The main monster on the front was decayed, its skin falling off and walking on a bent ankle, with a whole blurred out mob of zombies behind it.

"Kara, look," I said amusedly, pulling the poster from the selection and holding it up so she could see. "They got it all wrong."

She snorted with laughter, extending her arms ahead of her as she started toward me and groaned, "Brains." I chuckled and turned around to put the poster away. I only had my back turned for a moment before Kara's hands grabbed at my face. "Brains," she groaned again, pushing onto her tiptoes to try and wrap her arms around my head.

I couldn't help laughing now. "Get out of here, creature feature," I chuckled, ducking out of her grasp. Before she could react I bent over enough to grab behind her knees, and then I threw her over my shoulder. "No room for zombies in here," I told her playfully. "Guess I'm going to

"No room for zombies in here," I told her playfully, "Guess I'm going to have to throw you outside." Kara was giggling with entertainment, but the moment I took a step to teasingly carry her toward the door Wolf jumped up. He must've thought I was trying to hurt her, because his teeth nipped at my thigh. "Ow!" I nearly dropped Kara, and set her down rapidly to avoiding getting bit again. At least he didn't break skin… I think. "That dog really likes you," I grumbled lightheartedly, rubbing out the pain in my leg.

Kara gave a proud smile. "It's 'cause I found him an awesome collar."

"It's because you feed him," I corrected with an amused huff. "Be careful with him though," I warned more seriously, leaning over enough to check for a tear in my jeans. "He can't get infected, but who knows if he's carrying."

At that Kara's face twisted with worry. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I told her reassuringly. "He didn't break skin." Out of the corner of my eye I could see a still figure from across the store, and when I looked over I saw that Namiko had stopped to watch the commotion. I gave Kara's shoulder a parting pat and ambled over to the woman. "You find what you need?"

She shook her head, shifting to the next coat on the rack. I nodded, unsure of what to say, and began to help her search while I thought of something else. I wanted her to be comfortable around me, and the only way I could think of expediting the process was to try and make small talk. Even if she didn't answer me at least she'd learn it was okay.

"Did we scare you with all that noise?" I asked with a good-humored smile. To my satisfaction, Namiko's lips curled as she shook her head again. "That's good. We were just messing around." I pulled a coat from the rack and held it up to examine its size. Deeming it too large, I put it back. "She's still a kid, you know? I don't want her to have to be serious all the time." Brushing past a couple coats I could clearly tell were the wrong size, I asked, "How old are you anyway?" I'd always heard it was rude to ask a woman her age, but right now I was desperate for things to say. There were a few moments of silence, any longer and it would've

grown awkward. "I'm forty-three," I supplied. "And Kara's fifteen."

I paused thoughtfully, trying to come up with some kind of related topic to transition to while I continued passing through jackets. Before I could, Namiko answered in her soft voice, "Thirty-four."

"Really?" I muttered with surprise. "I thought you were younger." Was that rude? "I mean… You look-" I was stammering with uncertainty. I had no idea what kinds of ways Van had abused her in the years she was trapped with him. The last thing I wanted was for her to grow even more wary of me because she thought I looked at her in lecherous way. "Um, younger. I'm going to shut up now."

"It's fine," she told me in an amused murmur. She'd hardly said much to me, but I thought I detected a faint accent.

"You're Japanese, right?" I pulled out another jacket, finally finding one that appeared the right size. "Here, this looks like it might fit." Namiko nodded in confirmation to my question while she shrugged out of my coat. I shuffled to her side of the rack to hand her the one I'd found. "Were you born there?" She nodded once more and pulled on the new article of clothing.

I opened my mouth to ask her how it fit, but before I could get it out a growling started from near the door. At first I went into fight mode, my hand immediately shooting to the knife I'd replaced at my belt. Then I realized it was Wolf.

"Tch!" I scolded harshly. "Wolf!"

The dog wasn't listening, and if there wasn't already a Feral outside then he was bound to start attracting them. I began pacing over to pull him away, but Kara reached him before I did, and she grabbed him by his salvaged collar and led him to the back of the store. I stood there, everything silent around us, peering out the windows and listening for any threats outside the shop. The night was quiet, but I couldn't say that was entirely reassuring. If Ferals could be heard wandering around outside, or even the unlikely sound of passing voices from other travelers, it would've been understandable. But I could hear nothing. So what was he

would've been understandable. But I could hear nothing. So what was he growling at?

After I was reassured nothing was going to come charging into the store at us, I returned to Namiko. "How's the jacket?" Her head bobbed with satisfaction. "And it's warm enough?" She nodded again, and I glanced down at her feet. "You still need shoes." I started toward an aisle that had an arrangement of used shoes, Namiko following close behind. "You'll want something with plenty of cushion," I chattered. "We do a lot of walking."

While she shuffled through the messy racks of shoes to find a suitable pair, I glanced through the gaps between shelves to check for Kara. The faint outlines of movement as she wandered around was visible, but as I looked, so too was something else – in my peripherals, and only for a moment. It wasn't distinct, and I couldn't say exactly what it was. But the moonlight that was filtering through the windows was hindered for a brief second as something moved outside from the left-most side of the building to the right. A shadow.

Leaving Namiko behind I crept to the front of the store, and when I reached it I crouched below the waist high wall beneath the windows. I lifted myself just enough to see outside but remain hidden, and searched the sidewalk immediately outside, then the street, and the opposite sidewalk. I even tried to get a glimpse to see if maybe someone was hiding just on the opposite side of the wall that I was hiding behind. There was nothing. No movement. No Ferals that might've come out because of the noise from our previous battle. No travelers.

The rational side of me said it must've been an owl or some other large bird that had flown by. There were still animals out there in the world. But my gut told me something else. The only way in and out of this shop was a few feet away, and if something came in we could get trapped. I wasn't comfortable staying here any longer than we had to.

Thankfully, Namiko found sneakers more easily than she'd found a coat, and by the time I returned to her she was tying the laces of a fresh pair of running shoes. "Ready?" I asked her, trying not to sound too impatient. She nodded. "Kara," I called in a whisper. "Let's go."

Kara met us at the front, where I picked up our duffel bag of food and threw it onto my back. "Have your axe ready," I told her, pulling out my own knife.

At the door I reached up, yanking at the tongue of the bell so hard that I ripped it out. Now that we could make a silent exit I pushed the door open just enough to stick my head out, and peeked both ways to search for the source of my mysterious shadow. No danger was immediately visible, and so each of us left the store, continuing on our way. We were already near the edge of the city, and managed to pass its borders without any sign of being pursued.

Whether or not we were being trailed, I was still tense. I chalked it up to the dog making me paranoid. Usually Kara and I talked and joked on our long walks, especially out in the desert like we were now, where it was unlikely anyone was around to hear us. But I didn't say a word for hours, as I subconsciously listened for any stalking footsteps. The only audible sound was the chirping of desert insects, and a rocky rattle as Kara continuously kicked a pebble on ahead of us. It was so silent that after those hours Wolf growled, and it startled every one of us. It scared Namiko so badly that she jumped, tripping over her own feet and only remaining standing because I caught her by the elbow.

"You okay?" I asked, only half paying attention as I followed the course of the canine's snarling. He was menaced by something behind us, but the dark concealed even the road after only fifteen feet. Kara had continued forward to retrieve the pebble since she'd kicked it too far ahead, and I waved her over urgently. "Kara, stay close."

At the tone of my voice she instantly returned to my side. I pulled out my flashlight, pointing the beam down the road we'd just traveled, searching for whatever was causing Wolf so much displeasure. The highway was completely empty. It was almost as if the dog was comforted by that fact as well, because he stopped growling.

"We should start looking for a place to camp," I said after another minute of studying the dark. The sun would begin rising in less than an hour.

Clicking off my light, I squinted through the black, searching against the night sky for the shape of cover. In the distance I could just make out what appeared to be a rocky hill, no more than half a mile away. Taking the lead, we cautiously trekked the short distance to it, reaching it just as the sky began to gray. I searched around for a ledge we could rest under, to offer us shade once the sun came up, and after finding one we lay out to rest.

I took first watch, all three of my companions breathing sleep-heavy within the first twenty minutes. Sitting there, leaning back against the nearest boulder, I was tempted to start dozing off too. To be honest, I might've drifted off into a light sleep, because the first movement I noticed was Wolf starting out of slumber, and it scared me like noises do when they wake you. Then he started growling again. Softly at first, without moving from his spot at Kara's side or even curling a lip. It soon picked up, and he shifted into lying with his hind legs tucked under him, ready to spring if needed.

I still couldn't see or hear what he did. There was no indication of anyone but us being around, and I'd never experienced Ferals off the road like this since they stayed where food was certain, but I felt a more eager sense of paranoia than I had all night. I would've been comforted if Wolf was prone to growling while we stayed at Van's building. Only, during that time he'd been completely at ease, and that's why I felt paranoid. Why I was as sure as Wolf appeared to be that there was someone, or something, following us.

If We Started Out Blind

The Take Down by Dabin & Koda

If We Started Out Blind

Genevieve

I watched April pull the gauze off of Echo's shoulder to examine the burn, cringing at the sight of the wound. "It's healing nicely," April praised. "Any throbbing? Or nausea?" Echo shook her head. "Good." The doctor reached for a fresh bandage. "Keep keeping it clean."

After April was finished redressing the wound, Echo said 'thanks' and then looked at me for instruction. I nodded for her to follow me, and began to lead the way out of the medical cabin. Since the attack a couple nights ago we didn't have much time for relaxing, so this was our only chance to eat some dinner before we had night patrols. Once we'd grabbed our utensils we headed to the DFAC, and then sat down with our hot stew.

It was a relief to have something hot – since I'd given that little boy my gloves, my hands were constantly frozen – and so while I let it cool down enough to eat it I wrapped my fingers around the bowl. Echo didn't appear to mind that the stew was scalding, and she slurped it up like she didn't even notice. She was raising her spoon to her lips for her next bite when Kellan passed by on her side of the table, and he didn't seem to care that I could see him as he bumped her with his elbow. He continued to walk away afterward, but Echo's lips pursed and she growled with withheld agony, and as she stretched her hand to the back of her shoulder I realized Kellan had hit her burn.

"You okay?" I asked seriously, suppressing the urge to drag him back to apologize. I would've interfered more aggressively between them if not for the fact that I was sure it would only intensify Kellan's hatred for Echo.

When her eyes met mine there was the slightest glimmer of pained tears

in them, but it seemed the pain was taking an understandable turn toward anger. "If he touches my burn again, don't try to stop me when I stab him to death with my spoon."

"For the record," I said, holding back an amused chuckle by taking my first bite of food. "I made it very clear that I was never going to sleep with him."

Echo met my gaze again, squinting at me curiously. "Because of me?"

"What? For Christ's sake," I grumbled in instant exasperation. "What is with the two of you? He asked me the same damn thing." Then I sighed and answered, "No. I have no desire to be another one of his conquests. It has nothing to do with you."

Echo didn't look like she entirely believed me, but instead of addressing it she glanced over her shoulder to look at where Kellan had sat down. "Can I do something to piss him off?"

"Huh?" I asked with surprise, but she had already stood, and she strode around the table until she reached me and then she plopped down at my side. "What are you doing?"

She reached across for her bowl and pulled it to her, then scooted even closer to me. "It's your fault," she said, taking a satisfied slurp of her stew. "You won't let me kick his ass, so I have to resort to passive aggression."

Out of pure curiosity my eyes wandered to where Kellan was sitting, only to find that Echo's passive aggression was working too efficiently. He looked beyond furious. "You're not helping your situation," I told her, turning my head to let her see how serious I was.

"No," she agreed knowingly, "But the look on his face is making me really happy." She turned her own head to return my look, but upon seeing me her laugh line deepened with a smirk. Next thing I knew she raised her hand to my face, and I must've had a spot of food on my lip, because she wiped it off with her thumb and then stuck the pad of her thumb into her mouth. My cheeks flared, and in response to that I narrowed my eyes at her. The glare only made her laugh. "You're lucky I didn't kiss you just

now," she said defensively. "That would've really pissed him off."

"And now I don't trust you not to." I scooted a couple inches away from her just in case. "Kiss me to make him mad, and I swear to God I'll slap you."

"Because everyone around would see," she mumbled with knowing sarcasm.

I swallowed down the last bite of my soup, and then gave her a hard scowl. "No, because my affection isn't for you to make a spectacle of," I corrected impatiently.

"Affection?" she repeated in shock, and at her tone I instantly stood with my dish to walk away. "That was an interesting word choice," Echo mused, getting up to follow me.

"What other word could I use?" I asked defensively, heading in the direction of the tent to store my utensils.

"There are a lot of words you could've used," she laughed, "But I definitely don't think I'd call what you do to me 'affection'."

"Whatever," I grumbled in annoyance. "You got what you wanted, you made him mad. Now shut up about it."

"Can you honestly tell me," she said as we reached the tent, and she strode over to her cot to set her dishes beneath it, "That his reaction wasn't even a little amusing?"

I paused from putting my stuff away to consider it. Kellan was being a major dick lately, and I was still offended that he really thought I'd go so far as to sleep with him to make Echo jealous. "A little," I admitted reluctantly. Then I turned to her to scold, "But don't ever kiss me for any reason other than-" I'd been about to say 'for any reason other than that you want to,' but stopped short when I realized that would've given her the completely wrong idea. Instead, I furrowed my eyebrows in a glare and corrected, "Actually, just don't ever kiss me."

"W[illegible]

"What about when you kiss me?" she asked smugly.

I was going to call her a smartass, but for the sake of her never having the nerve to kiss me in public, I answered seriously, "Then it's fine."

She squinted at me skeptically, but her laugh line was still deep with amusement. "Did you just set a rule?" she pointed out teasingly, and then she added matter-of-factly, "I might be in reform, but the raider in me says rules were meant to be broken."

"Sometimes, you're sarcastic," I started with a deadpan expression, and her eyebrows rose with interest, "And I just want to punch you in the face." She opened her mouth to say something, which clearly would've been flirtatious by the smile she had, so I interrupted before she could, "If you say we're flirting right now I *will* punch you in the face."

"You're getting good at recognizing this banter thing," she praised with a laugh.

I ignored the obvious fact that she was trying to get me to be openly playful and reached for my backpack. "Get your stuff."

She rolled her eyes and put her own backpack over her shoulders, and then motioned that she was ready. We had one of the first ground shifts for patrol, so once we got to the edge of camp we started our stroll around the borders. Echo seemed to get more serious once we began. Her eyes set to scanning the area around us, and when the sun went down she didn't say anything for the sake of listening intently for Ferals.

It was long dark by the time it was our turn to man a tower, but I'd given that little boy Echo saved my only pair of gloves, and even before the sun went down completely the temperature had dropped. While we patrolled I'd tucked my hands into my pockets for warmth, even though it didn't do much. When we finally got into one of the towers I shoved them down my pants, but my jeans were thin enough that it didn't do anything to help. After only about thirty minutes of sitting in the blind, once my blood had stopped flowing warmly because we weren't walking anymore, I started shivering so bad that it wouldn't surprise me if the entire tree was shaking.

"Are you okay?" Echo asked eventually, looking over from her spot at the side of the tower, where she was kneeling to scan the ground below with a pair of thermal goggles.

"My hands are f-f-f-f-frozen," I mumbled. I folded my hands up under my armpits, but the cold had already spread and it was no use.

Echo watched me for a few thoughtful seconds, and then lifted the back of her jacket and tank top so her skin was exposed. "Come here." I made a move to go over, but when I paused hesitantly she chuckled, "Seriously. You'll get frostbite, and you need your hands." I was too miserably cold to decline, so I crossed the blind toward her, and when I reached her I slid my hands up her shirt, setting them flat against the skin of her back. "Holy crap," she complained in a growl to suppress the shock, and I could feel her tense like it took a real effort not to shy away from my touch.

I couldn't stop a smile at the satisfaction of how warm she felt, and to make it even better I leaned forward against her, making sure to avoid touching her burn while securing my hands between the warmth of both our bodies. "Thank you," I told her, genuinely grateful. I'd already stopped shivering.

She shrugged and replied teasingly, "Come to think of it, we both need your hands."

"I would act surprised that you're trying to flirt with me right now," I chuckled, "But I'm not."

Echo snickered with equal amusement. "You might as well be holding ice against my skin. Letting me flirt is the least you could do."

I huffed with laughter, but that statement also made me feel a little bit guilty. This wasn't the first time she'd done something nice for me, but she did it on the hopes that it would give her a chance with me. Only, it never would. At the same time the guilt hit me, so did a subtle hint of that not okay flush, and with that another kind of guilt. The kind that said the flush was wrong because of the things Echo had done. Confusing didn't

even begin to describe it, because now I couldn't decide whether I should take my hands away or move them somewhere more intimate.

"Did you know this is my favorite tower?" Echo said, interrupting my internal debate.

It was a welcome distraction. "Why?"

"You can see all the stars," she answered, nodding toward the sky. "You can't see them from the other towers because of the trees."

"Huh," I mumbled, leaning against her a bit more to take a look. "I never noticed that before."

"You need to learn to appreciate the little things in life," she told me seriously, though there was a bit of playfulness behind it. Before I could even respond to that she asked, "Have you ever heard the story about the big dog and the little dog?"

"Um, no?" I answered unsurely. "What is that?"

"They're constellations," she chuckled. "Look. See that bright star?" She pointed, and after following her finger I nodded. "That's Sirius, it's the brightest star in the sky. It's part of Canis Major, big dog."

After looking over to make sure I was still following her finger she traced a shape along the stars. I'd never been good at finding the figures in stargazing, maybe that's why I'd never enjoyed it, but with the help of some squinting I found the shape of a canine. "Whoa." I smiled proudly at having noticed it.

I felt Echo huff with amusement, and then she moved her hand to point at another star. "See that bright one?" I hummed the affirmative. "Canis Minor, the smaller dog, it only has two stars. That one, and…" she adjusted her finger. "That one."

I leaned over even more to look at her. "How do you know these?"

"My mom was an artist, she was into anything poetic," she answered with

a shrug. "She loved telling me about the myths behind the stars."

Her response was satisfactory, but the candidness behind it was shocking. "That's the first time you've mentioned your family to me," I mused quietly. It was my fault, but anytime I brought them up in the past she grew understandably irritated.

This time she turned just enough to meet my gaze for a brief second, and I couldn't say I was surprised when she sounded defensive. "Do you want to hear the story?" I wanted to hear her talk more about her family, but it seemed unlikely that was going to happen, so I nodded her on. "In Greek mythology, Canis Major was the fastest hunting dog ever. It had a destiny to catch anything it ever chased." I murmured 'mhm' so she'd continue. "The big dog was sent to hunt for Canis Minor, which was actually a fox. Only, it was the fox's destiny never to be caught."

"Then the chase would never end," I protested.

"Exactly," she agreed. "Zeus realized that, so eventually he turned them both to stone and put them in the sky."

"That's kind of sad," I whispered as I glanced back and forth between the constellations.

"Why?" Echo asked, turning to look at me again with surprise.

"On earth they were chasing their destinies. What if they were happy, and Zeus ruined it?" The spot of Echo's back that I had my hands on wasn't warm anymore, however shifting them up or down wouldn't have been as comfortable for me to lean against. It might've been too affectionate of a change, but I slipped my arms around her to press the backs of my hands to her stomach. She inhaled painfully, but didn't say anything because I continued explaining why I didn't like the story. "Now they're stuck up there, just staring at each other."

"What if they weren't happy with their destinies?" she argued, pressing the goggles to her eyes again to scan the ground below us. "Maybe they wanted to be friends, and death was the only way to fix it."

"That's sad too," I told her gloomily.

"It's just a story," she chuckled, but then she added apologetically, "If I'd known it would bum you out I wouldn't have told it." I didn't know what else to say about it, so when I failed to respond Echo changed the subject. "Are you warming up?"

"Yeah," I answered, but it brought back that slight guilt, which only made me feel like I should warn her about it. "But you shouldn't be so nice to me, you know."

"Why not?"

I knew it hurt her every time I walked away or denied her, but I was self-aware enough to have realized by now that I didn't keep doing it because of revenge. I couldn't help it that I couldn't stop myself, but I wouldn't keep it up if she didn't let me get away with it. "Because it won't change the way I feel about you."

I hadn't thought about what her reaction would be, I'd only been thinking of doing the most I could to warn her. She got offended instantly, and grumbled, "Then get your damn hands out of my shirt."

It was so warm though that I didn't do it, and when I didn't obey she grabbed my arm, pulling me around so that my back thumped against the wall at her side. "Why?" I whined disappointedly, already feeling the icy tingling seep back into my hands.

"Because," she said angrily, "Apparently I can't do anything nice without you thinking there's an ulterior motive."

Real smooth, Genevieve. It hadn't been my intention to make her mad, or to make her think I was trying to be mean. I was trying to be honest without exposing my own vulnerability. Right now, however, miserably frozen was the last thing I wanted to be, so I did the only desperate thing I could think of. I slid my hand up the inside of her thigh. "I'm sorry," I said innocently, continuing up as far as I could and then pressing my hand hard against her. "Please?"

"That's not fair," she groaned in half-hearted protest.

With a delighted smile I pushed myself back up, resuming my position behind her while my hands reached around to work the button of her cargos. "Is that a yes?"

"Would it be pointless to remind you that you're a bitch?" she grumbled, but she made no move to stop me.

"Why?" I asked, surprised at how that was the first time it ever stung when she called me that. Trying not to let that show, I ignored it and slipped one hand into her pants. She instantly reached out to grip the lip of the low wall, and pressed her body back into mine.

She didn't answer right away, as she appeared to be composing herself enough that her reply wouldn't come out a moan. "Because you're using me."

"Like you're not using me," I pointed out sarcastically. The hand between her legs was warming up rapidly, but my other was still at her hip, exposed to the frosty air. In order to get that one warmed too I moved it beneath her shirt, causing her to whimper at the icy feel of it.

"I'm not," she insisted, managing to sound shocked that I'd even say it.

"No?" I asked in disbelief. To make more of a point I shifted my hand upward, seductively massaging her chest for the first time, and in response she let out a shocked and pleasured breath. "So you get nothing out of this?"

After a contented hum she mumbled, "That's different."

"How?"

"If I could think," she said in a ragged breath, "I'd have an answer."

I still felt somewhat slandered, and that was a shock to me, but without saying anything else to her I focused on what I was doing. This was one of the only times I was going to drag this out, and only for the sake of

getting as much warmth into my hands as possible, but I'd be lying if I said that flush of not okay heat didn't return. There was a thrill in hearing the effect of my touch, in the way she was so intently pushing herself back to get closer to me that her head was practically on my shoulder, and now that I knew what *her* touch was like I was almost jealous she was getting the better end of the bargain. But I couldn't let that happen again, ever, because when she put her hands on me I lost complete control. Not just of what I was thinking and doing, but also of what I was feeling, and once it stopped, once I had control again, I was struck by guilt so severe that agony was an understatement.

However, when I did it to her the guilt wasn't so bad, and the way my other hand was exploring her upper body, it did something to sedate that flush of heat. I'd never felt her this intimately before, but I liked the way her soft skin felt. The way it gave her goosebumps when I shifted my cold fingers across her stomach. The way her chest rose and fell with each increasingly excited breath when I ran my hand over her breast. It was satisfying in the most physical of ways. Until with my next shift across her abdomen my fingers ran over the stab wound scar in her hip.

Lately there were always two kinds of guilt I felt when I did things with Echo. The lesser one was because I knew she had genuine feelings for me. Even if I hated her, she'd been proving herself in small ways – like saving my life or running into a burning cabin to rescue a child – and I knew this was wrong. The greater was because I'd begun to enjoy it for my own sake, and because of the things she was guilty of it made me feel like I was betraying my father and brother. So when my fingers ran over that scar, in the most painful and irrepressible way it instantly reminded me of everything that was wrong with what I was doing, and I froze. Echo picked up on it immediately, and it seemed she knew exactly what I was thinking, because instead of begging me not to stop or getting annoyed, she let out a defeated sigh.

I took both my hands out from under her clothing, and still stunned by the blow I dropped, leaning back against the adjacent wall at her other side and pulling up my knees to bury my already cold hands between my thighs. Echo watched me silently, and even though it was too dark on this moonless night for me to see it, I could practically picture the

disappointment on her face. Then she turned around and sat, propping herself up against the wall and stretching her legs out in front of my feet.

"Can I ask you something?" she began carefully, with something like desperation in her tone. "And will you, just this once, give me a sincere answer?" I didn't respond right away, because through the remorse I was preparing myself not to react to the question, then I hesitantly gave my consent. "Is there really no way, ever, that I could get you to forgive me?"

That was about what I expected, so it didn't take much effort to keep from getting angry. The part of me that felt bad about what I was putting her through thought she deserved a sincere answer. Plus, there might've been another small part of me that didn't want her to think I was a complete bitch. "How many people have you killed?"

I couldn't see the reaction on Echo's face, but when she spoke she sounded offended. "Forget it."

"I'll answer your question," I reassured her. "And I'll try not to judge you, I promise." That was the truth. Even if I didn't like her reply, I'd keep from judging her just this once to give her an answer. "But I need to know. How many innocent people, just by your hand, that didn't need to die?"

"It's been six years," she said softly, as if to lessen the impact of what she'd say next. Through the dark I could hear her take in a deep breath, and when she finally answered it was so quiet I almost missed it. "Eighteen."

"Okay." I'd made a promise, so despite the overwhelming shock I cleared my throat to keep my voice even. "Eighteen," I repeated, still almost choking on the number. "Since you got here, all you've been saying to me is that you didn't have a choice. That you had to choose between killing and dying." I paused, but it seemed she was listening intently, because she didn't make a sound. "But for how many lives is that just an excuse? How many nights were you alone in the city, and you could've left?" I wasn't angry, nor was I shocked at the number anymore. I felt disappointed again, like she let me down. "Nobody forced you. I'm not saying it's a sure thing, but to start, you can't be forgiven of something you won't take responsibility for."

you won't take responsibility for."

Echo didn't say anything right away, and then her voice came out a forced whisper. "Taking responsibility… The guilt… I don't think I could survive it."

"Then you're an idiot," I told her honestly, and that disappointment I felt made me add bluntly and earnestly, "It wasn't a choice between killing and dying. It was surviving, or it was killing *and* dying, because you killed, and in sacrificing the biggest part of who you were some of you died. You chose wrong, Echo. You fucked up." I could sense her tension, sense how heavily my honesty had struck her, but I wanted her to know that this wasn't me judging her. "But you're stronger than you give yourself credit for," I told her sincerely. "You always have been. If the guilt crushes you, if you can hardly stand it then good, embrace it, because that means there's still something in there worth saving."

There was another minute of silence, and then Echo said quietly, "Thank you… for answering."

I nodded even though she probably couldn't see it, and when I felt it had been long enough that she'd recovered from whatever emotions I'd thrust on her, and when I'd recovered myself, I spoke again. "Can I ask you something?" She gave a hum of consent. "Who was she?" Even in the dark I could tell Echo knew who I meant, because she took in a sharp breath like I'd just picked at a severe scab. "Was she a raider?" I asked gently, that way she'd know I was still intent on not being judgmental.

"Valerie," Echo murmured sadly. "She was a raider, but she wasn't like the rest of them."

I don't know why, maybe because I could sense how immediately hurt she was, maybe because the heroic way she got burnt the other night was still so fresh in my mind, but this was the first time I wanted to know about Echo's past. The first time I was ready to listen. "Did you love her?"

"Yes," Echo answered, "But not in the way you're asking." There was an overwhelming despair in her voice, so I stayed silent to give her time to gather her thoughts, and to say anything else if she wanted to. "I used to

think she was weak," she continued eventually. "Her weapon of choice was a wrench. I can't think of a time she ever killed anyone with it. She never stood up for herself with the other raiders." Echo sniffled, and even though we couldn't see each other, I glanced away from her as if my gaze would make her even sadder. "I was so wrong. She was the strongest person I knew. She never sacrificed who she was, not for anything."

"Did you leave her behind? When you came here." It was a while ago, but I thought I could remember seeing a couple other girls the day we found Echo on the roof.

Her silhouette shook its head. "She's been dead for years."

Sympathy. That's what I was feeling, genuine and irrevocable. That's why I couldn't judge her right now. I couldn't do it if I tried. "What happened to her?"

The answer came in a hollow whisper, "I put a knife through her heart."

It wasn't until Echo sniffled again that I realized she meant literally, and that sympathy made me hurt for her. "She got bit?" I asked knowingly.

"Kind of," Echo said with small shrug. "There was another raider who always had a thing for me." One of her gloved hands rose to her face, and she wiped at her tear-moistened cheeks. "When he found out about me and Val he attacked her and left her for the Ferals."

Even though she was crying, it made me angry that someone would do that. "What happened to him?"

Echo sniffled once more, and I wasn't sure if she didn't want to show me her sensitivity, or if she just genuinely didn't care, but she stopped crying, and her answer sounded detached. "I tied him to a streetlamp, carved an 'x' into his chest, and left him there."

It was brutal, violent, wrong, I knew that, but at this point, through the curiosity and the sympathy, there wasn't a single part of me that was judging her. "I probably would've done the same thing," I told her in an

attempt to draw her out, to see if she felt remorse for it.

"I appreciate that," she said with a humorless huff of amusement, "But we both know it's not true. That's what makes you better than me." Echo casually leaned her head back against the short wall of the tower. The way she'd been talking about Valerie, I thought I was going to catch an extended glimpse of a softer side. It was gone, but I still felt that sympathy. "If that was true, I wouldn't be alive right now."

"You're not alive because of my moral code," I told her instantly. If she were anyone else, especially being a raider, I would have killed her. Those were my orders. "You're alive because I-" When I hesitated she lifted her head to look at me, and I figured if we were having this sincere conversation then I might as well finish. "Because I used to care about you."

"In high school?" she clarified, to which I hummed the affirmative. "Did you-" she paused like she wasn't sure if she should ask whatever question she had, but after a moment's consideration she finished timidly, "Did you have a crush on me?"

I couldn't help it that I chuckled, and if it weren't for the fact that she'd softened me up by making me actually feel bad for her, I probably would've been annoyed. "Maybe," I answered with a shrug. I'd never really known how to sum up my feelings for her back then. All I was really aware of was that I didn't know as much about her as I wanted to. "I don't know." Thinking about that made me sad too, and it took me a few seconds to figure out exactly why. "But… Hayden is dead, remember?" That's what Echo had told me, and at hearing her name I could practically feel her cringe. "I don't believe that, by the way. She's in there somewhere."

"Genevieve," Echo sighed softly, but after a few moments of pause she didn't finish that sentence.

"What?" I prompted encouragingly.

"If you knew," she started haltingly, "You'd understand. The things I've seen and done. I can't… I had to bury her. She would've gotten me

killed."

"What kind of things?" I asked. To be honest, based on the number of people she'd killed, I wasn't sure if I could handle even hearing it, wasn't sure what kind of effect it would have on my feelings toward her, but Hayden mattered to me. Maybe it would help bring her back.

"I've seen," she began, but it was already torturing to her, because she took a deep breath like she was struggling to say it. "All the people they've killed. We killed. And you don't know how many girls they kept alive, and brought back after raids. What they forced them to-" She finally sniffled again. "You can't imagine fear like that, like I've seen in their eyes."

I wasn't sure how to feel about that, whether to still feel sympathetic, or angry, and whether or not to feel those things toward Echo. "Did you ever…?"

"If I hadn't just told you how many innocent people I've killed," she said coldly, but her pain betrayed her as she sniffled once more, "I'd be furious you even hinted that I would." I opened my mouth to apologize, to tell her I didn't really think she would, but she continued before anything came out. "No. But one time I found a father and daughter while I was scavenging, and they didn't have any food. I gave them some and begged them to leave the city so my group wouldn't find them. They didn't." Echo inhaled grievously again, but it seemed she was dead set on not breaking down. "They found the girl and brought her back, and I knew what they were going to do. So I shot her before they could."

"Echo," I said thoughtfully, trying to figure out why I felt confused. "Did they ever do it to you?"

Other than apologizing to me sometimes, she didn't always act like she had overwhelming remorse for her time with the raiders. I'd seen some pain in her eyes before. I'd seen some remorse, but that was why I was confused – most the time she seemed apathetic about it. Right now she sounded a little hurt, but after my experience the other night with having to give the bitten euthanasia, I couldn't understand why she wasn't

breaking down. What did she have to feel immense pain for if not for these crimes?

"No," she answered, "But it was only a matter of time if I stayed." We were both quiet for a minute, but then she whispered, "That's not even the worst thing." She sniffled a few times now, and then raised both her hands to wipe at her cheeks. "I don't want to keep it in anymore."

"You can tell me," I assured her.

"You're going to hate me so much more, but I can't-" she whimpered, but I remained silent to listen. "After Valerie died I didn't do anything or talk to anyone or contribute. They didn't trust me anymore, I guess they thought I might try to stop them from robbing or killing, so they wanted to test me." She took a few moments and a final deep breath, and after she let it out again she sounded like she'd completely composed herself. "I felt so empty. They brought a man, and put a gun to my back to see my reaction, to make me watch while they tortured him." Her voice was so hollow. "It was my fault. I watched them torture a man because of me… and I felt nothing." If there was ever anything that might convince me Hayden really was dead, it was this. "I felt nothing." The emptiness was heartbreaking. "I can't handle the guilt, Genevieve. I had to bury her. Please don't try bringing her back."

Her first statement was wrong. It didn't make me hate her more, not in the slightest. I'd been so angry with her since she got here that I was blind to it, but this was the first time that I could say I *truly* understood her. I still couldn't say she wasn't a killer. She'd stolen innocent lives, and nothing could ever take that back. But she wasn't coldblooded. She wasn't heartless. I'd never seen Echo as clearly as I did now. She was damaged. Life after the outbreak had taken the innocent teenager I used to know and it chewed her up. It rode her through misery after misery until it broke her so bad that she didn't want to be fixed.

This was the first time since Echo got here that I didn't want to hate her. But that heartbreaking desire to let go of my hate cut me so deep that I couldn't keep my eyes from welling with miserable tears. I couldn't let it go, at least not outwardly. Everything I felt toward her in this moment wasn't enough, because my loyalty was bound by the memory of two

wasn't enough, because my loyalty was bound by the memory of two ghosts. They haunted me, constantly reminding me that no matter how bad Echo felt, no matter how much she proved herself to me, she'd had a hand in their deaths. My physical attraction to her was strong enough that letting the hate go only a little was enough to forget it, even if it was just a momentary blunder like letting her touch me in the cabin.

But I'd never known guilt like what hit me after those times I caught myself letting her in, the pain was excruciating. Letting it go so completely that I let myself fall for her like she wanted, that would make me the worst kind of traitor. What I now realized I desired, the very thing I couldn't resist, it was a desecration to the memories of my father and brother. I owed it to them to make sure they were never forgotten, and that meant I was obligated to hate Echo. The thing that caused my eyes to tear was that this realization only alerted me to the fact that from now on, I was going to be in constant pain.

I wanted Echo physically, undeniably and too much to resist her, and I didn't want to hate her anymore, no matter who I owed it to, because she didn't deserve it. I wanted to give her a chance even if the odds were stacked against her, but no matter how much it hurt, I could never admit that to her. If I admitted it to her it would give her false hope, she'd push harder for a relationship than she already was and we'd both be in more pain than we already were, *she'd* be in more pain than she already was. And we could never be more than we already were, it could never mean anything intimate, because that was a guilt-encompassed betrayal I simply couldn't stomach. It was a betrayal of blood, and I had to keep hurting Echo to keep from hurting her worse.

As I Am

Daisy by Brand New

As I Am

Echo

This was one of the first nights since the attack that we didn't have patrols, so when I glanced up from the novel I was reading by lamplight and saw that Genevieve was lacing up her boots, curiosity got the best of me. "Where you going?"

She paused from tying a lace to look up at me, her gaze lingering for a few seconds before dropping back down. She'd been so quiet the last few days, ever since the night in the tower when I spilled my guts. Something was different, but it wasn't a something that was necessarily noticeable. It was more of a something I felt in the way she looked at me, in how quiet she'd been, in the fact that she hadn't gotten annoyed with me even once. It would've eased my mind a little if I could say whether or not it was a good thing. The newfound patience she seemed to have was good, but the simultaneous distance contained something darker.

"I'm going to hang out with Kellan," she answered eventually.

It had been so long she was quiet that I'd resumed reading, but when she said that I lowered my book. "I thought you weren't going to flirt with him anymore," I said, unsuccessfully masking my disappointment.

She moved on to the laces of her other boot, pulling at the strings for a second before saying, "I'm not flirting with him."

I'd been lying down on my back, but now I pushed myself onto my elbows to look at her. "Why are you torturing yourself like this?"

As she stood she looked at me, and before I even made my point her eyes did a confirmatory scan of my body. "What do you mean?"

"I know you want me," I told her, putting on a smirk even though I was somewhat grumpy about her going to hang out with Kellan.

The distance I'd been feeling darkened her eyes when I said that, and they shifted like she wanted to look away. But a moment later she recovered from it, and her lips curled into a modestly entertained smile. Before answering she strode over to my cot, and when she sat over my hips and unexpectedly slipped one hand up my shirt, I struggled not to melt. "Is that what you think?" she asked, seductively dipping her head just enough so her lips could brush mine.

"That's what I know," I said. When I tried to lift myself enough to kiss her she pulled back enough to maintain that tantalizing graze, and when I lowered myself with defeat she followed.

Her hand slid flat up my stomach, and touches like this were so new that when it kept going I felt myself hold my breath. "Does it still make you jealous?"

"Yes," I answered, trying to catch her lips again only to have her pull away.

This time she pushed me back down, shifting her fingers so they made a teasingly delicate stroke between my breasts. "Does it drive you crazy?" she asked, her mouth tickling against my own.

I'd admit to anything if she kept this up. "Insanely," I whispered.

She pulled away, pushing against my chest so I wouldn't lift myself, but when she spoke her eyes didn't contain nearly the amount of satisfied coldness that her voice did. "That's why." After that she got off me, and since she still didn't have any gloves she only had to pull on her jacket before she was completely dressed. Once she was done, however, she didn't leave, and instead she turned back to me. "I'm just kidding, Echo," she said softly, probably at seeing that because of the disappointment I hadn't even moved since she got up. At that, I finally lifted to look at her again. "This is the only chance we get to celebrate Garcia's birthday," she explained. "He's having a bonfire. You coming?"

I would've been pissed that she'd been screwing with me the whole time, but I was so relieved she wasn't going to hang out with Kellan alone that I couldn't help but give a placated laugh. "You're such a bitch," I grumbled lightheartedly, and she dodged it when I threw my novel at her. She stood by the door with her rifle hanging over her shoulder while I rapidly laced up my boots. When I'd put on my dark green winter coat and my black beanie I stood and met her at the exit. "You know," I started both playfully and grudgingly, "It's not nice to tease."

She made a deliberate glance at where the novel had landed on the floor, "It's not nice to throw books at people either," and then returned her eyes to mine.

When our gazes locked I failed to come up with a response, because it was there again. That change. A minute ago had been the first time she even got close to me since the other night, and part of me was starting to wonder if she ever would again. Maybe everything I'd told her had changed her mind about the revenge thing, even though that seemed like wishful thinking. It still made me want to kiss her, to figure out if it would be the last time. But she must've seen it in my eyes, because as I was about to lean forward she turned and headed out the door.

With a sigh I followed her out, trailing her to a nearby campsite where some of the soldiers from our platoon and a few civilians were gathered around two different bonfires. Blake and Casey were there too, sitting on a short log at an angle to one Kellan and Garcia were at. It was reluctantly that I sat down next to Genevieve, on the opposite side of Blake and Casey that Kellan was on. He'd started glaring at me the moment we walked up, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting real fucking tired of it. Fortunately there were five other soldiers around the same fire, so after a minute he got distracted and started focusing on other people.

"How old is he?" I asked Genevieve just to make conversation, nodding toward Garcia.

She was already rubbing her gloveless hands together like they were freezing, and before answering she raised them to her lips to blow hot air

into them. "Um," she squinted at him thoughtfully. "I think he's twenty-five now."

"How do they even know what day it is?" I laughed. That it was winter was about the extent of my chronological awareness.

Genevieve chuckled, and when she saw that I'd noticed how cold her hands were she set them behind her and leaned back. "Someone around here keeps track." A moment later something icy touched the skin of my hip, and I glanced over at Genevieve in shock. It wasn't necessarily the fact that she was using me for warmth, it was that she was doing it while there were other people around, even though it was dark enough and she was close enough to my side that nobody would notice. "Can I?" she asked at seeing my reaction.

That was new too. She never asked my permission. "Of course," I told her, still watching her curiously.

While the hand at my back slid far enough beneath my clothing to get warm, she shoved the other one between her own thighs. It was like Kellan could sense it, because when I finally looked over in his direction he was scowling at me again. It may have been dark enough that nobody would notice how close Genevieve was to me, but when someone like Kellan was looking for it, it didn't take a genius to figure out where her hand was. It was gratifying that he was so mad about it, and I wanted to push it further to make him even angrier.

I began to raise one of my own hands, preparing to set it on Genevieve's leg, but she must've seen the look on Kellan's face too, and she could read me like a book. "Don't even think about it," she warned quietly. "My hand wouldn't be there if it wasn't freezing."

"You're seriously no fun," I complained, returning my hand to where it had been hanging over my own knee.

She took the celebratory bottle of wine that was being handed to her, and when she passed it to me without taking a drink, I knew it was because we were still on high alert for Ferals. I wouldn't have minded being more relaxed, but seeing as I wanted to do everything possible to make

Genevieve like me, I handed it to Blake without taking a drink either.

"You want to know another reason I never slept with Kellan?" Genevieve asked in a whisper, glancing around to make sure everyone near us was occupied in another conversation. I nodded. "Fraternization." She turned to look briefly at me. "Good, you're familiar with it. As a leader, having meaningless sex with any of my soldiers, even raiders who don't technically have a rank," and she poked me in the back indicatively, "It's highly frowned upon."

"I'm not a raider anymore," I argued sportively. "And this isn't the military."

"A lot of these guys were before the outbreak," she said, looking over at me with a serious expression. "It took me years to earn their respect."

I understood what she was getting at. There was a right way for people to find out about things like this, if they would ever find out about it at all, and me getting into a fight with Kellan over it wasn't the right way. I just couldn't resist teasing her. "What if we were actually dating?"

She didn't seem to think it was funny, but it was another instance where her newfound patience came into play, because she didn't get upset either. "Don't joke about that," she told me morosely.

My eyebrows furrowed with confusion, but she didn't appear to want another reply. She turned to join in on the conversation a couple soldiers on the opposite side of her were having. I noticed that even though Kellan was engaged in his own conversation, his eyes wandered toward me every so often to scowl, and it continued throughout the night. It probably shouldn't have bothered me as much as it did. If we were going off a point scale, I was winning – Genevieve wasn't even flirting with him anymore. It wouldn't have bothered me so much if it was just the looks, but it was the physical aspect of it that had started wearing on me. There was only so much shoving one person could take.

Eventually a few hours had flown by, and Genevieve stood to say her goodnights. "Garcia, happy birthday. I'm going to bed."

Before I even had a chance to react Kellan stood eagerly. "Let me walk you back."

It was one thing for me to hate him, but frankly, the way he'd been acting lately I didn't trust him alone with Genevieve. Not for a second. Especially if he thought she'd been drinking tonight. "I'll take it from here," I told him, consciously trying to maintain a friendly tone as I stood so it wouldn't start an argument.

His face twisted with immediate and uncalled for fury. "Sit back down," he spat bitterly. I glanced behind me at Genevieve to see if she was going to interfere, but it appeared she was going to give me a chance to 'walk away.' I wasn't going to fight him, but he'd officially pissed me off to the point that I wasn't backing down. "She doesn't want you there."

I scoffed sarcastically, mad enough that I was completely unconcerned with trying to stay friendly, or even calm. "Which of us shares a tent with her?" I pretended to think about it. "That's right, I do." His eyes narrowed, so I added angrily, "Maybe you should sit back down."

I didn't even care that the few soldiers who were close enough to hear us over the roaring of the fires and conversation were watching curiously. "Echo," Kellan growled viciously, "She hates your goddamn guts."

"Yeah, and she'd still rather fuck me," I sneered bluntly, and I was too furious with Kellan to even care that when I said that Genevieve instantly stormed off without either of us. "That just kills you, doesn't it?"

I hadn't seen rage like the expression that crossed Kellan's face in months, especially when some of the soldiers snickered with amusement. There was murder in his eyes, and he immediately started forward like he was finally going to be the first to strike. "You little-" I pulled my pistol on him to threaten him against it, and when everyone around us went silent to watch tensely, he stopped in his tracks. "You wouldn't," he challenged angrily.

"You see this tattoo?" I asked, tilting my hand just enough so he could see my wrist. "It means I've killed for less."

"Okay," Blake mumbled, finally seeing the need to interfere as he stood and moved between us. "Kellan, sit down," he instructed calmly. "Echo," and he gave me a disappointedly scolding look and nodded in the direction of the tent, "Walk away now."

I put my gun back into the holster at my thigh, but it wasn't Blake's getting involved that made my anger fade. It was guilt, because I'd just lost my temper bad enough that I'd alerted anyone who was listening to the nature of my relationship with Genevieve. No doubt she was furious, or mortified, or most likely both. Without looking back I turned and hurried in the direction of the tent, desperately hoping she'd accept some kind of apology.

When I burst in she was in the process of taking off her first boot. "I am so sorry," I offered hastily, bracing myself for her fury.

Only, it didn't come. "Just forget it," she murmured without looking at me, moving to undo the next set of laces.

"What?" I breathed in shock. Her refusal to get mad made me suspicious of why she'd been so patient with me the last few days. Because of everything I'd told her, she'd been treating me like I was fragile. That's the only thing that made sense. "Go ahead. I deserve it," I told her acceptingly. I could handle it. "I'm really sorry."

"It's fine," she replied, but it was a clipped breath. I just couldn't figure out if the impatience came from the fact that she really was upset or because I wouldn't let it go.

"Why aren't you mad?" I asked, taking a step closer to get her to look at me as she removed her second boot.

"I am," she grumbled more impatiently.

It wasn't the first time today that my eyebrows furrowed with confusion. This was so unlike her. "Then why aren't you… like… exploding at me?"

"Would you like that better?" She stood, finally looking like my inquiries had caused her to snap. "I'm mad, Echo," she told me angrily. "I'm mad!"

I must've been too close, because her hands landed on my shoulders and she pushed me away from her. "I'm fucking mad." Then she put her hands to her forehead and took a deep breath, willing herself to calm down. "After I tell you one of the biggest reasons I don't want people to know," she huffed, "A good, legitimate reason, and you announce it in front of anyone who's listening."

"I'm sorry, Genevieve." I'd severely messed up, and I felt so bad about it I just wanted her to stop being mad. "Tell me what you want me to do," I begged. "I'll do it."

"It keeps coming back to this," she mumbled quietly, ignoring my question and falling back to sit on her cot. "You're impulsive. You get upset and instead of thinking you just react. How am I ever supposed to completely trust you?"

"What do you want me to do?" I repeated pleadingly.

"Stop disappointing me," she whispered, and when her eyes finally met mine they looked discouraged, like she genuinely thought I was hopeless.

It was so different to see anything other than hatred when she was upset with me, but this was worse. I preferred the hatred. I could deal with that. I didn't like knowing that I let her down, because I didn't know a fast way to redeem myself. Lately when she was furious she took it out on me and then it was done. Disappointment… I didn't have a quick fix for that. The only way to fix the disappointment was to keep it from happening in the first place.

"Genevieve," I started gently, unsure of whether or not I should even keep trying to talk to her.

"What?" she asked blankly without looking at me again, and she set to massaging her fingertips into her temples.

I took another judgmental pause, and when I spoke my voice was cautious. "He's dangerous."

Because of how she'd been with me the last few months, I expected her to come back with a snide remark about me being dangerous too. Instead, she offered seriously, "Then stay away from him."

"He's becoming obsessed with the challenge you've given him," I replied, and then admitted, "It's not me I'm worried about."

She finally glanced up at me, and at first she appeared offended. However, at seeing the deeply concerned look on my face the hardness faded. "You remember all those conversations we've had about you not being with raiders anymore?"

"It's not just raiders that are assholes," I argued urgently. "The world used to be full of them. You know that as well as I do."

"Echo," Genevieve sighed, a newly familiar distance darkening her gaze. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Without saying anything else she slipped under her blankets and turned her back to me. I stood there for a minute, entirely disheartened and even more upset that it was my own fault. Not knowing what else to do to make amends tonight, I went out into the cold just long enough to brush my teeth, I took off my boots and coat, turned off the lantern, and slipped into bed. I'd been hoping that sleep would recover some of Genevieve's mood, and that by morning she wouldn't be as disappointed in me. Upon waking she was in the process of pulling on her brown leather jacket, and after noticing that I was awake she barely even looked at me.

"Take an hour of free time," she told me, throwing her backpack and rifle over her shoulders. As she strode out the door she mumbled, "I need to be alone for a while." I didn't like this new Genevieve. When she was shouting at me was better than now, when she was depressing most the time. If it was about everything I'd told her, she was taking it to heart way harder than she needed to.

Seeing as I didn't have anywhere to be, I took my time getting out of bed. Once I was dressed I strode over to Blake's tent to see if he wanted to get breakfast with me, but as I got there he was helping Casey into her winter coat at the entrance. Casey's cheeks colored a little when I

winter coat at the entrance. Casey's cheeks colored a little when I reached them, and after giving me a timid smile in greeting she strode away without saying anything.

"Did she spend the night?" I asked Blake teasingly once she was out of earshot. He didn't answer, but his lips curled into an adorably bashful grin. "You dog, you," I laughed jokingly, giving him a playful punch in the arm.

He chuckled amusedly, but changed the subject with modesty. "What's up?"

"Genevieve sort of ditched me this morning," I answered gloomily. "You want to get breakfast?"

"I was going to meet Casey there in about thirty minutes," he said. "You can join us."

I gave him a grateful smile, but not entirely willing to be the third wheel, I shook my head. "I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

He nodded understandingly, but his hazel eyes had been scanning me curiously since I got here. "You okay?"

"Genevieve's mad at me because of last night," I told him with a guilty shrug. "She's been acting weird though. Usually she'd have hit me or slept with me by now and gotten over it." Blake squinted thoughtfully, so I asked, "Has she said anything to you?"

"Sorry," he replied apologetically. "You've been a sore topic with her lately. I've pretty much avoided bringing it up." After I nodded he added warningly, "I'd stay away from Kellan for a while, by the way. He was beyond pissed the rest of the night."

"I will," I assured him, and as I strode away I called back, "Thanks."

It looked like I was going to be dining alone, so after going back into the tent and grabbing my eating utensils I made my way to the DFAC. My eyes did a scan for Genevieve when I got there, but she was nowhere to be found. I took my time eating my hot stew and drinking my coffee,

doing it so slowly that by the time I was finished I was sure there were only about twenty minutes left of the hour. It was a short task to rinse my dishes, and then I took them back into the tent. When I got there I found a note on my cot from Genevieve, telling me she'd gone to check on one of the Feral traps out past the eastern watchtower, and that I should meet her there. Tossing the note back onto my cot I double-checked that I had my pistol and my pocketknife and then headed out.

The eastern side of camp was one of the remotest parts, and therefore one of my favorites. In the winter everything was so still and crisp, and as the sounds of camp faded I felt more and more contentedly alone. I passed the patrol tower, calling a greeting up to the soldiers who were in it, and continued toward the trap that was set about a quarter mile farther. The farther I trekked, however, the more I began to get an uneasy feeling in my gut. Especially since now I could see the trap, but not Genevieve. I continued forward, the idea of what was going on forming in my mind as I kept my eyes and ears peeled. By the time I reached the Feral trap I already knew what was wrong. It wasn't Genevieve's note, and it wasn't her I should've been worried about.

At the softest sound of a footstep in the snow I turned, pulling my pistol out of its holster and raising it toward that smug smile. "When did you figure it out?" Kellan asked, taking a few steps closer with his own gun raised until he reached a spot only ten feet in front of me.

"About thirty seconds ago," I answered, trying not to let it show that inside I was panicking. He wasn't as much like Decker as I thought. He was more like Victor – the kind of guy who wouldn't force Genevieve because that wouldn't be a victory. But I was the competition, and his victory would come easier by eliminating me.

"Would you have come anyway if you knew?" he asked, clearly believing that I had no problem with a faceoff. Maybe he needed to believe it to justify this. Perhaps he'd never even murdered anyone like this before, and that's why he hadn't shot me yet, because something inside him was hesitating. He wasn't a killer, but I could be, and that's why right now I had the upper hand.

"No." But I didn't want this. I hated him, that didn't mean I wanted to kill him. "You don't have to do this, Kellan."

"It should've been done that day on the roof," he said coldly. "Before you had time to manipulate her into trusting you."

"So it's all about Genevieve?" *Please don't make me do this.*

"Genevieve," he agreed casually, "You being a raider. You're a loose cannon. You've proved it, everybody knows it, and it helps that you pulled your gun on me last night. When they ask what happened, I'll be able to talk my way out of it. Gen will forget about you eventually."

"Look, I know you don't like me," I started soothingly, but I didn't think this would end well. It was obvious that last night I'd pushed him too far, that I'd injured his pride to severely. So I slowly and subtly began moving the sights of my pistol toward his weapon arm.

"I *really* don't like you," he cut in sneeringly. "Do you have any idea how frustrating it is? It doesn't make any sense. I've done everything. I've been charming, funny, and nice. I've even played shy. But every fucking time I look at her, she's looking at you."

"We have history," I told him gently, hoping the explanation would get through to him. "Come on, Kellan," I added pleadingly. "You could have any girl you want. Let this one go."

"History?" He gave a dry chuckle of disbelief, ignoring my plea. "History. You killed her family, and she rewards you with sex. How is that even logical? What the hell does she see in you?"

It was useless, I could see the resolve in his eyes, but I offered anyway, "Let's put the guns down and talk about it."

"No," he replied, shaking his head as he slid his finger over the trigger. "No, you're bad for her, and I'm done t-"

I fired my weapon before he could finish his sentence, putting a bullet through his arm and causing him to drop his gun, and immediately threw

myself forward. I summersaulted toward him, and then sprang up from the ground into his stomach to take him down. He was completely unprepared for it, and by the time the shock and pain wore off enough for him to react I'd hit him in the face a few times. I expected him to pull the same thing he did in the library, lifting himself up to grab me and shift our positions.

This time he reached up and grabbed my coat collar, pulling me down to him so I couldn't wind up and punch him again. Once he had me closer he wrapped his injured arm around my neck, and then he whipped me to the left so hard I fell sideways off of him. He rolled just enough to throw one leg over my hips so he was sitting over me, and after putting the hand of his injured arm flat against my chest to hold me down he raised his other fist.

His first hit crashed against my cheek so heavily it had me reeling. "You fight dirty," he chuckled, raising his hand again.

It landed in the same spot, and even though I could hear a bone in his hand snap from hitting me so hard a second time, my adrenaline was pumping so fiercely that the only reason I could tell he'd split my cheek open was because his knuckles came up bloody. The sight of red gave me the barest presence of mind I needed, so through the swaying in my head I reached up and dug my thumb into the bullet hole in his arm. He reared up with an agonized yell, and while he was distracted trying to pry my hand from his arm I threw my other clenched fist straight into his nose.

He fell backward off of me from the sheer pain of it, and while he lay there trying to blink the tears from his eyes so he could even see me I pushed up, preparing to launch myself toward my pistol. The moment I stood to pitch myself past his head to where my weapon was, Kellan swung one of his legs toward me, catching me in the side of the knee and sending me back down. I let out a cry of pain when I landed, as something solid beneath the surface of the snow connected with the healing burn in my shoulder. Kellan took advantage of my momentary distraction, and with tears still in his eyes he scrambled over to mount me again.

Before he had time to punch me I reached for the solid item beneath my shoulder, and once I had the rock in my hand I brought my arm forward, smashing it against the side of his head. He hollered angrily as he fell off me again, and this time I immediately thrust myself on top of him, raising the rock threateningly once more.

That's when I heard Genevieve yell, "Echo!"

At the same time I saw Kellan's eyes dart to the pistol within arm's reach. "Don't do it, Kellan," I pleaded with him, and his gaze shifted to the rock suspended above his head. "I'll get up. I'll walk away, I promise. Please don't reach for it." But I could see it in his eyes. This was his only chance to kill me, because if he didn't do it now we both knew Genevieve would take my side, and he'd never get the opportunity again.

"Echo!" Genevieve shouted again, closer this time, and without looking I could tell she was sprinting toward us at full speed.

I knew what decision Kellan would make before he made it, so when his arm shot out to reach for the gun I put my other hand on the rock and brought both arms down with all my might, making damn sure one hit would be all it took. The thud the stone made against his skull was sickening, and when my mind went blank at the sound the stone fell from my hands, and all I could do was stare. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Genevieve reached us, but she must've been in shock too, because after whispering my name once more she dropped to her knees in the snow.

I was breathing so rapid and shallow that I was starting to feel weak, and after a couple more seconds I fell off Kellan, lying on my back in the increasingly bloodstained snow. This wasn't what I wanted. I thought I wouldn't have to kill anymore, thought it was over. But I'd just taken another life. I'd just proved to myself that I would never stop being a raider. I should've let him kill me. It might've been better than living with this again, with how Genevieve would probably look at me after this. Better than living with more blood on my hands.

"No pulse," Blake's voice came quietly. At that there were murmurs from a couple other people around. I couldn't find the strength to lift myself to

a couple other people around. I couldn't find the strength to lift myself to see who, but it was probably the soldiers from the patrol tower. Blake knelt at my side a moment later to examine me, and then said over his shoulder, "We have to get her to the medical cabin." Instead of a response he was met by dead silence, so he turned impatiently. "Genevieve, snap out of it." Then he slid his arms beneath me so he could pick me up, and at the first touch of his gentle warmth I felt my eyes fill with tears.

Genevieve pushed herself off the ground, finally standing and recovering from her stupor. Once she looked at me I couldn't hold it back anymore, and I broke into sobs. She didn't look mad. Nor did she look worried, or sad. Her face was blank, completely shut off from showing or even feeling any emotion. "There's too many people in the medical cabin," she finally answered. "Take her to the meeting tent." Turning to someone standing around she ordered, "Go get April, bring her there."

Blake carried me all the way to the meeting tent, and after he set me in a chair at the table Genevieve told him to find Cap. When he left it was just Genevieve and I, alone in a tense silence. She wouldn't even look at me, but I was too despairing to care. I could barely see her through the tears in my eyes anyway. But Cap was coming, and that realization brought on another. I was still on probation. Is that why Genevieve wouldn't look at me? Because they were probably going to label me too dangerous and kill me anyway, and I'd just killed Kellan for nothing. Knowing that my fight wasn't over yet, I forced myself to stop crying. I drove away the staggering guilt in order to be able to make my case.

Once the tears were gone and I could see better, I glanced over at Genevieve again. When she realized I was looking at her she turned away, but not before I caught the glimpse of a watery streak cascading down her cheek. I wanted to say something to her, but the moment I opened my mouth I heard voices outside the tent, and at knowing someone was near Genevieve wiped the moisture from her face.

It was April that came in, and when she saw me she hurried over with concern. She took in my swollen cheek, and immediately opened the small box of supplies she'd brought with her. "I don't think you'll need stitches this time," she said softly. "Did you hit him?" My eyes met hers

stitches this time," she said softly. "Did you hit him?" My eyes met hers, preparing to get defensive at the question, or to keep myself from breaking down again. She must've seen it, because she gently reached for my hand. "Let me see." Because of the stinging and throbbing in my cheek, I hadn't noticed the pain in my wrist until April pointed it out. She poked around the bones, and carefully bent my wrist and fingers while asking how bad the pain was. Based on that she determined it was only bruised, and broke a cold compress to ice it.

While she was pulling out gauze, rubbing alcohol, and ointment for my cheek Cap came in, and he stood silently at Genevieve's side to wait until I'd been taken care of. I cringed and sucked air through my teeth when the rubbing alcohol touched the wound in my face. April's eyebrows furrowed apologetically in response, but she continued to work diligently until the cut was bandaged. Then she prepared one more icepack and told me to keep it on my face to help with swelling.

The only three of us left in the tent watched her leave, and then it was quiet for a minute. Cap stood there studying me thoughtfully, and after some time he strode over to the table and sat down across from me. He continued to keep silent in his seat. He repeatedly scratched at his beard, pinched the bridge of his nose, and adjusted the dark green hat on his head.

"Genevieve," he said eventually, pulling out a chair next to him. "Come sit down." At the instruction she finally looked at me, so it was with reluctance that I could see she came over and dropped down at his side. It wasn't until she'd been comfortable for almost another minute that Cap turned his gaze from the tabletop back to me. "What happened, Echo?"

I couldn't look at him or Genevieve, so I focused on the icepack on my hand while I explained. "I was taking my hour of free time," I began hesitantly, wondering if it even made a difference. If he hadn't already decided he was going to kill me no matter what. "When I got back to the tent I found a note on my cot, signed from Genevieve, telling me to meet her at the Feral trap past the eastern pa-"

I paused when Cap coughed, and would've continued if it didn't turn into a fit. His shoulders shook violently, and his coughs came out in deep,

guttural hacks. It ended after a minute, and with an apologetic smile he said, "Continue."

"Eastern patrol tower," I finished, taking in the concerned look Genevieve was giving him. "But it wasn't a note from Genevieve, and when I got to the trap Kellan was there. He had his gun on me." I turned my eyes on Genevieve, like I was explaining it to her, "I had to do it."

Cap cleared his throat as if to will away another cough and glanced at Genevieve. "Does that sound accurate to you?" Genevieve closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Without saying anything she reached into her pocket, producing the note Kellan had forged and setting it on the table in front of Cap. Cap read it over. "I see," he mumbled, and then said skeptically, "Kellan was one of our best men. What reason would he have for attacking you like that?"

All the blood drained from Genevieve's face, and even though she didn't go so far as to shake her head at me or glare, I could tell she was hoping I wouldn't say it. But I had to. My life might depend on it. "He was jealous," I answered, respectfully adding 'sir'. "Of me and Genevieve."

Something seemed to strike Genevieve when I said that, because her face flashed the first emotion I'd seen all day. It was a familiar one too. "Cap, could you give us a second?" Cap looked like he was in shock, like he didn't know what to say, but he stood and made his way out the door. "I can't believe you just told him that," she whispered angrily once he was gone.

I knew why she was mad too. I could see it on her face for the first time. True, genuine shame. Not like last night when I revealed it to some of the soldiers, it wasn't an offended anger. She was preparing to be on the defensive, like she knew Cap was going to have something to say about it.

"He might kill me for this," I told her desperately. "Excuse me if I let it slip that you're gay all of a sudden."

"It's not because you're a girl," she quipped, and her eyes darted only momentarily to the tattoo on my wrist

momentarily to the tattoo on my wrist.

After everything I'd told her in the patrol tower, after the ways she'd been treating me since then, I'd almost been beginning to think I was getting past it. I'd let her in by telling her all that, I'd trusted her with scarring details, and so this stung excruciatingly. "You know what? Fuck you, Genevieve," I said furiously. I didn't want to deal with this right now. Not when I had my life to worry about. "Cap!" I called, and when he poked his head in I looked glaringly at Genevieve and told him, "We're done talking."

"Genevieve," he started, motioning for her to come with him, "Can I speak with you?" Her gaze fell with that shame again, and she stood to follow him outside. It was so silent inside the tent, however, that even though they were speaking quietly I could hear every word. "Is it true?" There was no answer, but she must have nodded, because then Cap sighed, "I'm confused… Are you in a relationship with her?"

"With all due respect, Cap," Genevieve said in a cautiously low tone, "I don't see how that's any of your business."

The months I'd been here, I'd never seen or heard of Cap ever getting upset over anything. Until now. "It becomes my business when it puts lives in danger," he growled, and even though I couldn't see Genevieve's face, I was instantly flooded with more guilt. Maybe she was a little embarrassed because Cap would judge her for sleeping with the girl that killed her family, but I just realized more than that she was ashamed because she'd known right away that he would blame her for this. That's why she'd gotten mad when I told Cap – it made her culpable. And that's why she'd been concerned enough to warn me about the fraternization idea. "This isn't like you."

Genevieve was quiet for a second, and then she answered haltingly, clearly uncomfortable with saying it, "It's only… physical."

"And with Kellan?" Cap asked seriously.

"Nothing with Kellan," she clarified hastily. "He had no reason to expect anything from me. He acted on his own." There was another deep sigh

from the older man, and Genevieve whispered sadly, "Cap, I'm sorry."

"Gen," he mumbled, sounding disappointed. "You're a leader. Do you realize what that means? You have responsibilities... standards for behavior. These last few years I've been trying to prepare you for command. You've always been so rational."

Instead of defending herself, Genevieve repeated in shock, "Command? Cap, I'm not-"

"Am I mistaken?" he interrupted softly.

"No," she answered reassuringly. "I make decisions for the good of the platoon, just like you taught me – always listening to reason."

"Then," he began carefully, "What is this? With Echo?"

If it weren't for the fact that admitting it was about revenge would've contradicted Genevieve's reassurances of rationality, I would've expected her to say that to him. Instead, she seemed to falter over an answer, eventually telling him, "I don't, uh… I don't really know what to say to that."

Cap made a thoughtful sort of grunting noise, which caused him to start coughing again. It sounded like Genevieve made an inquiry about the wheezing, but he didn't respond to it, instead prompting, "Have you made your decision?"

"About what?" Genevieve asked in confusion.

"Echo."

"Cap," she began in protest. "It shouldn't be my decision." He must've looked resolved, because she added almost pleadingly, "I'm not objective."

"A commander's decisions are never objective," he said flatly. "Nor should they be."

Without saying anything else to her, Cap walked back in and resumed his

seat across from me. When Genevieve followed, my heart began to pound. It was obvious he was testing her, but I was terrified to hear what her decision would be, what she'd deem as the consequences of my actions. Maybe she'd finally kill me. Maybe she'd take away my bobby pins and keep me here as a prisoner. Maybe she'd banish me, and I'd have to survive on my own or go back to the raiders. I'd choose death before going back to the raiders. At the very least she'd take away my weapons, and I'd be back at square one as far as her trust in me was concerned.

"Genevieve," Cap prompted, nodding toward me. "Repercussions?"

Genevieve's gaze met mine, and while she stared at me her eyes filled with tears. It took her so long to think about it and spit it out that I wanted to reach across the table and take a hold of her coat in my hands, to beg her to just get it over with. Then she drew in a deep breath, answering as she let it out, "None." A single drop fell from her eye, and as she wiped it away she stood, and then hurried out the door.

I stared at the exit in shock. With how much she hated me, that was the last thing I expected. "Sir," I said to Cap urgently, forcing away the shock. "May I be excused?" He appeared satisfied with the verdict, or if he wasn't I doubted he'd ever say it, so when he nodded I sprinted out of the tent and ran after Genevieve, who I could see through the breaks in the trees. "Genevieve," I called, but she ignored me. "Genevieve," I called again, this time catching up and gently reaching for her hand.

"Don't," she mumbled, yanking her hand away without stopping.

"Please, stop," I begged, taking her hand in mine again.

This time she turned on me, shoving me backwards into the nearest tree. "Don't touch me! Don't!" She pushed me again, and I cringed at the soreness it caused my aching body. "Don't fucking touch me!" But the moment she finished yelling her eyes dewed up once more, and even though there were people around she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry I did this to you," she cried, burying her face against me.

"You didn't do this," I told her seriously. Trying to be reassuring, I slid my arms around her waist and squeezed her to me. I breathed her in, and my pain was gone. "This isn't your fault."

She pulled away, and while her soggy brown eyes stared into mine she lifted her hand to run her thumb beneath the bruise of my swollen cheek. Though I still had my arms around her waist I hadn't touched her in any particular way, especially not a hard way, so when she cringed with obvious agony I couldn't understand why. "Don't touch me," she whispered, pushing me back again. But even more confusing was that her tears spilled over, almost as if it pained her when she whimpered, "I hate you." Then she jogged away, leaving me there completely and torturously baffled.

No Man Is An Island

**** Well, a couple of you asked for a quick update or one before Christmas… does this count :P. Just wanted to say thanks to all you guys that have been so faithfully reviewing. I read every one and I love seeing what you have to say :). For those of you who wanted to know how I enjoyed The Last of Us… It was AMAZING. The day after I finished I felt like something was missing from my life, and I had to put off writing Charon for a few days after I finished 'cause I was so stuck in Ellie and Joel's perspectives.*

Dlight – Tbh that just makes me super freaking happy :D

Anyway, Merry Christmas! Hope you all have a wonderful holiday and a good New Year. Stay safe!

Black Flies by Ben Howard

No Man Is An Island

Dugan

"Douglas?" Kara repeated with a laugh. "Your last name is Douglas? Dugan Douglas." She was cracking up for some reason, and I couldn't help but chuckle along just at seeing how amused she was. "How come you never told me!"

"I had no idea you'd be so easily entertained," I answered, and then just to tease her I asked, "Did you get bit or something? Are losing your mind?"

Through the just breaking gray of the start of dawn I could see Kara look over at Namiko for help. "It's so satisfying to say!"

"Alright, kid," I said endearingly, "What's your last name then?"

She tossed the tennis ball she'd found on the side of the road into the air and caught it. "My last name, Doogie Doug," she paused to snicker at the

nickname, during which I gave her an affectionate push. She then threw the tennis ball for Wolf before answering, and the dog took off down the road after it. "Is Ryder. Simply not as satisfying as Doogie Doug."

"It's got a ring to it," I reassured her.

As Wolf brought the ball back to Kara, I glanced up and down the two lane stretch of highway we'd been traveling on all night. It had been miles and miles, an entire night of trekking, and we hadn't seen a single pit stop since the beginning of our day's walk. At least the area was remote, so remote that I doubted there'd be a single Feral or person around anywhere. There had been no sign of our pursuer either, not since yesterday – Wolf hadn't made a peep about it all night – so I wasn't necessarily worried about traveling into daybreak.

I still didn't know what had been following us. There was never more than a warning snarl from the dog, and every once in a while a fleeting shadow. Whoever it was must've tired of it. Either they decided they didn't want to make themselves known and had given up, or that we had nothing worth trying to steal and had moved on. Either way, I was more comfortable now that Wolf made no signs of aggression.

"What about Namiko's last name?" I asked, directing my question at Kara since I knew the woman would be more likely to answer the teen.

Kara hopped around energetically to walk backwards in front of us, facing Namiko to wait for a reply. Eventually Namiko said softly, "Miyake."

"Hey." Kara gave a pleased nod as she turned to throw the ball again. "That's satisfying too! It just rolls off the tongue."

I smirked with amusement, and with the new light peeking over the horizon I thought I spotted a structure in the distance. Pulling my rifle around I lifted the scope to my eye, using it to zoom in on the architecture. Sure enough, it was one single, beat down building. A gas station, judging by the large awning built over the front of the main edifice. It was still about a mile away, but at least there was an end in sight.

"You see something?" Kara asked when I lowered my gun.

I nodded. "Gas station I think."

"Thank God," she groaned happily. "I'm starving."

"Maybe if you hadn't given Wolf half of your last meal…" I muttered, not sure I had the recognition yet to be able to blatantly scold her for it.

Even though I made my displeasure known, Kara didn't seem fazed. "He only gets one can a day, and we get two."

"He's a dog, Kara," I argued mildly. "Animals are built to go longer periods without food. And even with one can he's already putting on weight."

"Uh huh," Kara breathed with an almost guilty complacence.

It took me a few seconds to realize why she wanted to avoid talking about it more. "Wait," I mumbled in understanding. "How long have you been giving him extra?"

She threw the tennis ball once more while humming, "Um…", clearly having no intention of answering the question.

"Since we left Van's?" I concluded with an exasperated sigh, and then I looked at Namiko. "Did you know she was doing it?" Namiko's faced scrunched with fearful apology. "You guys are killing me," I groaned.

"It's only half of *one* can," Kara justified. "That's barely a loss for me, but it's making a difference for him."

I didn't like it. If the dog was starving I had no doubt he'd wander off to hunt or scrounge something up for himself. Kara was still in her formative years, she was still growing, and our diet was already lacking in crucial nutrients for a kid her age. But it seemed her mind was made up, and I was pretty sure she'd sneak the canine food even if I told her not to.

"Fine," I consented reluctantly. "But if you start feeling weak or sick, promise me you'll eat it all yourself."

promise me you'll eat it all yourself."

Kara crossed her finger over her heart. "Promise."

We walked along for a few minutes in silence, Kara still playing fetch with the dog. Once I'd gotten over the stress of her health I started thinking about the conversation we were having prior. I'd tried to continue Kara's schooling, but when it came down to it, all I could really instruct her in was math. We didn't have any books, and I'd never been good with history. There was no point to teaching her about the old United States when I couldn't even be sure I was getting my facts straight.

"When you were home," I began, motioning for Kara to hand me the tennis ball because I wanted in on the fun, "Did you ever read poetry?"

"Like 'Jack Be Nimble'?" she asked, and when Wolf brought the ball back to her she tossed it over to me again. While I threw it I squinted thoughtfully, trying to think of the poem she was referring to. "Jack, be nimble. Jack, be quick," she supplied. "Jack, jump over the candlestick."

"Oh," I chuckled with recollection. "That's a nursery rhyme, but it's the same kind of idea."

"Those were my favorite," she confirmed with a grin. "My dad had a book, but even before the outbreak I already knew them all, so I never read them anymore."

I nodded and made a mental note that if we ever came across a poetry book I'd pick it up for her. I made no verbal response, however, because we were coming up on the gas station. It was tiny, with only two pumps on the outside, and a single double door entrance to the shop inside. The entire building was made up of thin wooden panels. The only way I could tell they used to be painted white was because of random flecks where it hadn't completely peeled off yet.

The rest of it was worn down too. From the moment we walked up I spotted a few places where the wood was beginning to rot. The see-through doors and the large two-pane window in front were thickly layered with bright desert dust. One of the panels of the window was

even completely missing, and the piece of dirty, decayed cardboard that used to block it was hanging by a single nailed up corner.

Seeing as we were in the middle of nowhere and it wouldn't bring any Ferals running if we fired some shots, I swung my rifle around. Then I motioned for Kara and Namiko to get their guns out too. They followed me around the side of the building, and I peeked around the corner to check for anyone or anything. Wolf appeared to have no concerns about the place. All he was doing was staring at the pouch of Kara's backpack where she'd stored the tennis ball. Still, I figured it couldn't hurt to be a little cautious.

We continued around to the edge of the side, where I peered behind the back searchingly. There was a door at the back of the shop, a normal wooden one with a round gold handle, unlike the standard glass shop doors at the front. When we reached it I tested the knob, and finding it locked continued on to the far and final side. Nobody and nothing dangerous was around, but something else at this side made my heart jump with excited surprise.

Before I could completely acknowledge it, however, I wanted to make sure the inside of the store was safe as well. So the four of us snuck back around to the main entrance. When we reached it I wiped a layer of dust off the glass, and then cupped my hands around my eyes to block out the glimmer of the rising sun. It was still dark inside, but Wolf had remained silent and I couldn't see any immediate threats.

"Have your gun ready just in case," I told Kara and Namiko as I reached for the long handle.

I gave it a tug, but it didn't budge. Taking a grip on the other door I did the same, and the result was no different.

"Locked?" Kara asked.

I squatted down, squinting to peer between the two doors to check for the connecting bar that would let me know it was locked. There was nothing keeping the doors shut. Straightening back up I tossed my rifle over my shoulder, taking a handle in both my fists. Keeping a tight grip I gave the

door a hard wrench, and it budged just slightly with a loud metallic screech.

"Rusted," I told Kara, ignoring the deafening sound to continue forcing the door open.

It only got halfway before there was a grating crunch. The hinges snapped clean off the frame, and the glass door went crashing down. Kara was out of the way completely, but Namiko had been standing close to my side, leaning away just enough to look into the window nearby but still in a spot to get crushed. Out of instinct as I jumped sideways I grabbed Namiko by the waist, hauling her with me just in time for the door to smash against the cement deck instead of her.

The glass shattered against the concrete, and a combination of the sound and my touch scared Namiko so bad that she shoved away from me. My first thought at the way she pushed off of me had told me she was mad, or maybe she felt liked I'd violated her personal space. Then I noticed that she'd wrapped her arms around herself defensively, and she was leaning into the wall of the building as though she wished it would absorb her into safety.

"I'm sorry," I apologized softly. She shook her head hastily, though I wasn't sure if she was telling me 'it's okay' or if she was trying to ward off the sound of my voice. "Did I hurt you?" She shook her head again. I kind of felt bad for scaring her, but I hadn't done anything wrong, so I didn't know what else to do. "Okay. Sorry," I repeated quietly, and then turned to examine the shards scattered around the fallen door. "Keep him back for a second," I told Kara as I pointed to Wolf.

If the dog went into the store right now he'd probably cut his paws on it, so once she'd grabbed his collar to restrain him I strode into the shop. There was a large foot mat on the floor just inside the entrance. Picking up the corners, I carried it outside and tried to fling it over the glass. However, the wind was blowing too strongly and the mat was too large for me to be able to lay it flat on my own. I was about to ask Kara for help when Namiko's hands reached for the opposite side that I had a grip on. She pulled on it so the mat was flat, and then helped me stretch it out

over the shattered door.

"Thank you," I told her with a grateful smile. "He's good," I said to Kara.

The moment she let the dog go he trotted into the shop, and we followed in after him. The inside was damp from being so shut in, and there was a musty smell from the rotting of some of the wood. Other than the smell and the dust, the place was surprisingly well preserved. I'd have thought in the last six years at least one person would've chanced upon it and scavenged, but that wasn't the case at all. The shelves were lined with all their old stock. Granted, every food item on the shelves and in the refrigerators had long ago molded, leaving old box stains or remnants of plastic wrap. But the bottles in the refrigerator were still full of different colored sports drinks and sodas, and there was canned food down one of the aisles – enough to replenish the emptying duffel bag on my back.

"It's an oasis!" Kara exclaimed, sprinting down the canned aisle and picking up one in particular. "Spaghetti-O's!" We'd run out of those within the first few days of finding our duffel bag, and Kara had been missing them ever since. "Can we eat now, please?"

That reminded me of what I'd seen outside. "Hold on," I said, laughing inwardly at the disappointed sigh she gave. "Follow me." I led the way back out of the store, each of my companions trailing behind. When we reached the surprise I held out my hands in presentation. "Ta-da!"

Kara's eyebrows furrowed. "What is it?" she asked, sounding entirely unimpressed.

"What is it?" I repeated in disbelief, and when I heard Namiko giggle quietly I looked at her. "You know what it is, right?" The woman nodded. "It's a fig tree," I told Kara.

"Like those little fig cookie bars from before the outbreak?" she asked, voice a little more excited now.

"Well, minus the cookie and preservatives," I answered with a chuckle. "Go grab a plastic bag from the store real quick."

While Kara ran off to get a bag, I stood at the tree and [illegible]

While Kara jogged off to get a bag I strode to the tree, and after dumping the duffle bag and rifle into the sand I reached for the nearest branch. I climbed up into the branches, picking a handful of ripened fruit by the time Kara got back.

"Catch," I called down her, throwing a fig toward her before she even had the bag ready. "Think fast," I said, teasingly tossing another when she bent down to pick up the first one.

"You better be careful, Doogie Doug," she warned, playfully taking a fig in her hand and pulling her arm back like she was preparing to throw it at me. "I've got good aim."

"Let's see it then," I challenged with a grin. She let the fruit fly, and I ducked just in time for it to soar over my head. "You throw like a girl." I hadn't noticed she'd already picked up the second one I'd tossed, and by the time I finished my taunting it was already in mid air. The fig was so ripe that when it hit me in the shoulder it spattered tiny seeds across my neck, and I sputtered with surprise as I wiped my fingers across my eyes.

"Ha!" Kara hollered triumphantly. "Who throws like a girl?"

"Not Kara Ryder," I laughed, picking the next nearest fruit. "Hold the bag open."

She did, and I proceeded to drop down fruits for her to catch until the plastic bag was full of figs. Afterward I climbed down, and we hurried back into the store to dine on our spoils. Before I sat down to eat, however, the refrigerator caught my eye.

"You know what," I said thoughtfully, striding over and pulling out a glass bottle of Coca-Cola. I popped the cap off and took the tiniest sip to test the flavor. "Oh my God," I groaned euphorically. The soda was completely flat, but the air was cold enough that the drink had a delightful chill. "Still delicious. You guys want one?"

When they both nodded I carried back two more bottles, and after opening it for them I plopped down to lean my back against the checkout counter. I reached for a fig, sighing happily after taking my first bite. Kara

tossed one to Wolf before eating one herself, and the dog sniffed and pawed at it curiously before taking it into his mouth. Then Kara bit into one.

She chewed, her mouth quivering with disgust the longer she did. "The skin is so gross. How are you eating that?" She forced herself to swallow, and then stuck her tongue out for emphasis. "Bleh."

"You can take it off," I told her, snickering as I reached for one to show her. I twisted off the stem, and then peeled the skin and handed her the bare fruit. "Better?"

She shoved the whole thing into her mouth. "Much," she confirmed with a grin, and washed it down with a gulp of cola.

The entire bag was gone in less than ten minutes, and not long after that both Kara and Namiko had passed out. Guess I was taking first watch. Wolf was still awake, lying between Kara and I. I'd always liked animals, but my first experience with a dog after the outbreak hadn't been a positive one. My daughter's pet was a liability. It growled and barked constantly for the weeks we stayed in our apartment building. There was no way we could've taken it with us when the food ran out and we had to leave, it would've gotten us killed, but the loyal beast would've followed us if we set him loose. It would've been cruel to lock him in the apartment and let him starve to death, so we told Christina that he'd gotten out in the middle of the night and had run away. Really, I'd taken the dog a few apartments down and given him a clean, humane death. Necessity didn't stop me from bawling, and my daughter never would've forgiven me if she'd known what really happened.

"What is it about you guys that pierces straight to the heart?" I asked the dog in the whisper, extending my hand to rub the top of his head.

Wolf was clearly more attached to Kara, but when I scratched at his ears he pushed his skull harder into my hand, and I felt a fond smile tug at my lips. I stopped a minute later, but the dog had grown so relaxed by it that his head dropped right into my lap. Then I heard his stomach rumble. It hadn't been surprising to me that he didn't like the figs. I'd never heard of a dog eating only fruit. Now that we'd found some cans to replenish our

a dog eating only fruit. Now that we'd found some cans to replenish our food stores, I figured we could spare an extra one for him. Just this once.

I pulled a can beef stew out of the duffel bag at my side, figuring if I was going to cheat I might as well spoil him, and when he saw it his head picked up with anticipation. "Don't tell Kara," I mumbled, setting the open can onto the floor in front of his muzzle. That's when I heard a huff of amusement, and when I glanced over Namiko was laughing silently. "Moment of weakness," I told her with a chuckle.

She pushed herself up, and brushed her long black hair behind her ears before wrapping her arms around her pulled up knees. "I won't tell," she said shyly.

"Can't sleep?" I asked amicably, seeing this as an opportunity to draw her out of her shell, because she'd just spoken to me more willingly than she ever had.

She shook her head, explaining in a murmur, "Nightmares."

"Oh," I replied, uncomfortable just with thinking that it might make her uncomfortable to dwell on it.

Wolf already finished licking clean the entire inside of the can, and still smacking his lips he lowered his head back onto my lap. Namiko smiled at that, and I watched her eyes wander over to Kara. "You take care of her?"

I gave a sort of half nod, feeling Kara deserved far more credit than that. "We take care of each other." Namiko pursed her lips with understanding, but wanting to continue talking to her I added, "I haven't had anything to live for in years. It's just been me. Did you ever have kids?" She shook her head. "I found Kara, and I'd forgotten how it felt to care about something more than you care about yourself."

"That's why you fed him," Namiko said knowingly, nodding toward Wolf. I huffed with soft laughter and shrugged in agreement. "She's lucky," she started timidly, "To have found a stranger that would give so much."

I tensed one corner of my mouth in a grateful half smile, but I wasn't sure

I tensed one corner of my mouth in a grateful half smile, but I wasn't sure how to respond because my mind made an immediate connection to her situation. Van had to have been a stranger when they first met, and she'd been far from lucky. Namiko seemed to catch the caution behind my thoughts, because she took a deep breath and let it out in a slow, soft sigh. Every few seconds I could feel her eyes fall on me thoughtfully, but I was too unsure of myself to even test boundaries like looking at her too long.

Eventually Namiko found the courage to speak on her own. "He didn't do that." I finally met her gaze, watching her inquisitively. "What you think he did. I can see it in your eyes when you look at me."

"I'm sorry," I apologized softly, worried she was offended by my assumptions about the abuse she'd suffered.

"It's okay," her delicate voice reassured me. "He never forced me to share his bed." I didn't know what to say, or whether or not she even wanted me to say anything. So I stayed quiet, hoping she'd keep trusting me with this enough to continue. "Sometimes," she began a minute later, "I wished he would." She was staring straight at the floor, but her mouth twitched with disgust when she said that, and I tried to keep from letting my shock show. "Because then I would know what he was getting. It would make more sense why he kept me there." Namiko's eyes met mine for a brief moment before darting away awkwardly. "It was more terrifying to me that all the pleasure he needed was to cause pain."

I took a minute to absorb that, to let it sink in and to understand. "I saw the way you held that knife," I started cautiously, remembering how I'd been worried she'd kill him. "Why didn't you stab him?" She refused to look at me while her hand rubbed over her mouth anxiously, and then shakily wiped over her forehead. "I'm so sorry," I said once more, "That's none of my business."

"I did, once," she murmured, and even her voice was shaken with residual fright. "At the beginning. He nearly killed me for it."

"I never properly thanked you for saving my life," I told her, truly recognizing for the first time how hard it must have been for her to finally

kill him.

Still timid, her arms tightened comfortingly around her knees, but her thin lips widened with a modest smile. "I'm the one who owes thanks."

"Well, I'm not the one you owe it to," I responded with a proud grin, motioning toward Kara. Then, figuring we were both ready for a topic change, I asked, "So what did you do before the outbreak?"

"I was almost done with medical school," she answered, taking a small sip of the soda she hadn't finished earlier.

"In New Mexico?"

She shook her head, cheeks tinting humbly as she corrected, "Stanford, in California."

"I'm impressed," I praised with a laugh, and grew even happier when her smile got wider than it had yet. "What kind of doctor were you going to be?" When she answered with 'trauma surgeon' I turned my mouth down to portray even further astonishment. She wasn't even close to as helpless as I'd originally thought. "I'm from Los Angeles." She nodded, clearly surprised at how close we'd been before the outbreak. "Small world, I guess."

Namiko opened her mouth to say or ask something, but Kara sat up looking worried, and when she spotted the dog still lying on my lap she smirked. "I knew you liked him."

I purposefully made my eyes wide with guilt. "This isn't what it looks like."

"You're so full of crap," Kara laughed, crossing her legs beneath her now that she was fully awake.

Now that we had another listener, Namiko seemed to grow even shier, and reaching for her backpack she stood. "I'll be back."

"Are you going to the bathroom?" Kara asked nonchalantly, and when Namiko nodded she stood as well. "I'll come too."

"Take your shotgun," I told Kara, knowing they'd probably wander a little bit into the desert. Even if this place was remote, it was always better to be safe.

She reached for the gun as she threw her backpack over her shoulders. "Wolf!" she called, running out the door ahead of Namiko with the dog trailing behind her.

I chuckled while my companions disappeared, and then glanced around at the mess we'd made with the figs. There were stems and peels all over the floor, since most of them hadn't made it into the plastic bag. I collected them all back into the bag, and as I pushed myself onto my feet I threw the empty soda bottles and caps into it as well. With a sudden desire to indulge in an old habit, I leaned over the counter to look for a garbage bin behind it. I'd barely threw the bag into the trash when there was the crunch of footsteps over the broken glass outside.

"That was fast," I said, turning to greet whichever girl was returning.

Only, when I turned it wasn't Kara or Namiko. It wasn't even Wolf. It had to be whatever had been following us, and whatever I thought had stopped following us. At first glance it looked like a Feral. It wasn't wearing a shred of clothing. It was caked in dirt and dust and dried blood. It even emitted that gut wrenching, putrid smell, but there were things about this vile creature that caused me to hesitate.

The male wasn't emaciated and starving like every other Feral I'd seen. It appeared so well fed that where other Ferals had nothing but flesh and bones it had lean, rippling muscle. I would've thought it was only someone recently bitten, and not yet starving, but it hadn't roared or snarled at me. It hadn't charged at me aimlessly, voraciously, or viciously. It'd been following us for days, hiding in the shadows. Maybe it had even backed off far enough to remain undetected by Wolf. It waited until I was alone, and thank God it hadn't been Kara or Namiko who'd been the first to be left alone. Then it snuck up to the door, and the only reason I could see for it freezing instead of finishing the job was because it hadn't been expecting the glass to alert me to its presence.

I would've thought it was crazy. Ferals weren't hunters. They didn't stalk

I would've thought it was crazy. Ferals weren't hunters. They didn't stalk their prey. They weren't calculated. But this one was watching me closely, peering straight into my eyes with a stare so dark and emotionless it sent a chill straight through my spine. It was tense and ready to spring, and when I searched the ground for my rifle it followed my gaze. It was almost like it recognized the weapon, because when my eyes landed on it the creature growled low and deep.

That sound snapped me out of my bewildered hesitation, and I shot into action. At the same time I dropped to grab my rifle the Feral sprang. Any time I'd been rushed by one in the past, the Feral started it with a snarl. However, the only reason I knew this one had taken off was because its bare feet fell heavy across the wooden floor only twice. I also expected it to throw itself at me, to take me to the ground and start snapping just like every other one I'd fought in the past. It reached me right as I was raising my rifle, and instead of trying to bite its fingers clamped down around my weapon. It continued charging forward, pushing me hard backward against the counter with the gun wedged between us.

I was driving my rifle upward with all my might while the Feral was bearing down on me. It maintained its grip on the gun, but it appeared furious that I was fighting it, because it leaned forward until its mouth was inches from my face. It finally roared, but it wasn't just a hungry, bloodthirsty boom. There was an underlying and purposefully intimidating fury behind the rumble, and in the midst of it the Feral pulled back hard, wrenching the rifle out of my grip and flinging it across the store with one swift sway of its arms.

I'd been pushing myself up, my brain frantically searching for some new way to fight back. As the Feral turned to face me again it did so by swinging its heavy arms, and one of them caught me so forcefully that I was thrown to the floor. The beast roared again, and there was something human enough remaining in it that I could tell this bellow was complete impatience. Then it reached down for me. Its fingers closed around the shoulders of my jacket and it hauled me off the ground with ease. It barely had me on my feet before its snarling mouth shot toward my neck, but even here there was a method. There was no doubt by the direction of its eyes and teeth that it was aiming straight for my jugular.

It was all happening so fast, and I was so stunned and unprepared for the intensity of this creature that I knew I was done for. The moment before the Feral's jaws reached my neck there was a distinctively canine snarl, and Wolf jumped so high into the air that I saw his long fangs sink straight into the brute's shoulder. An explosive growl echoed from the creature's chest, and it let go of my coat to reach behind it for the canine still tearing into its back. It managed to tangle the fingers of one hand through Wolf's fur, and taking a step back from me it brought its elbows down fast, bringing Wolf crashing over its head.

The dog hit the floor with an agonized yelp, and the Feral raised a bare foot, preparing to rain one deadly stomp onto Wolf's ribs. In the split second it had taken for the Feral to grab Wolf, I'd reached for the knife attached to my belt. Now, before the creature's foot could come smashing down on the dog, I threw myself into it blade first. I hit the floor on my knees, and I pulled the knife out of the Feral's torso and raised both arms. I brought it down again with all my might, straight into the space between its neck and collarbone. That caused it to snarl, and as I pulled the knife out it brought a knee up as high as it could. I stabbed it once more in the same spot right as it sent its foot so hard into my chest that I went flying backward.

I'd barely stomped tumbling and the Feral was already on its feet. Its knees bent like it was preparing to lunge at me, but once it crouched it froze. My knife was still sticking straight out of its neck, and now that it stopped I could tell it was gasping for air. It took a shaky step toward me and drew in a labored breath. Another step and it tried to roar. The yell only came out a harsh hiss of air, and a moment later it dropped face first, taking one last, shallow breath before going completely still.

I groaned and dropped onto my back because it hurt too much to sit up. There was a stabbing pain in my side and my chest. It felt as though at least one of my topmost ribs was broken from the kick. Then I remembered Wolf, and I forced my head up to look at the dog that had saved my life. He was extending his nose back toward one of his hind legs, and every time he nudged it he let out a soft whimper.

"Don't be broken," I whispered, scooting myself toward him, clenching at

the pain in my side and trying to ignore it so I could make sure Wolf's leg was okay.

But when I got to him I didn't have the energy to look him over. I was breathing so heavily that the pain in my torso was excruciating, and I was exhausted from such a short burst of panic. My head dropped as one of my arms draped over the dog's neck, and both of us simply lay there.

"Dugan!" Kara's voice hollered from the entrance, and she came toward me so fast that she slid half the distance on her knees. "Dugan!" she shouted again, pulling me by the shoulder so I was on my back, and then she shook me worriedly.

"Oh, God," I whined pleadingly, "Don't touch me."

"Did you get bit?" she asked in a panic. It took so much focus just to force away the pain with every breath that I couldn't answer, so she began squeezing my hand because she was afraid to try and get my attention any other way. "Dugan, please," she cried, tears flooding her eyes. "Did you get bit?"

"No," I told her, giving her hand a comforting clutch. "No, I just got kicked."

Namiko had gotten down beside Kara, and she hesitantly set her hands on the bottom hem of my shirt. "May I?" she asked quietly.

I gave the slightest shake of my head, so she pushed my shirt up to my chest, careful not to cause any more suffering. She studied the already bruised spot where the Feral had kicked me. Gently pressed her fingers into my lower ribs, and moved up until she reached my chest, where it hurt so bad at the lightest touch that I let out a howl of misery.

"What's the matter with him?" Kara whimpered, and I could tell by the look on her face that she felt completely helpless.

"Broken ribs," Namiko answered, pressing in the same way on my other side without causing any pain.

"Is he going to live?"

"Is he going to live?"

Before answering Namiko lowered her ear to my chest, barely setting any weight on me to keep from hurting me. "I need to listen," she said calmly. After a minute she pulled away, telling me timidly, "It didn't pierce your lung."

"Hear that, Kara?" I asked, forcing a smile through the pangs. "I'll be fine." Then I motioned toward the dog. "Check his leg, please."

Namiko examined Wolf's hind leg for a minute, and she gave a positive review by answering my searching gaze with a nod. His leg wasn't broken.

"When we leave here," I began as I tried to push myself up, but it ended up coming out a grunt as I lay back down. "We're stopping at a pet store, and getting that dog as many cans as we can carry of the best dog food we can find."

"I knew you liked him," Kara laughed, appearing relieved that I wasn't fatally injured.

I gave her a wink. "It's exactly what it looks like."

"What is it?" asked Namiko's soft voice before Kara could respond.

Kara and I both looked over to see her staring down at the dead creature. This time I forced myself up, wincing until I was steady on my feet.

"Where'd it come from?" Kara added, following as I trudged over to it.

"I think it's a Feral," I answered. "It was following us. I think it was waiting for the perfect time to attack."

Kara's eyebrows furrowed, unconvinced. "Have you ever seen one do that before?" I shook my head. "Ferals don't do that," she mumbled. "Right? What do you think it means?"

At the question, I glanced from my discarded rifle, to Wolf, and back to the creature. Kara was right. Ferals didn't do that. But this one did. It did

something I hadn't seen in the six years since the outbreak. It did something I would've said was impossible. Even more terrifying than the things it did was wondering if it was the only one that could do it. Wondering whether whatever happened to this Feral to make it different was an isolated incident, or if there were more out there like it.

I finally glanced back at Kara, taking in as deep and calming a breath as my broken ribs would allow. "I don't know."

On The Cusp

Do I Wanna Know? by Arctic Monkeys

On the Cusp

Echo

With a frustrated groan I tossed the rag-wrapped ball of snow I was holding to the floor. I'd hardly slept all night because of the fiery throbbing in my cheek – the side I'd been hit on was the side I liked to sleep on. Holding ice to it helped the pain, but it was nearly impossible to doze off while keeping it in place. It was morning now, and lying down was getting exhausting, so I pushed myself up. Genevieve was still asleep, and attempting not to wake her I quietly eased my feet into my boots. I managed to slip out of the tent unnoticed with my makeshift icepack in hand, so I strode in a random direction, focusing on the sounds and smells of the waking camp in order to get my mind off the coldness against my cheek.

I kept wandering, shifting hands every couple minutes when my arm got tired of being held up, until eventually I found myself at the motor pool. At first it appeared there was no one around, but upon a closer inspection I spotted Garcia near a vehicle, working on the flat metal side of it. I stood watching him from a distance for a minute, debating whether or not I should even go over. He'd been Kellan's battle buddy for years, and the last thing I needed was more trouble. But I'd always liked Garcia, and part of me felt like after yesterday I should say something to him.

"Hey," I greeted timidly when I reached him, dropping the icepack from my face. Once I saw what he was actually doing over here, I was glad I'd come over. He was painting something onto the side of the vehicle. I'd never known he was an artist.

He knew by my voice that it was me without having to look away, so he dipped his thick brush into the can of red paint and continued filling in the large American flag. "Hi." I wasn't really sure what to say to him now, and

after a minute of me just standing there he asked quietly, "You need something?"

"Genevieve said you're changing platoons," I observed, repeating something she'd told me last night. Garcia simply nodded, so I added remorsefully, "I'm sorry."

He was silent while he carefully traced a curved line of the waving flag, and then he replied flatly, "No you're not."

He was kind of right. I still felt guilty, but I didn't regret it anymore. I did what I thought I had to do. "For your loss, I am."

Finished with the flag he set the can down, finally turning around to look at me. It was the first time he'd seen me since yesterday, and when he caught sight of the swollen wound in my cheek his eyes widened a bit, and his mouth turned down almost sympathetically. "Kellan was a good friend," he admitted with a light shrug, "But we all saw the way he was with you." His eyes ran over my cheek once more before he leaned over to rinse the brush in a tin of water. "I was with a group, years ago, before I found these guys. None of us really got along. We fought with each other. Brutally. Constantly." Done rinsing off the red paint, he dried the bristles with a rag while he continued haltingly, "I just… I get it, you know, Echo. This world changes you. He didn't give you a choice."

I pursed my lips gratefully, and I wanted to express in words how much that forgiveness meant to me, but somehow it didn't seem appropriate. Garcia turned around and took a step back to study the painting from a distance, and the step he took put him directly at my side.

"I didn't ask to leave the platoon because of you," he said, and then added, "Well, not exactly, anyway." He glanced over at me, and at the curiosity on my face he continued. "Kellan was my battle buddy, and I feel like everyone else is going to be looking at me now, expecting me to hate you." Garcia raised one hand to scratch at the scruff growing on his face. "But that's not me. I don't need that pressure. You don't deserve it. I kind of figured it'd just be easier for both of us if I switched."

"To be honest, I'm a little disappointed," I told him, giving a friendly smile,

"You're a good guy, Garcia."

He returned the smile thankfully, and a moment later his grin widened with mischief. "Are you really sleeping with Genevieve?"

I felt my cheeks color a bit, but there was no way I was answering that question when Genevieve didn't want people to really know. Glancing at the paint colors Garcia had, I noticed that he hadn't used some yet and figured he wasn't finished painting. Avoiding having to give an answer, I deliberately pointed to the side of the Stryker he was working on. "What are you doing here?"

He studied me for a few more moments. "You lucky bitch," he eventually muttered with laughter, spotting the truth in my elusion. At least he didn't press the issue, and instead answered my question. "Second's platoon sergeant likes my drawings, so when they got back last night and found out I was coming over, he asked me to name the Stryker and paint an emblem on the side." He shrugged nonchalantly. "I guess he thought it might be fun to have a mascot or something."

"So what are you going to name it?" I asked curiously.

"No clue." He folded his arms across his chest to lean back and look at the painting again. That movement was so familiar. "Got any ideas?"

"I don't know," I mused with a slight shrug. "I always thought these things kind of looked like giant bugs. Like a cricket or something, especially these tan ones."

Garcia chuckled, saying amusedly, "You want me to paint a cricket on the side of a tank? What, and call it Jiminy?"

"You asked!" I snickered, giving him a playfully defensive push. I heard someone yell my name, and when I glanced back I could see Genevieve was running toward us. "Could be funny right?" I finished saying to Garcia. "Little bitty bug, big 'ole Stryker."

Genevieve reached us then, and both Garcia and I turned toward her when she stopped, panting heavily. "What the hell," she breathed with

vexation.

"What?" I asked in confusion, watching her eyes dart back and forth between Garcia and I. She looked worried, maybe even panicked, and that's when I realized she might've been concerned I was going to get in a fight with him too. "We were just talking." She didn't say anything because she was still trying to catch her breath, so I looked at Garcia, "I got to go."

He nodded understandingly, but he had on that mischievous smile again as he mimicked the sound of a whip. I gave him another friendly shove, and while I strode away with Genevieve he called, "I'll paint a cricket."

I gave him a thumbs up, but didn't get to say anything back because Genevieve practically glared. "I was looking all over for you." I tensed my bottom lip down apologetically. "Why'd you leave the tent?"

"My cheek was hurting," I told her calmly, showing her the icepack I was still holding in my hand. "I needed to walk it off."

"I don't want you going anywhere alone for a while," she said, and when we continued past the location of our tent I began to wonder where she was leading us.

"Are you worried I'm going to hurt someone?" I asked, my voice portraying my offense because I thought she'd decided not to punish me. She offered no answer. "Genevieve?" I pressed. "Genevieve." Still she continued at my side without answering. "Genevieve?" I knew I was being completely annoying, but this was the most she'd spoken to me since yesterday. Even if she was aggravated, I didn't want it to stop. "Ge-
"

"No, Echo," she interrupted impatiently, stopping to face me as she finally answered my question. "I'm worried someone's going to hurt you. Satisfied?"

I just looked at her, somewhat surprised that she was genuinely concerned for my wellbeing. "Oddly," I confirmed, to which she rolled her eyes. At the risk of irritating her even more, I asked, "Are we ever going

eyes. At the risk of irritating her even more, I asked, "Are we ever going to talk about yesterday?"

"What do you want to talk about?" she said expectantly. "How you encouraged him to hate you? How you bashed his head in with a rock?" At that she visibly shuddered, but she didn't stop. "How if I'd listened to you I would've seen it coming, and could've stopped it? How it never should've happened in the first place because this," she motioned between the two of us, "Never should've happened either?"

"What is *this,* exactly?" I asked in annoyance, offended once more by the fact that she'd just given me more blame than I felt I deserved.

Her head twitched with almost anger. "Don't go there right now." I briefly threw up my hands in surrender. She'd done me a mercy yesterday by letting me off the hook. Annoyed or not, the last thing I wanted to do was make her regret it. "I'm sorry," she offered a moment later, in recompense for offending me. "You had me all panicked." She took a deep breath, and after stressfully rubbing her hand over the back of her neck she looked at me more sympathetically. "He tried to kill you, Echo. *He* came after *you*. What else is there to say?"

"You're not mad at me?" I asked with surprise. Since she'd been irritated with me so far today I expected anger to be the driving emotion.

But she shook her head. "I can't be mad at you for defending yourself. I saw it. Okay? I saw him reach for the gun. I'm mad at me for not taking it as seriously as I should've." I opened my mouth to protest that, to tell her it wasn't her fault just like I had yesterday, but she could see it on my face. "I've told you so many times that you have to find another way to deal with confrontation," she interrupted with an unsure shrug, "You didn't have to kill him, and if there was time maybe I'd be more upset. But you had to do something, and it's over. It's past. I just… don't want to talk about it anymore. We have bigger things to worry about right now."

"So," I started hesitantly, "We're alright?" I don't think I'd ever characterize the relationship we had as 'alright,' but it was the only word that came to mind to sum up my question.

Her eyes scanned my face. She must've been able to tell how concerned I was about it, because she answered reassuringly, "Nothing's changed."

Seeing as the last thing I wanted to do was dwell on the event, I let it go, motioning to Genevieve that she could continue leading the way. "Where are we going?"

"I had Blake gather the platoon in the meeting tent for a ConOps brief," she answered, and when I mumbled 'conops' under my breath questioningly she explained. "Concept of operations?" Still I raised an eyebrow at her to let her know I wasn't sure what she was talking about. "That's what it's called every time I tell you guys exactly what we're doing on mission."

"Oh," I chuckled. "You never get technical with me."

"You don't act like a soldier," she shrugged. "Most the time I forget to treat you like one."

"That's fine by me," I told her with a laugh, since I couldn't exactly picture myself ever calling her 'ma'am'. "Are we leaving right away?"

Genevieve had gone to talk with Cap last night after Second Platoon got back. Usually I went with her, but because of the events of the day she'd left me under Blake's supervision while she went alone. I was as in the dark so far as the rest of the soldiers, and I had no idea yet what the plan was or what Second Platoon had discovered during recon.

"Yep," Genevieve answered as we reached the meeting tent, and we both walked in.

Everyone was plopped down on the floor waiting, while Cap sat at his usual spot behind the table with Blake half-sitting at the edge of it. I wasn't entirely sure what the platoon's attitude toward me would be since yesterday, so even though everyone noticed me walk in I stayed standing at the back, behind their vision, while Genevieve made her way to Blake's side at the front. There was another man sitting in a second chair near Cap, and while he wasn't a soldier, I vaguely recognized him from around camp. Genevieve extended a greeting to Cap and the man, and

then she mumbled something quietly to Blake. Once he'd nodded to whatever she said, she addressed the other fifteen soldiers.

"McMahan briefed you all on yesterday's events," she started knowingly, and a couple of the soldiers knowingly glanced back at me. "If any of you have questions for me, this is your chance to speak freely."

Some of them looked around at each other, some of them looked at me again. A few had been at Garcia's bonfire the other night, and I know the ones who'd been close enough had heard what I'd said about Genevieve and I. There was no way Blake answered questions about it – he knew Genevieve wouldn't want any inquiries addressed – and I wasn't sure whether or not the ones who heard actually believed it or if they thought I was only saying it to make Kellan mad. If anybody was wondering about it, and I could see by the looks on their faces that some of them were, none of them said anything.

Genevieve waited a minute to see if anyone would say something, and then she continued. "Moving on then. I know you've all heard about the decision to move camp to a secure military base. Second Platoon just got back from recon, now it's our job to clear it." She paused to let that much sink in. "First things first, Second spotted two parts of the surrounding fence that were broken. We need to get this base cleared fast. Powers?" Powers said 'ma'am' to let her know he was listening. "The first night we get there I want you to take Bravo Squad around to fix the fences." He nodded in confirmation.

"Phase One is containment and elimination. Got it?" Once everyone nodded Genevieve motioned toward the man sitting near Cap. "This is Harvey, he's going to electrify the fences for further protection." Once she said that I recognized the man from when I'd first arrived at camp. He was the one who'd set up all the solar panels. "Datsyuk and Morgan, raise your hands," she addressed two soldiers I hadn't seen before. One was a guy in his forties, the other a woman somewhat older than myself. They must've come over from Second Platoon to replace Kellan and Garcia, and they both stuck a hand up in the air. "Your assignment until we've killed *every* Feral on that base is to guard Harvey. Starting now, don't take your eyes off him." The two new soldiers nodded

understandingly.

"We're leaving as soon as everyone's ready," she continued. "Safety is a top priority, so our first stop on the way there is a police station. Nobody's getting bit on my watch. Every one of us is scavenging and wearing riot gear. Limb protection is critical, understood?" There was acknowledgement all around. "Our next stop after that is a hardware store. Alpha Squad," she paused indicatively to make sure we were paying attention. "After we clear the store we're going around with Harvey to gather everything we need to electrify that fence. That means Bravo," and she looked right at Powers again, "I need you to get as many bike locks – not the kind that need keys, the ones with the codes – get as many as you can find in that store and some bright spray paint. After we secure the fences, we're locking every door on that base and clearing each building one by one. Once all targets are eliminated we re-secure the lock so none can get back in and mark it as cleared with the paint. Paint the code to each lock on the door too. Questions?"

Lee raised his hand with a question, and when Genevieve nodded at him he asked, "What about the Ferals roaming the streets at dawn?"

"At daybreak we're camping out as usual on a roof," Genevieve answered, and then told him with a chuckle, "I'm sure you guys could use some target practice." She was met with some laughs and a couple enthusiastic 'hooah's. "If a building isn't securable – broken windows or broken doors that Ferals can come and go out of – we save those for last and clear them all in the same night. I'm pretty sure our gunfire should draw out any Ferals living in those buildings, so it shouldn't be much of a problem." She looked around at everyone to make sure they were still following. "First couple nights we're keeping it quiet. Hand to hand weapons only. At least until we clear enough Ferals off the streets that gunshots won't bring on a rush we can't handle."

After that Genevieve glanced over at Blake, saying aloud so everyone knew they could speak up. "Anything else?" Nobody had any concerns. "I'll brief you guys on Phase Two once we get the base clear. Start loading the vehicles. We're only taking two Strykers and a cargo truck this time. Gasoline tanks and supplies go in the back of the truck.

Dismissed."

Everyone filtered out of the tent to begin preparing the vehicles until eventually Blake, Genevieve, Cap, and I were the only ones left. Now that none of the soldiers were around I trudged forward to resume my place at Genevieve's side. When I reached her I could see Cap's eyes going back and forth between the two of us. He still kind of looked like he was in shock, as though he still didn't know whether or not to believe what was going on between us. More than that he appeared curious, like there was something about it he couldn't figure out.

"You ready?" he asked Genevieve, his eyes finally settling on her.

"More than ready," she confirmed. It looked like Cap was about to say something, but he was seized by a coughing fit worse than those from yesterday. Eventually he stopped wheezing, but Genevieve was visibly concerned. "Cap, are you getting sick?"

"I'm an old man," he chuckled reassuringly. "It's just a cough." She didn't seem entirely convinced, but Cap changed the subject. "Something got into the food stores last night."

"Something like an animal?" Genevieve questioned seriously.

Cap shrugged. "Big animal if it was, and it only ate the dried meat." He shook his head indifferently. "Anyway, you guys are taking half fresh food because of it. So keep that in mind when you ration it out." Genevieve nodded her compliance. "And make sure you find a radio as soon as you can so we can keep in contact. You know the frequency."

"I will," she told him eagerly.

"Be safe," Cap said, and then his eyes wandered over all three of us, lingering the longest on me. "Keep each other safe." I'd never seen him be so sentimental, it actually made what we were about to do feel more dangerous.

"We'll be alright, Cap," Genevieve said with a smile. Instead of telling him 'goodbye' she turned to leave, saying over her shoulder, "Go see April.

Get that cough checked out."

Blake and I followed her out, and while Blake went to spend time with Casey before we'd have to leave, Genevieve and I went to get some breakfast. She was fairly quiet while we ate, like she was in deep thought. After a while I was starting to wonder if her and Cap thought this mission might result in some casualties.

"Are you worried?" I asked eventually, needing to talk to release some of the doubt building in my own mind.

That pulled her out of thought, and while she shook her head she nonchalantly raised her cup of water to her lips. "Just running through everything again," she said as she put the cup back down. "Making sure I didn't forget anything important."

"Your plan's solid," I said encouragingly. I'd actually been impressed by it. "You thought of things I never would've. You covered all the bases."

She gave a grateful half-smile, and her eyes fell to my cheek. "Do you want to take some pain killers with us?"

I gently pressed my fingers to my cheek to see how tender it was, and then shrugged. "It's not half as bad as that concussion you gave me." Genevieve huffed amusedly, but seeing as she fell quiet again I figured she really was worrying a little. "What do you think got into the food storage?" I asked to make conversation.

I'd been expecting her to put some thought into it, or to say she wasn't sure. Instead, she answered undoubtedly, "Bear." There was almost too much confidence behind it.

"Bears aren't strictly carnivorous…" I told her curiously, but then I actually studied her expression. "But you know that." I actually thought about her answer. "What do you really think it was?" She took another bite of food without looking at me. Without answering. "Feral?" I supplied.

"Ferals don't sneak into storage cabins," she replied flatly.

"I [illegible]

¨Uninfected mi-¨

"Echo," Genevieve interrupted, throwing down her bowl and fork with annoyance. "The last thing I need to be stressing about while we're on mission is what might happen here. Let it go."

The aggravation was a little unexpected, but I nodded obediently and fell silent to let her relax on her own. After we finished eating we grabbed our backpacks from the tent and met the rest of the soldiers at the motor pool. Genevieve was going to be driving the cargo truck instead of commanding a Stryker like she usually did, and since there were only two seats in the cab it was just she and I.

"One thing I love about the vehicles," she mused as we started our journey, traveling in the middle of the caravan. She patted the dashboard happily, seeming to be in a better mood now that we were actually starting mission. "Heater in the winter. AC in the summer."

I laughed, glad she was happy about it, especially since she still didn't have any gloves. "You mind if I sleep?" I asked, the hum of the motor and warmth of the heater already making me drowsy. I'd barely gotten any last night.

Genevieve shook her head that she didn't mind. There wasn't enough room in the vehicle for me to kick my feet up, and the seat didn't recline. The only reason I could see that I was comfortable enough to fall asleep leaning against the window was because I felt exhausted. It was hours that I stayed like that, grateful Genevieve didn't disturb me once. I probably could've slept longer if it weren't for a loud voice eventually coming over the radio, scaring me out of slumber. I didn't catch what one of our comrades had said, but when I felt the vehicle start to slow I sat all the way up.

Genevieve sighed, bringing the truck to a complete stop behind the lead Stryker. "They're having engine trouble," she told me, nodding to the one in front of us. We were in the middle of a long stretch of empty highway, but Genevieve spoke into the radio just in case. "Blake, make sure you scan the area before they get out."

"Roger," his voice replied. A minute later he said, "All clear. Over and out."

Through the windshield I could see half the guys inside start to get out of the vehicle. Datsyuk and Morgan stayed inside with Harvey, and while Hunt, Lee, and Jarvis went to check the engine Blake strode over to Genevieve's window. He hopped up onto the step outside her door while she rolled the window down, nodding across at me in greeting.

"What happened?" Genevieve asked, already sounding like she was beginning to stress out again.

Blake shrugged, resting with his elbows into the truck. "Just stalled. They're going to try and figure it out."

"Okay, keep me posted." He nodded and trudged away, and Genevieve rolled the window back up to keep the cold air from seeping in as she turned off the engine. Then she tilted her head forward against the steering wheel. "This was not how I wanted to start the mission," she grumbled.

"How far are we?" I folded my arms across my chest and turned sideways in my seat to face her, and then leaned back against the window once more.

"Not even half way."

When she sighed deeply again, I finally fully understood what she was worried about. She wasn't extremely concerned about the platoon. We'd been on missions, and we all knew exactly what we were doing. She was more worried because we wouldn't be around camp to help protect them if there was another Feral attack, or from whatever was stealing food. That's also why she was already stressing so much about the vehicle breaking down. Any delay to our travel was a delay to making the base safe for civilians. Genevieve was still leaning forward with her head against the steering wheel, so I stretched one hand across the cab, immediately massaging my fingers into the back of her neck.

"Echo," she groaned, swiping my hand away even though she didn't

sound entirely protesting. "I'm not in the mood for this right now."

"I'm not trying to hit on you," I told her honestly, slowly returning my hand to see if she'd push it away again. She didn't. "You seriously need to relax." She took my advice with less protest than I thought, because she didn't respond, and she grew so relaxed that her body swayed with every push of my fingers. "Better?" I asked after a couple minutes, deciding to pull away so she would know I was serious about not trying to hit on her. Then I rested myself against the window again to resume my nap. "You should try to sleep too."

It seemed she tried to doze off. I know I did, and I woke some time later to a constant and annoying tapping sound. Upon opening my eyes I found that Genevieve was resting her chin over her hands on top of the steering wheel, and her fingers kept going up and down, impatiently beating the hard plastic. When she realized she'd woken me up she gave an apologetic smile and leaned back, deliberately pulling her hands off the steering wheel, but she immediately began shaking her leg up and down. It wasn't until she shivered and blew hot air into her hands that I recognized she wasn't just impatient, but also cold. She needed gloves.

"Here," I said, taking the gloves off my own hands to toss them into her lap and then tucking my hands under my armpits. At least she could use them until we started driving again and she could turn the heater back on.

Genevieve's lips turned up in another modest smile, and she pulled them on. "It's been almost two hours."

"Did you fall asleep at all?" I chuckled.

"I can't," she whined, letting out a stressed breath.

"They're doing everything they can," I told her in an attempt to be comforting, but she didn't even acknowledge it. A moment later I bent over to reach for the backpack at my feet, and pulling out my cigarettes I held one out to her. "My last two." After she took it I tried to find something else to say or do to distract her from worrying about the vehicles, and the only thing I thought of was, "Do you remember the food fight the seniors started in the cafeteria freshman year?"

fight the seniors started in the cafeteria freshman year?

I was pleased when Genevieve let out a loud laugh. "I got pelted with a slice of pizza," she recalled with amusement. "You know, the nasty ones that tasted like cardboard and left a pool of grease on the plate?" I nodded knowingly, and she huffed and shook her head. "It made a perfect, orange-grease triangle on the back of my shirt. Had to throw it away because the stain wouldn't come out."

I'd taken in a breath of smoke, and almost choked on it because I started chortling when she said that. "I hid behind the vending machine," I told her.

"What?" she asked in disbelief. "You weren't even a little tempted to throw anything?"

"I was tempted," I reassured her. "I guess back then I was more concerned with not getting in trouble than I was with having fun." Genevieve just nodded with slight amusement, so I added with a laugh, "And the staff spent the rest of the week trying to figure out who started it."

"They all started it," she giggled. "That's what my teammates said anyway."

"Yeah," I agreed, still grinning. "My sister told me her class were the ones who created the tradition, instead of senior ditch day."

Genevieve cocked her head at me curiously. "Which sister?"

At the friendly seriousness of her tone and the reminder of my family, my grin slowly faded. It wasn't just that remembering was painful, but remembering with Genevieve felt like a risk. I didn't trust her enough to give her those memories, because I was afraid she'd use them to hurt me. "Millie," I answered flatly, subconsciously shifting in my seat as if it would shift the tone of the conversation.

It worked, because Genevieve studied me for a minute without saying anything, and then she set to looking out the windshield. We were both quiet for a bit, until finally a voice came over the radio

quiet for a bit, until finally a voice came over the radio.

"Genevieve," Blake queued, "You hear that?" And a deep, consistent rumble came through the speaker. "That's the sound of a running engine."

Genevieve looked over at me with a grin, and then spoke into the radio, "Then let's get the hell out of here." After that she glanced at me once more to ask, "You want to drive?"

My cheeks tinted instantly, and trying to avoid having to admit the truth I declined nonchalantly. "No, it's okay."

"No really," she insisted, reaching for her door handle. "Maybe I could sleep now."

"Genevieve," I admitted embarrassedly, "I can't drive."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean you can't drive?"

"I mean I don't know how," I told her, my cheeks flaring more darkly. Genevieve was nearly eight months older than me, so while she'd had her license sophomore year when the outbreak hit, I wasn't old enough to. I could've had my permit, but seeing as my parents couldn't afford to get me a car, I'd never seen fit to practice. Or even learn. I'd thought I had all the time in the world.

"You're kidding me, right?" Genevieve asked in disbelief, staring like she really thought I was joking. I shook my head. "Yeah, that's not okay." She pushed her door open, hopping out before I could protest. She walked all the way over to my side, opened the door, and then began pushing me toward the driver's seat. "Go on."

"Is this necessary?" I complained, but began climbing over to the opposite side as she practically scooted herself under me to give me no choice.

"Absolutely necessary," she said seriously. "All the soldiers can drive. You need to know too, in case there's an emergency or something."

To be honest, I was a little terrified. It's one thing to learn when you're fifteen years old in your parents' little sedan. This beast of a truck was almost the size of a small semi. Intimidating was an understatement. "Where's the keyhole?" I asked expectantly, searching the dashboard for an ignition.

"No keys in the military vehicles," Genevieve answered, leaning all the way over and pointing to a switch. "Flip it to 'on'." I did as she said. "It's diesel, so you have to wait for this light to go off." We both waited for the light to die, and when it did I looked at her for the next step. "Now hold 'start' until the engine fires up." I wasn't sure exactly what noise to wait for, so while I held down the button I watched Genevieve, and thankfully she knew to nod when the engine started so I could let go.

"Foot on the brake," she instructed. "That's the left one." I chuckled and rolled my eyes, because I at least knew that much. But then I noticed that the Stryker ahead of us had already started pulling away, and I began to feel rushed. Once I had my foot on the brake Genevieve pointed to the gear shifter. "Put it in drive, take your foot off the brake." When I took my foot off I expected the vehicle to start moving, but it stayed put, and I glanced at Genevieve for instruction. "Ease on the gas."

I barely set my foot on the gas pedal, and when that did nothing I pushed down on it. Apparently I did it too hard, because we jerked forward so bad that Genevieve had to throw her hand to the dashboard to keep from falling to the floor at her feet.

"Gently," she laughed. I tried it again, but this was hard to get a handle on. If I did it too lightly we didn't move, but the moment I pushed we jerked again. "Okay, rest your foot on top," Genevieve said with another chuckle, and then she reached across and put her hand on my knee. "Gradual at first," she instructed, and she pushed down on my knee just enough to start the truck forward. "Feel it? Just a little at a time."

I was a little disappointed when she pulled away, but I ignored it to focus on getting a feel for the pedal. Once we started forward I pushed on it just a tiny bit more, getting a spark of joy when we sped up without experiencing whiplash.

"You got it. Easy right?" She had a proud smile on her face. "When the sun goes down you turn on the lights with this." She pointed to another switch. "All the way up." After that she turned up the heat and leaned back in the seat to rest, but the moment she closed her eyes the Stryker ahead of us went off the road to avoid a blockade of cars on the highway.

"Genevieve," I called in a panic, and she sat up looking worried. "I'm not ready for this," I told her, bringing the truck to a halt at the shoulder and pointing at the downgrade into the graveled roadside.

She immediately started laughing again, until I glared at her, and then she told me seriously, "It's not even that steep. Just turn the steering wheel and you can go at it at a small angle."

I started forward again, and at the first bump going down over the shoulder I drew in a scared breath. "Whoa, no."

"You're fine," she giggled.

"Okay," I said slowly, tensing up when I felt the vehicle slanting, but I continued driving, and only a few moments later we were leveled again, following the Stryker through pot-holed and bumpy dirt. "That was a rush," I mused, finally letting out that breath.

"You're wild," Genevieve retorted in a playfully sarcastic mumble as she tiredly leaned against the window again, and when I looked over to pass her a lighthearted scowl she gave me a teasing smirk.

I drove until the sun went down, and even though Genevieve woke up shortly after it got dark, I continued to drive all the way to our first stop. When we got close to the city she told me to turn the lights off because it would attract Ferals, and after parking and waiting for the Strykers to tell us we were clear, we got out. Since we had to go into a decent sized city to find a police station that hopefully had riot gear, we had to trek in like we usually did while leaving the vehicles behind.

At the station, Genevieve made Harvey stay near the entrance with Datsyuk and Morgan while we cleared the first two floors of the building. It took longer, but Genevieve didn't want the squads to split up to search

for Ferals, so we did the first two floors as a platoon. The building was actually surprisingly large, with a massive section of desks and offices, the cellblock, the armory and evidence rooms, and the main lobby all being on the first floor alone. It took us a good hour and a half just to make sure the place was clear of Ferals.

After we'd regrouped we all walked back to the arms room to acquire the riot gear Genevieve wanted us to wear. What I had in mind beforehand was that we'd just be wearing a bulletproof vest. I was wrong. All the suits of gear we found consisted of a vest with shoulder protection, cuffs for your forearms and upper arms, thigh pads and shin guards, and even a helmet and face mask. Most of the guys appeared excited about it, probably because even I had to admit once they put it on they looked kind of badass, but just looking into each separate bag of gear seemed excessive to me. There was too much. Then I put mine on, and I felt so weighed down and suffocated that I immediately took it off and put it back into the bag.

I tossed the bag over my shoulder even though everyone else was donning their gear right now, as were Genevieve's instructions. I hid at the back so she wouldn't notice I wasn't obeying, and once everyone was done she tasked a new assignment.

"I want everyone to fit as many weapons and ammunition as you can into these gear bags," she instructed, tugging at her own black vest like she still had to get used to it. "Bravo, after that go back up to the second floor, see what else you can find."

In order to follow Genevieve's directions without having to put all that gear on, I grabbed a leftover suit and dumped it out of the bag, and then began filling the bag with guns and ammo from the arms room like everyone else was doing. There were enough of us here, and a lot of the stuff had been scavenged already, that we completely cleaned out the armory by the time our bags were even half full. Then we scattered to check the rest of the building for useful supplies.

"Why don't you have your gear on?" Genevieve asked as I followed her into one of the offices, but even as she said it she unstrapped the large

vest she was wearing, sighing as she took it off and set it on the single desk.

"It's bulky, and the goggles hurt my cheek," I answered, dropping the two bags I was carrying and plopping down into the cushioned office chair to start checking the desk drawers. "Why aren't you wearing your vest?" I asked mischievously, pulling a box of ammunition from a drawer and tossing it into my open bag.

"It's bulky," she copied with a chuckle. "But I'm putting it back on as soon as we're done, and you have to wear yours too."

"Um," I started thoughtfully, "No. I'm not wearing that stuff."

Genevieve pushed herself onto her tiptoes to look into the top drawer of a file cabinet behind me. "You don't have a choice."

"You know how I survived all these years?" I asked, swiveling the chair around to look at her. "Stealth and agility. That stuff weighs like a million pounds."

"That's an exaggeration," she said flatly, and then she put her hands on the armrests of the chair, leaning forward so she could get closer and more seriously make her point. "And we aren't just surviving anymore. We're fighting back. You're wearing the gear."

Her proximity instantly put other things on my mind. "Tell you what," I began flirtatiously. "I'll wear the gear if you kiss me."

She rolled her eyes and turned again to search the next drawer. "How about," she countered, pulling a flashlight out of the cabinet and walking around to the other side of the desk to drop it in her bag. "You wear it, or I'll never kiss you again."

"Touché," I laughed, and then I stood and made my way to her side of the desk, sitting down at the edge of it. "But," I paused to make sure she was listening, and she folded her arms across her chest and looked at me to indicate that she was. "You haven't done it in a while. How do I know you're ever even planning on kissing me again?"

"It's only been a few days," she retorted reluctantly.

"It's been six," I said exactly. "Which is the longest interval yet."

"Seriously?" she asked sarcastically, like she thought it was obnoxious that I knew exactly how long it had been. Then her eyes narrowed at me. "We're not dating. I don't *have* to kiss you, ever."

"You do if you want me to wear the gear." I shrugged with smug nonchalance. "I'm not scared of your authority like the rest of the soldiers. You can't force me."

"Does it take practice to be this much of a pain in the ass?" she asked, sounding entirely frustrated.

I gave her a cheeky grin. "With you it kind of comes natural." She studied me for a few seconds, and then paced forward to give me such a brief peck on the lips I didn't even get a chance to return it. "I know you don't honestly think that counts."

She sighed with annoyance and walked toward the door like she was just going to leave, but when she got to it she peered out into the halls, looking both ways. When she didn't see anyone she silently closed it, and I straightened up in excited anticipation. "Just a kiss?" she clarified, striding toward me until we were standing face to face. I nodded. "You do realize that technically this is blackmail?"

"Nobody's making you care about my safety," I replied teasingly.

Genevieve glared at me again when I said that, and she must've still been frustrated with me, because she grabbed my coat and pulled me into a hard kiss. It seemed she was intent on making sure I had nothing to complain about, because she didn't stop right away either. She kissed me long and deep, and even though she was clearly irritated, there was something in the way her lips felt, in the way she was leaning forward into me, that was reminiscent of that day in the cabin. The moment I got a taste of it I melted, and I completely lost sight of the fact that I'd told her just a kiss.

My hands landed on her hips, and I pulled her closer to me so eagerly she let out a startled breath. It didn't stop her though, nor did it stop her when my unruly hands ran up her back, or her ribs, or her stomach. It didn't stop her because instead she kissed me harder, and still more intensely when I lost control enough to turn us around, pushing her back into the desk and running my hands over her chest. Unlike that day in the cabin, however, now there was a tension, even though her breathing picked up excitedly. She seemed at odds. It was as subtle as one hand wrapping around the back of my neck receptively while the other set on my shoulder like she was preparing to push me away, but I noticed it.

I lowered my hands to her hips again and inched forward so I could bring her body even closer to mine, and then the hand on my neck came around, and she flicked the wound in my cheek. It was so sudden and painful that out of pure instinct I shoved away from her.

"Ow!" My hand shot to my cheek as though I'd rub out the pain, but it was so excruciating I couldn't bring myself to touch it. "What the hell?"

"Sorry!" she offered hastily, appearing surprised that she'd done it too.

"Sorry?" I asked in disbelief. The pain had caused an involuntary flare of anger, but I was in such shock that I huffed in agonized amusement, "You did that on purpose."

She was still panting a little heavily, so she spat out in a quick breath, "Feeling me up wasn't part of the deal." She inhaled deeply to calm herself. "That was-" And then she cleared her throat. "Too much."

The pain had subsided enough that I could touch my cheek, so I pressed my fingers to it gently and then brought them down to make sure she hadn't caused any bleeding. "You could've just pushed me away."

"I know, I'm sorry," she said sincerely, a genuinely apologetic look on her face. "I panicked."

"Panicked?" I repeated, furrowing my eyebrows curiously. Had I been too aggressive? Did she think I wouldn't stop if she asked me to?

Those were my first thoughts, but then her eyes widened like she hadn't meant to say that, and she passed me and knelt down to begin zipping up her bag. "Forget it."

I watched her for a few more seconds, trying to figure out what she'd meant. I'd never touched her when she told me not to, or so much as hinted not to. She didn't even try to push my hands away, and she never had a problem with doing that. "Did you think you wouldn't want to push me away? Is that why you panicked?"

"Just drop it," she grumbled, passing me again to grab her riot vest.

"Are you confusing on purpose?" I asked, growing somewhat frustrated. "Because if you are, you're really good at it." She raised a perplexed eyebrow at me, so I explained, "One second you're unbelievably hot, and the very next you're cold. You want me, Genevieve, why'd you flick me?"

"Why are you so convinced that I want you?" She dropped her vest near her bag and crossed her arms over her chest again, this time scoldingly. "And what exactly do you even mean by that anyway?"

"It's obvious you're attracted to me," I pointed out. "Don't even try to deny that." She stayed quiet like she had no intention of arguing it. "But you're starting to like me." I paused, but then so she wouldn't be able to avoid my statement I added, "Romantically."

Her eyes twitched as though she wanted to give me a death glare, but she managed to hold it back, asking apathetically, "What makes you think so?"

"You're honest," I stated simply, "But not trustworthy."

She stared at me for a few seconds intently, waiting for me to break it down. "Fine, I'll bite. What are you talking about?"

"You won't lie to me, you said so yourself. That's why you won't deny that you want me." I took a step toward her so we were close again. "Honest," I said, pointing to her mouth. "But your actions lie. Not trustworthy." I set my hands indicatively on her waist. "You can't be hot *and* cold. One of

them isn't real."

"And you think the cold isn't real?" she concluded, to which I gave a shrug. I really wasn't completely sure which one I believed in. If she was honest, then she meant it when she said she hated me, and that would make the cold real. But I know what I felt when she kissed me, and she wouldn't deny wanting me. That would mean the heat was real. "So what does that make you?" she asked, pushing my hands off her.

"Huh?" I breathed, baffled that she was going to apply this to me, because I was honest with words and actions about my feelings for her.

She chuckled, "Just because you're smarter than me doesn't mean I'm stupid." In response I made an impatiently inquisitive jerk of my head. "You don't want me the same way here," she started, running her hand up the inside of my thigh, "As you do here." When she finished she pointed a finger toward the center of my chest.

"Yes I do," I protested defensively.

Her head tilted with discovery as she gave a coy smile. "Dishonest."

"I'm not lying to you," I grumbled, completely dissatisfied with the turn of the conversation.

"You want the sex to mean something," she continued in order to explain. "I can feel that when I'm with you. Trustworthy." Her eyes scanned my face, judging my reaction to her statement. "But if romance is what you want most, why do you let me do it? If you think I'm starting to like you, why don't you make me wait until the sex really would mean something?" She paused thoughtfully, and then laughed with a newfound amusement, "Because part of you objectifies me… And now I don't know if I should feel offended or not." I narrowed my eyes at her, but she didn't give me time to respond, because she finished her thought by tapping her finger once against my lips. "Dishonest."

I took in an argumentative breath, but I was completely unsure of what to say to that. She'd just flipped this in a direction I'd never expected it to go, and she was pleased with that judging by the smug look on her face.

Plus, she might have been a little bit right, even if the ways I wanted her didn't conflict with each other. That's why I couldn't say 'no' to her. When I failed to form a defense she chuckled and reached down for her vest, slipping it on over her head.

It wasn't until she'd picked up her bag that I said, "You're manipulating my words. That's not fair. And not true."

It didn't matter what I said though. She didn't need to form a rebuttal because it had taken me long enough to reply that she'd clearly won the argument. "Liar," she smirked tauntingly.

"Actress," I mumbled indignantly.

She carried the bag toward the door, and after she'd opened it she stopped to tell me, "Put on the riot gear. I'm not asking anymore."

I scowled at her sourly even though she'd already turned and headed out, and began to do as she instructed. I had to take off my winter coat in order to comfortably fit the gear on, but it was thick and heavy enough that I wasn't worried about being cold. With my backpack and bag full of supplies, I trudged back to the front of the building where we were all supposed to meet up. Then we trekked back to the vehicles, ready to start the next step of Phase One.

Causing Me Shame

Waiting Game by Banks

Causing Me Shame

Genevieve

"Stop here," I told Echo from the passenger seat, since we'd just pulled up in front of a massive hardware store.

We were in an area that was more of a suburb than a city, but it still would've been too loud to drive all three vehicles in. However, we were scavenging too much equipment for trips back and forth between store and truck to be efficient. Instead, all the soldiers and Harvey were in the cargo bed, and after getting everything we needed we'd drive them back to the Strykers.

Echo pulled the truck into the loading zone outside the store and shut off the engine. "God," she complained, pulling roughly at the bulletproof vest she was wearing. She'd been griping about it all day. Her burn was healed enough that the weight of the vest didn't hurt, but apparently it'd been growing itchy, and the vest was too stiff for her to be able to scratch it.

"Take any of that gear off and I'll finally put you into that coma," I threatened. I found the riot suits as uncomfortable as she did, but it was necessary. At least until the base was clear. When she gave me a miserable scowl I added, "It's for your own good." Whether she wanted to believe it or not, I didn't want her getting bit.

Before she could protest I threw open the heavy door and jumped out of the cabin. When I got to the end of the covered cargo area a few of my soldiers had their blades buried in some Ferals. That set me on instant alert, and my hand darted to the knife strapped to my thigh while my eyes scanned the area for any more.

"They heard the truck," Blake explained, hopping down from the bed with

"They heard the truck," Blake explained, hopping down from the bed with a chuckle. "Chased us probably fifty yards."

"Anyone hurt?" I asked in a loud whisper, and the soldiers within eyesight were shaking their heads.

Hunt used his boot to kick the Feral he'd stabbed off his blade, and while looking at me he patted the chest of his vest indicatively. "These suits were a good idea, ma'am. Sucker got a few good swipes in with those nasty fingernails."

"Good," I laughed with grateful amusement. Then I glanced around at everyone else who'd gotten out of the cargo bed and was gathering around. "You all remember your jobs? Bravo, coded bike locks and spray paint. Alpha, we got fence materials. Jarvis and Barns, you guys are on guard duty out here. Datsyuk and Morgan, stay right inside the entrance with Harvey until I come back for you. As for the rest of us, let's clear this place quick and quiet."

Turning to lead the way into the store with Echo at my side, I pulled my clipped flashlight from my pocket and flipped it to the blue lens, then gripped my knife in the other hand. More blue lights came on behind me, illuminating my back and casting ghostly shadows onto the exterior of the building. Normally I'd have taken Alpha to the left of the warehouse while sending Bravo to the right, that way we'd be able to clear the building faster. But after the massive attack on camp and our theories that Ferals were starting to group more than usual, there was no way I was splitting us up when we had no idea what to expect.

We went down aisle after aisle cautiously slow. Through the plumbing section, checking inside the display showers and tubs. Down the lumber aisle, shining our lights over and behind the palettes of wood. Even into the outdoor gardening area, searching through the jungle of overgrown trees and plants. I don't know if it was because Ferals really were grouping and they were doing it somewhere else, or because food was getting so scarce for them that a lot had started dying off, but we didn't find a single one inside that huge hardware store. For once it seemed things might actually go the easy way.

Finding the store empty of hostile life, I sent Bravo to start their scavenging chore and then led Alpha back to the front where we'd left Harvey with Datsyuk and Morgan. The middle-aged electrician had soft, wise brown eyes, and his graying brown hair glowed blue under the beams of our flashlights. He hadn't been a civilian with our group for long – we'd only found him after our camp in the forest had already been established – and I could tell by looking at him that he wasn't at all intimidated by our mission. He didn't appear nervous or frightened that there might've been Ferals around, and the holstered revolver at his hip was one he'd owned before his arrival at camp. Regardless of that, his life was important, and I wasn't taken any chances by putting him into any type of combat.

"You want to take us to the right aisle and show us what we need?" I asked Harvey.

He gave a slight nod and started deeper into the store. It didn't seem he knew exactly where he was going because he kept shining his light up at the signs labeling the aisles, and then shining them down the aisles themselves. Eventually he got us to the outdoor security section, and upon reaching it he grabbed a black piece of plastic and held it up for all of us to see.

"These are insulators," Harvey began, and then shined his light over some smaller yellow ones. "Same for those. We'll need every last one this store has." He glanced further down the aisle. "We're going to need as much wiring as possible, steel and aluminum will work, also some normal electrical wiring. Grounding rods like this," he put the insulator down to point to a long metal spike. "Copper or any kind of galvanized metal." Then he pointed to a roll of what looked like thick green rope. "Grounding wire too. And um," he paused to look at me, "We'll need more solar panels, and some batteries if you can send some people for that."

"Anything else?" I asked just to be sure, and he shook his head. It was crucial that we didn't forget anything, and so to make sure that didn't happen I decided to delegate. "Blake, I want you to get all the insulators. Hunt, you got the electrical wiring. Datsyuk, Morgan, and Harvey, I'll let you guys get the fence wire. Lee – grounding rods andwire. Echo, you

and me will get the solar panels and batteries. Let's get moving."

All my guys dispersed, and Echo and I headed toward the outdoor batteries. The selection was surprising, and I wasn't exactly sure what kind and how big Harvey needed, but I figured bigger was better. In earnest to get this done as fast as possible, I hastily picked up a battery, almost knocking myself over backward at the weight of it.

"You're not as strong as you think you are," Echo chuckled playfully.

"Shut up," I laughed, watching as she reached for a battery too. She barely lifted it past her knees before setting it back down. "Should we grab a cart?" When she consented we hurried to the front of the warehouse to grab a long, flatbed cart, and then pushed it back to the batteries.

I picked up my first one and put it onto the bed. I'd noticed the cold the moment we got out of the truck, but what I hadn't realized until now was how stiff it made my fingers. It hurt just to carry one battery, and after I'd dropped it I could barely even straighten my fingers out.

"Ow," I groaned, shaking my hands to try and work some heat into them. When I glanced back up Echo was looking at me concernedly. "My hands are cold again."

"You need gloves," she said, and made a move to take off her own.

"Don't," I stopped her before she'd worked her hand out of it, giving a grateful smile for the thought. "I'll be okay."

Echo watched me thoughtfully as if deciding for herself whether or not I'd really be okay, and eventually she nodded. "You ever want to do track and field in high school?" she asked, tensing to lift her first item onto the cart.

"That's random," I said amusedly.

"I guess." She gave a somewhat embarrassed giggle. "Lifting this stuff made me think of shot-put."

I mouthed 'oh' in understanding even though she wasn't looking at me. "Not really," I answered her original question. "I had no desire to run for fun."

"No," she said sarcastically, "You'd rather add a ball and make it even more challenging."

"I never thought of it like that," I told her through a laugh, my amusement turning into a grunt as I gently lowered another heavy battery onto the cart. "What about you?"

"Sports?" she clarified, to which I hummed the affirmative. "Um, no. That would've involved socializing."

"Not even softball, huh?" I asked, snickering at my own teasing.

"Ha-ha, you've got lesbian jokes," she replied flatly, though by the glow of our flashlights I could tell her laugh line was deep with a smirk. "What's the saying… the pot calling the kettle black?"

I wanted to laugh at that too, but that was a conversation I didn't want to get into right now… or ever. So instead I said, "No, seriously though, were you that terrified of interacting with people?"

"Can you blame me?" she asked knowingly. "Look at how we act when society falls apart."

For a few seconds I just stared at her, because she'd said 'we'. She was taking responsibility, which meant she truly had taken to heart that sincere conversation we'd had. Despite the amount of respect I had for it, her statement shifted me out of my playful mood. "I guess I can't."

Like always, she picked up on the change. "Yeah," she mumbled with soft finality, falling quiet to finish our scavenging in silence.

It took a while, but eventually we'd gathered everything we needed. All the supplies to electrify and fix the fence, locks and paint to secure the doors, and we even managed to get some barbed wire for whatever uses we could find for it. By that time there were only a few hours until sunrise,

so without further delay the soldiers got back into the bed of the cargo truck, and we cruised back to the other vehicles. Echo parked the truck next to the two Strykers, which were lined up one in front of the other, and after shutting off the engine we met all the soldiers hopping down to the street. We could've left immediately for the base, but it would be daylight when we got there, and waiting out the afternoon in the vehicles would be far from comfortable.

I opened my mouth, about to tell everyone we'd be heading to the roof of a nearby building, but a deafening crack cut me off. My ears recognized the sound as a gunshot instantly, and it scared me so bad that I dropped the flashlight I was holding. My eyes set to searching my men, trying to figure out who'd fired a weapon and why. Then I noticed that Stackhouse was flat on the ground, and my next instinct was to rush over and check on him.

It didn't register that he'd been shot until hardly a moment later, when another of my men yelled, "Taking fire!"

There was an immediate frenzy as everyone scrambled to get behind the cover of the truck. The shots were coming from a small apartment building across the street, on the opposite side of the truck as the Strykers. There was another gunshot in the rush, and this one hit Hunt so hard he stumbled a single step and then hit the ground on his back. I'd already jumped behind the cover of the truck, and as Blake sprinted around he grabbed Hunt by the shoulders of his vest, dragging him to safety.

"You okay?" I asked Hunt hastily.

He was coughing and wheezing, but he waved off the question and forced himself onto his knees. "Caught me in the vest."

The same couldn't be said for Stackhouse. When I peeked around the end of the vehicle just long enough to catch a glimpse I could see the moonlight, reflected off a glimmering pool of blood near his head. "Shit, shit, shit." I was frantic. We couldn't stay out here, in minutes any Ferals in the area would be here. I needed a solution fast. "Datsuk, Morgan!" I yelled in a rush. They hurried over. "Get Harvey into the Stryker, shine

yelled in a rush. They hurried over. "Get Harvey into the Stryker, shine the spotlights on the building. Don't open the goddamn door again until you hear my voice. Bravo! Get into the building behind us! Fire at any hostiles you see in the windows! Go!" A few of them responded with 'yes ma'am', and all of them instantly sprinted into the building. "Alpha, we're going in. We need to clear this fucking ASAP."

I waited only fifteen seconds, during which I glanced at Echo by my side, because this hadn't happened as long as she'd been with us. "We have a rule about raiders," I told her. "Zero tolerance." There was an almost reluctant expression on her face, but she nodded. In those short fifteen seconds Datsyuk and Morgan had gotten Harvey into a Stryker. The spotlight lit up the entire exterior of the three-story apartment building, and a few enemies' heads disappeared from the windows. "Bravo!" I shouted, loud enough for the squad inside the building behind us to hear me. "Cover fire!" The very moment Bravo started firing on the building across the street I left cover, aiming for the flashlight I'd dropped while hollering to my squad, "Go, go, go!"

By the light of the moon I could see a Feral about half a mile down the road, but we were already at the door. Blake kicked it open, and with my rifle aimed straight ahead I moved forward. There was nobody visible immediately inside, so while I stopped at the first apartment door with Echo at my side the men behind me continued in. Hunt and Lee moved to the door across the hall, while Blake shut the main entrance and he and Jarvis manned the hallway.

Echo posted herself at the opposite side of the doorway as me, and when I flung it open she pointed her pistol into it, prepared to fire on anyone who might shoot us. No gunshots met her movement so she paced in, and I followed so close that my shoulder was nearly attached to her back. There was nobody directly visible, but to make sure we didn't miss anyone that could catch us from behind after we moved on we checked every inch of the studio apartment – behind the couch, under the bed, in the closet and the bathroom. It was empty. We moved on.

This apartment building was small, with only four units on this floor. As we reached our second door Hunt and Lee came out of their first. I let Echo turn the handle this time, and the moment my entry was clear I shot

into the doorway. My eyes darted left and right as my finger tensed over the trigger of my rifle, looking at everything and nothing all at once. Scanning with soft focus for even the slightest movement.

This apartment wasn't a studio like the last, and when I moved to the first closed door on my right I heard Hunt yell 'clear' from their unit, and heavy footsteps thudded up the stairs at the end of the hall. I felt Echo's hand tap between my shoulder blades as I reached for the handle of a bedroom, indicating that she was guarding my back against the rest of the apartment. I twisted the handle just enough to offset it, and after I'd returned both hands to my rifle and was completely prepared to shoot I kicked the door open with my boot. No movement, and Echo backed herself into the doorway to continue watching our rear while I searched every nook and cranny of the bedroom. Nothing. I did the same thing with the bathroom across the hall, and then together we searched the living room and kitchen.

"Clear?" I asked, shining my light behind the couch.

"We're good," Echo confirmed, closing the storage closet she'd searched.

We hurried back out and up the stairs to where Blake and Jarvis were still guarding the halls. As Echo and I reached our next door Hunt and Lee were exiting theirs, moving on to the last one on the right side.

"Studio?" I prompted as they passed by, checking for a pattern in the units so I knew what to expect.

"Yeah," Lee breathed in confirmation.

"Get the handle," I whispered to Echo, posting myself at the left side of the door with my rifle at the ready.

She threw it open, and I exposed myself just enough to see and shoot if there was anyone in the apartment. The second I checked an entire head and torso popped up from behind a couch at the opposite end of the studio. I got a couple shots off, but missed because the man ducked back down right when he saw me. I'd barely started firing when there was movement from the very right of the unit, and I pulled back behind the

movement from the very right of the unit, and I pulled back behind the door as a second person, a woman, shot twice. I dropped to my knee to change things up, because I knew the targets now expected me at full height.

"I got two," I murmured to Echo. She nodded. "Couch at twelve o'clock, there's a man behind it. The other's at three, I got an angle on her. Can you handle the twelve?" She nodded again, though more hesitantly this time.

"Come out, bitch!" shouted the female voice, followed by a warning shot that hit the wall of the hallway across from Echo and I.

I nodded once to start the count down, and on the third nod I whispered, "Now!"

I leaned forward, and just as I'd thought the woman expected me at full height, and her shots hit the frame above my head. By the time she realized I was on the ground I'd fired a perfect hit into the center of her chest. The man behind the couch didn't pop up this time, and instead had his hand resting on the back of it, firing blindly in our direction. I hadn't been counting every bullet he fired before this, but with his pistol and since I'd shot the woman he'd already fired six.

I waited, and after he pulled the trigger only twice more there was the start of a pause. He was reloading, and there was no time to waste. My hand brushed Echo's shoulder as I rushed silently into the room, trusting that she knew to watch my back for a third attacker. As I paced closer I could hear the thud of a discarded magazine, and the click of metal against metal as he struggled to frantically jam his new one into the gun. He was in such a panic that he didn't even notice when I reached his side, and I fired a single deathblow before he had time to react.

For good measure we checked the closets and bathroom. When we got back out into the hall Hunt and Lee were finished. They were knelt at the bottom of the stairs, guns pointed upward to guard while waiting. Blake was leaning back against the wall on the left side of the stairs patiently, and Jarvis was doing the same on the opposite side. Echo and I cleared the last unit, room by room without a hitch, and then climbed the stairs

behind the other four.

We'd only just reached our first unit on the last floor and could already hear voices coming from the inside. Well, only one voice was readily apparent, but I didn't think the man was talking to himself. It sounded a little distant, and if the floor plan of this apartment was like the other two below, it was a studio, and the enemy was at the far end of it.

Echo threw open the door, clearly to the man's surprise. He stared wide-eyed for a split second before even thinking to raise the shotgun in his hands, and by then I'd already fired my expertly placed shot. The moment the man went down there was a movement from near the window. A girl stood and made to rush to the pistol sitting on the coffee table a few feet away.

She barely had her hand on it before Echo shouted, "Stop!" The girl froze, and Echo moved into the unit ahead of me, putting herself in front where I couldn't fire at the girl. "Drop it."

The girl had her back turned, but she let go of the gun, and with her hands up turned to face us. I now realized Echo got in the way on purpose because she knew I wouldn't hesitate to shoot, and she continued forward until she was only a few feet from the last enemy. But I'd told her the rule, zero tolerance, and the girl had been reaching for a weapon. When I got to Echo's side and she hadn't finished it yet I raised my own rifle.

"Don't," she protested, putting her hand on the barrel of my gun to push it down. "She's just a kid."

The girl couldn't have been more than sixteen, and when neither of us shot her she glanced back toward the window. There was a third man lying beneath it, already dead, probably shot by Bravo from across the street.

"She was reaching for a gun," I explained. If Echo were any of my other soldiers I would've shot the girl already, but I wanted Echo to understand because I didn't want her to be mad at me for it. If Echo were any of my other soldiers she wouldn't have hesitated like this. The girl's eyes kept

darting from me to Echo, and I could tell she was looking for an escape, maybe even contemplating still reaching for the gun on the table.

Echo glanced over at me pleadingly. "There has to be another way."

I could see it in those smoky gray eyes, the reason she didn't want to do it. She'd been saved and given a second chance, why couldn't we save this girl too? But we didn't know this girl. Sure, she could be worth it, or she could be like her companions and all the other raiders we'd come across over the years – already skilled and cold in the art of killing. Either way, we'd killed everyone she knew. There was no way she'd ever come with us willingly. Maybe she'd even seek revenge against us. There was no other way.

I turned toward Echo, prepared to more fully explain myself and make her understand. The second I stopped looking at her the girl materialized a knife out of nowhere, and she moved behind me so swiftly I didn't even register it until the cold blade pressed against my throat.

"Drop the rifle," the young voice ordered into my ear. Using me to block any gunshots, she retreated toward the far corner of the unit, keeping me between her and Echo, and also between her and the windows, where she knew Bravo would shoot if she gave them a chance. "You," she said to Echo once I'd tossed my rifle to the floor, "Give me your pistol."

Since the outbreak I'd been shot at countless times. I'd been in fistfights and stand offs with bandits and Ferals. But I'd never had a knife to my throat. I felt completely helpless, and terrified. I was about to start really panicking, until my gaze met Echo's. The look in her eyes gave me comfort. She appeared calm and confident. And resolved. Whatever hesitation she'd had before was completely gone now. I had no idea how she was thinking of getting me out of this, but her calm reassured me that she had a plan, so I watched her closely. I trusted her.

"Okay," she said to the girl softly, compliantly turning her pistol around in her hand so she was holding the barrel. "Take it easy."

She extended both arms outward as if to show the girl she wouldn't try anything, and I could feel the girl's chin shifting every other second

anything, and I could feel the girl's chin shifting every other second, looking from Echo's face to the extended gun as Echo moved closer. It was because the girl was focused on Echo's gun that she didn't notice Echo's other hand. Her fingers were spread out in a fan, and after making a deliberate glance at them to indicate I should look too, and then another down at the ground, she tucked in her thumb. Four. Another step closer, and she tucked in her pinky. Three. The look down must've meant that at the end she wanted me to duck. Closer. Tucked in her ring finger. Two. She got to us, and began extending the gun forward, but not far enough to put it into the girl's hand because she clearly wanted the girl to reach for it. Echo tucked in her middle finger. One.

The moment Echo finished her countdown her free hand shot for the girl's knife hand, with a speed that reminded of the time she'd pulled my own knife on me. She wrenched the girl's wrist outward so the knife was no longer against my throat, and at the same time I dropped away from the blade. I'd barely gotten out of the way before Echo brought her gun hand up, and since the girl was momentarily exposed Echo smashed the butt of the pistol against her forehead. As the girl dropped Echo flipped her gun back around, holding the grip firmly while aiming directly at the teen's head. This time she didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

I scrambled up, more than shocked that Echo's plan had actually worked. When I reached my feet she looked at me, her eyes widening worriedly. "Shit," she murmured, hastily taking my face in her hands and tilting my chin up. "You're bleeding."

My adrenaline was still pumping wildly, but now that she'd pointed it out I could feel the warm streak of blood trailing down my neck. I touched my fingers to the wound under my jaw. The bleeding wasn't severe. It only felt so hot because of how it contrasted with the frosty night air.

"It's only a knick," I told her, setting my hands on hers. For some reason I felt like she was the one who needed comfort. "I'm okay."

Despite my reassurances, she wouldn't let go of my face, and she pulled back just enough to look at me with a panicked light in her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she offered, her thumb running soothingly over my cheek. "I should've listened to you. I shouldn't have hesitated."

She was right. She shouldn't have hesitated. However, considering where she'd come from, where she'd been the last six years, I never wanted her to feel bad for not wanting to take a life. "It's fine." I actually felt bad that it ended up this way, that we couldn't save the girl. Reluctant to let Echo feel any more guilt, I firmly pulled her hands from my face, but before letting them go completely I touched them to my lips. "Don't ever apologize for feeling compassion. Okay? Don't ever let that go." Then I realized that I'd been involuntarily affectionate, and it put a stab of pain in my chest. Normally I'd have followed it up by reminding Echo that I hated her, but now wasn't the time. Not when she felt guilty. "But next time," I began with dry sarcasm, taking a step away and feeling Echo's eyes start to scan my face at the sudden change. "You can be the hostage."

One corner of her mouth turned up with the hint of a smile, but her eyes wandered to the smallest of the bodies on the apartment floor. I'd tried to be comforting, but I could tell it wasn't enough. There was more I had to say. I had to try harder to make it better, but this was a more delicate situation than I wanted to believe. Echo had lived with raiders for the last six years – I'd known from the start that her moral compass was broken – but it wasn't just broken as far as the things she was capable of. She didn't have to kill Kellan, but she did. She had to kill this girl, but she didn't want to. I'd always blamed the violence on her being coldhearted, but since my revelation about what she'd been through I now knew it wasn't a lack of emotion. I just didn't think she could tell the exact difference between a necessary kill and murder any more. She was damaged in ways I was still just beginning to understand.

"Echo, you want to know a truth?" I asked. Her gaze met mine, and after thinking for a minute she gave a slow nod. "All the people at camp, their numbers are nothing compared to all the different survivors we've seen over the years. Not even half." I wiped some of the blood off my neck, and then wiped it onto my jeans. "The truth is, most people can't be saved. Most of them don't want it." In the grand scheme of things, maybe that didn't exactly make this moment better. It was a dark truth. Far from comforting even to me, but it was still a truth, and Echo accepted it with another nod. Not sure what else to say about it, I tilted my head toward the door. "Let's clear the last room."

The last room was completely empty of life, but I could tell it's where this group of bandits stayed most the time. It was filthy with discarded food cans and ammo boxes, and dirty, stained mattresses littered different corners of the floor. Afterward we traveled up to the roof, and the first thing I did was signal to Bravo to stay put where they were. There were a handful of Ferals roaming the streets below, so we'd have to wait to regroup. But then I noticed where all the Ferals down there were going, and it made me sick. They were feeding off Stackhouse. Only, his riot gear limited their feeding to his hands and head.

Inside, I was growing furious, as now that my adrenaline was wearing off it was all beginning to sink in. This is why I followed Cap's zero tolerance policy about raiders. Stackhouse was a good guy. He didn't deserve to be shot and eaten. I wanted to kick something and yell, to let out my frustration, my anger at the injustice. Had it been just Echo and Blake that were here, I probably would've. Despite my inwardly boiling rage, I had to keep it together, because I had three other soldiers here who I couldn't let see what I was really feeling. My platoon's confidence in me relied on me keeping it together.

"Hey." Echo's hand landed on my shoulder, but I was so involved in my thoughts that I jumped. "Sorry," she huffed amusedly, and then held up some gauze and an alcohol pad. "Will you let me clean that cut? It's the least I could do."

I nodded, lowering myself onto the ground so I could prop my back against the edge of the roof. Echo knelt at my side, and after she pulled the alcohol pad out of the wrapper she cupped my face with her other hand, gently tilting my chin up. The other thing I could feel now that the adrenaline was wearing off was the cold, so while I leaned my head back completely against the low wall I tucked my fingers beneath my armpits.

"Here," Echo said, taking notice immediately and stopping her work to give me her gloves. I was about to protest and she knew it, because she interrupted. "I'm not even wearing them right now." Seeing as I was cold, I didn't try to protest again, and pulled them on while she resumed wiping beneath my chin. "You're right, it's just a knick."

She finished cleaning away the blood, and proceeded to blow air at my neck to dry the alcohol faster. All it did was make me colder, so I answered through a shiver, "Told you."

"Still might have to amputate," she replied with that laugh line smirk.

"Yeah, sure," I started sarcastically to play along. I didn't feel frustrated at the night's events anymore. Echo's relaxed attitude had melted it all away. "It's not like I need my head or anything."

She chuckled and reached down to line the gauze with tape. She fell quiet to stick it over my cut, and once she'd pressed the tape on with her fingers they trailed down my neck. Her eyes were focused on the gauze even when they traced their way back to my face, and cupping it once more her thumb caressed my cheek.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you," she said eventually.

She looked so disappointed in herself, or maybe like she thought I was disappointed in her. I wanted to let her thumb keep stroking me because I didn't want her to be sad, and she was so warm and it felt comforting for both of us, but I couldn't. That excruciating guilt had already flared.

"Don't touch me like that," I mumbled quietly, reluctantly, as I pulled my head away from her hand. But I felt frustrated again. I never got to act the way I wanted. The way I needed. "And stop feeling sorry," I told her, my voice coming out more bitter than I'd meant it to, but now that I'd found an outlet for that frustration I couldn't stop. "I'm fine. You're fine. Just get your shit together and move on."

Echo's eyes narrowed the slightest bit with offense, and her head bobbed in a repeatedly quick and irate nod. "Great," she grumbled as she stood. "I'm glad the respect here is making some real fucking progress."

I'd regretted taking it out on her the moment the words left my mouth, but when she walked away angrily I regretted it even more. It was obvious I had to do something by way of apology, but this very second might be a bad time. So I waited a few minutes to give her some time to get over the anger I'd caused, and then I strode to where she'd retreated.

"When she had the knife to my throat," I began, throwing a leg over the wall to straddle the edge of the roof Echo was sitting on, "I could see on your face that you knew how you were going to get me out of it, and I wasn't scared." When she glanced over at me she still appeared a little upset, but she watched me intently to let me say what I wanted. "I know I haven't done much to prove to you that you can trust me completely, and I'm sorry we couldn't save her. But I know how precious life is, especially now that it's scarce. I wouldn't ask you to take it if there was a better way."

Echo nodded knowingly, but I continued before she could respond. "When you're not backed into a corner, when you go after the action, it's not as easy to pull the trigger. I hesitated my first time too. I got someone else killed, and I still hesitated again my second time." I shrugged, trying to figure out how to conclude this and make amends. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that, because I understand."

Echo looked away, and for a moment I wasn't sure if that was going to be enough for her. Then she glanced back over with a smug smirk. "I might be more willing to accept that apology if you kiss me."

I laughed, relieved that she wasn't still mad, but I'd been trying so hard lately to stop leading her on. "Keep dreaming," I chuckled.

After that I strode away to kill time with Blake. We only had to wait a little more than an hour before the ground below was clear and we could travel back to the other building and wait with Bravo. So we gathered the ammunition we could find from the building below us, I let Datsyuk, Morgan, and Harvey know they could come out of the Stryker, and then we traveled up to the roof of the building where Bravo Squad was.

"Everyone okay?" I asked Powers, scanning the men I hadn't seen since we'd started taking fire from the raiders. They were all there, and all looking healthy.

"No injuries, ma'am," Powers confirmed.

I nodded my satisfaction. "Bravo, go ahead and get some sleep." I

I nodded my satisfaction. "Bravo, go ahead and get some sleep," I announced. We'd killed all the raiders in the apartment building, but I couldn't be sure if that was all the ones in the city. "Alpha, we're going to take first watch and make sure there are no more hostiles in the area." I'd looked to my side to motion for Echo to follow me to the far corner of the roof where we could watch the ground below, but she wasn't there. "Where's Echo?" My eyes darted to every face around me, and when none of them was hers I looked at Blake, a panic forming in my gut. "Where's Echo?"

He looked completely dumfounded, and shocked that nobody had noticed she'd disappeared. "I don't know," he answered, head turning as he searched the rooftop too.

My panic was rapidly building in intensity. "Echo?" I called, darting around the structure the roof door was set in, checking behind it in case she was back there.

She wasn't, so I shot to the edge of the roof and clicked on my powerful bright flashlight, shining the white beam down to the street. I shifted the light up and down every alley it would reach, but there was no sign of her. At this point, I was frantic enough that I didn't care if my soldiers saw that I was losing it.

Anything could've happened to her, and my mind was reaching the worst possible conclusions. She could've been so suddenly attacked by a Feral that she didn't even get a chance to scream. There could've been other raiders waiting outside, and they'd grabbed her when nobody else was looking. Now they were probably raping or torturing her, or they'd already killed her. Or they were recruiting her, and she'd join them.

Twenty whole, torturous minutes of panic, and then it shifted to anger. The only way she could've been grabbed by a Feral or raiders was because she'd wandered away from the group just enough for that to happen. That was her fault. Stupid. I was furious at her for being so goddamn stupid. After another twenty minutes during which I raged, I then realized that she'd survived too long to make a dumb mistake like that, and I started panicking all over again.

She was dead, and it was my fault for not having her back as well as I should have. That hit me so hard that I had to move behind the door structure so none of my soldiers would see that my eyes were welling with tears, and I motioned for Blake to stay put because I didn't want him to see either. I wasn't looking out for her, wasn't keeping an eye on my battle buddy. Now she was never coming back. My only link to the life I used to have. Gone. No more happy memories like pizza stains from a cafeteria food fight. No more bad ones like she killed my family. No more sex.

That conflict between thoughts, the panic in my chest, the nausea in my stomach, it all had me breathing heavily. I couldn't sort through my own mind, couldn't decide if I was feeling anger, or relief, or terror, or despair. It was so overwhelming that I had to cover my face with my hands and force myself to slow down, to take deep, easy breaths or else I might pass out. It started to work. I'd forced away every thought and feeling so well that my world was quiet. It got so still that I could hear something happening from inside the structure I was leaning against.

Thuds of footsteps were coming up the metal stairs. When they reached the top I sprinted around to the other side, watching intently to see who would open the door. The knob turned, the door cracked open. All the soldiers who were awake were watching too, and some of them had weapons ready in case it was raiders or Ferals. Then Echo's head poked through.

"It's just me," she called to the soldiers before coming all the way out, and once the weapons had been dropped she came through and closed the door behind her.

I stomped over, grabbed the sleeve of her coat in my fist, and dragged her all the way back behind the structure, out of sight again. There, I shoved her hard against the brick. "What the hell is wrong with you!" I growled furiously, angry once more now that I could see she was completely fine.

I didn't want to lead her on anymore, I'd been trying with everything in me not to kiss her or touch her. But I was so relieved that she was alive, and healthy, and not rejoining raiders, that in spite of myself and before she

healthy, and not rejoining raiders, that in spite of myself and before she could even get over the shock of being thrown, I kissed her. I wrapped my arms tight around her neck and pressed my body and lips to hers so eagerly that I could taste her surprise. I was so relieved that I didn't stop her when she recovered from shock and curled her arms around my waist to pull me closer. I basked in it, guilt-free for just a moment because I'd thought I'd never again feel her arms, or her lips, or her tongue.

The clearing of someone's throat snapped me out of my relieved stupor, and I jumped away from Echo to see Blake laughing by the corner of the structure. Then I remembered my fury, made worse by the fact that now I felt that guilt. So I shoved Echo again, harder than I had before.

"Where were you?" I whispered harshly.

"Geez, talk about whiplash," she grumbled, once more looking shocked at the sudden change, but she pulled a brand new pair of gloves out of her jacket pocket. "I went to get these for you."

"Seriously?" I asked angrily, and I was so pissed that I'd gone through so much emotional trauma over a pair of gloves that I pushed her again. "What the ever-living fuck, Echo!" I took a deep breath to keep myself from yelling. "You don't leave this group. Ever. That was stupid. It's almost daybreak. You could've gotten yourself killed! And for what? A pair of goddamn gloves."

Now she was mad, obviously because I wasn't receiving the gesture the way she'd been hoping I would. "I survived for years without you," she said. "I was on my own almost every night, and I'm still here. So don't you fucking tell me what I can and cannot do." She shoved the gloves against my chest, mumbled, "You're welcome," and then made to storm off, but my arm immediately shot out to the structure to block her path.

I'd done it again, made her the outlet of my frustration when it was far from deserved. She'd risked her life just to make mine more comfortable. It *was* stupid, I'd rather be miserably cold than let her die for it, but I couldn't deny it was generous. Whether I'd asked for it or not, I owed her gratitude.

"Please don't ever scare me like that again," I told her softly, and I felt reassured when she appeared to understand why I was mad, and it made her anger visibly fade. "It's not worth your life." To show my gratitude just this once I leaned forward and pecked her tenderly on her still wounded cheek. "Thank you for the gloves."

I removed my arm to let her walk away, and once she was gone I finally took the time to examine the gloves. The brown leather of the outside matched my coat perfectly, but it was of a quality that far surpassed that of my jacket. I slid my icy hands in, meeting more surprise on the insides. I hadn't expected them to be so warm for how thin they were, but that was where the quality was even more apparent. The insulation was thin enough that I could wear these and still be able to shoot my rifle, but they were so warm that I could already feel the life seeping back into my fingers.

And they were soft. The inside was lined in a cushioned material that caressed my skin smoother than silk, like I was swimming a toasty pool of fluff. I didn't know the size of Echo's hands, whether they were larger or smaller than mine, but these gloves were wonderfully snug. They were so flawless that I almost wanted to believe Echo had personally crafted them just for me; so flawless that as I clenched my fists to try out their flexibility, I couldn't stop both corners of my mouth from widening ear to ear.

"Is that a smile?" Blake asked teasingly, finally reminding me of his presence. "Did Echo just earn a genuine Genevieve smile?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I told him amusedly, giving him an affectionate punch on the arm as I passed by.

I made my way to the far end of the roof, where Echo had set her stuff away from the other soldiers and lain down. I lay down next to her while tugging one of my new gloves off. She had her back to me, but I nudged her shoulder to turn her over. Once she was facing me I reached for her hand, and she watched me curiously as I pulled off one of her gloves and then pressed our palms flat together. Her hands were bigger than mine, her slender fingers more than half an inch longer. She hadn't chosen the pair based on her size, but on mine.

pair based on her size, but on mine.

"The gloves fit perfectly," I said in response to the inquisitive look on her face, pulling away to put my glove back on and then propping my head up on my palm.

"I know," she replied with an easy smile.

"How?"

Echo watched me for a few thoughtful moments, as if to judge my mood before saying cautiously, "I've memorized all of you." Then with a huff of amusement she closed her eyes and extended her hand above my shoulder. With it hovering a consistent inch above me, she ran it down over my ribs and the dip in my waist, up the curve of my hip, and then just as confidently back to my shoulder, all without breaking the distance. All without touching me. "I could trace your shape with my eyes closed." After she said that she glanced away shyly, and busily picked at a stray thread on her backpack. It was dark, but her cheeks tinted so red that I could see it. It was the first time she'd blushed for me since high school.

Now I had the overwhelming urge to kiss her, to show her how truly thankful I was that she'd risk so much for something so insignificant. It was wrong, and I felt guilty and I wished that I could stop getting those kinds of urges. I just couldn't do it on my own, because I wanted it so badly that I forgot until it was too late, and I knew she'd never stop me. But that was what I needed, for her to stop me, even if it wasn't by saying 'no.' It would suffice that if I kept doing this I could hurt her so bad she'd never recover, but in some way she had to let me know that. I needed something drastic. "Echo, do you love me?"

Her eyes immediately met mine with shock. "What?" But she'd heard what I said, and I didn't know if I had the nerve to repeat myself. She scanned my face while the shock changed to what seemed like offense. The question had slipped out before I even knew what it would be. It wasn't until now that I even realized how inappropriate it was, but it was too late to take it back. "If I say no, will you stop sleeping with me?" I shook my head honestly. "If I say yes, will you want to be with me?" She was asking the wrong questions. She was thinking about it all wrong. I

gave another disappointed shake. "Will either answer change the way you feel about me?" she asked, voice portraying growing frustration. I wasn't sure about the answer to that, didn't know if it would change anything, so when I made no response Echo's eyebrows furrowed angrily. "Then fuck you for asking." She instantly turned over so her back was to me.

I sighed as my cheeks flared with shame. It was wrong to ask that, and probably cruel, and I knew it. "I wasn't trying to make you mad," I said quietly, almost as if I'd meant it to be an apology. Another one… so many apologies.

Echo turned just enough to look over her shoulder at me. "Yeah, well, you did." She shifted back, and a moment later her voice growled from the other direction, "Actually, what the hell were you trying to do by asking me that?"

"I just," I started, but stopped, unsure of what I could say to remedy the anger I'd caused. "I don't understand why you let me hurt you." I wished I could beg her to stop me, or to stop caring so much.

She was silent for a few moments before deciding to look over her shoulder at me again, and then she turned all the way, propping herself up on her elbow. "Because I know that's not who you are," she answered eventually, with a sincerity that was astonishing in the midst of her anger, and then she paused to study me. "You have one of the softest hearts I've ever seen, whether you want to admit it or not. I don't know what's going on in your mind." She shrugged. "I don't know how or why you like me so much physically when you still hate me, but it won't last. That's not your nature." When she finished she turned back around, appearing to have no desire to continue the conversation.

"What if I've changed?" I argued. I was grasping for anything that would help, for anything that might convince her to stop me.

"Genevieve," Echo sighed without trying to look at me, her voice ringing with finality. "The outbreak changed a lot of people a lot of ways, but you've always been who you are."

All that did was make me want to cry tears of desperation. She could always read me so well, but this she just didn't get. She didn't want to see that I was pleading with her, didn't want to see how bad I was for her. Or how much easier her life could be if she stopped having feelings for me. I'd known for a week now that this was going to be painful for the both of us, but in that moment I was terrified of how little power I had. At some point since this started I'd lost majority control of the situation. What made it worse was that Echo didn't seem aware she'd gained it.

Kaleidoscope

*** I know it's been too long. Thank you guys for hangin in there and being patient with me. I love you all :). I'll do my best to get the next update here as quick as possible.

W.D.Y.W.F.M. by The Neighbourhood

Kaleidoscope

Echo

I adjusted the glow-in-the-dark handle of the pocketknife in my hand, its pale green the only brief source of unnatural illumination before it disappeared beneath my gloves again. At the same time I glanced at Genevieve by my side. Her body was outlined against the snow by the black riot suit she was wearing, and the features of her face were illuminated by the glow of the moon. I returned my focus to the group of Ferals fifty feet ahead of us. They were all awake for some reason, huddled together even though it was long past sunset.

After working on the fence for the last three nights with our help, Harvey was almost done. Now he was ready to move on to the next and final section, but before pulling the cargo truck of fencing supplies up to it we searched the area for Ferals. Good thing too, because I could just make out the outlines of seven of them. Datsyuk and Morgan had been told to wait at the truck with Harvey while we cleared the area.

When Genevieve saw me look at her, she gazed back at the four soldiers behind us. Since the Ferals were awake we hadn't turned on our flashlights, and I was a little surprised when Genevieve continued forward. Especially considering how concerned she always was about safety. We were outnumbered. There was one more Feral than there was of us, but I guess that's what she'd wanted the riot suits for, and I knew she wouldn't risk Harvey for anything.

We crept closer to the Ferals, remaining hidden behind the cover of

shrubs in the forest that surrounded the base. They were so focused on what they were doing that we were able to get a few yards away without being noticed. Once we reached that short distance I could finally see what they were so intent on doing. Eating. It was very clearly a human figure, but it was as emaciated as they were. Another Feral, that's what they were feeding off of, probably one from their own clan that had either starved or frozen to death.

There was no smart, stealthy way to go about this. The moment we left cover the creatures would spot us and come charging. Another brief look over at Genevieve let me know she was thinking about what she wanted to do. She'd just taken in a deep breath when there was an uproarious snarl from one of the Ferals. The sound caused my heart to drop, because I thought we'd been spotted before being able to make the first move. Instead, one of the Ferals had lunged at another, and now they were rolling through the snow, fighting over a piece of flesh one was holding in its hands.

Now that two of them were distracted, Genevieve saw this as the perfect opportunity. She took in another breath, tucked in her bottom lip and pressed her tongue to it, and blowing that air out she released a deafeningly loud whistle. The Ferals straightened up, each of their heads shooting in our direction. The first one took off, and following its lead the others sprinted behind. The moment they reached us we sprang into action.

Genevieve and I were at the front, so we let the first four run right by us so the soldiers at our rear could get them. The fifth Feral reached us, and I was the first one it laid eyes on. It charged me, preparing to make a grab. Its arms were longer than I predicted, so when I made a mistimed jab at it with my knife I couldn't reach. The next thing I knew it knocked me backwards into a tree. The miss was so unexpected that out of instinct I forgot to push its shoulders, and instead threw up my arms to protect my face from its jaws.

The Feral's teeth clacked against the solid forearm guard of my riot suit. I was pushing hard to keep it away from me, but every time its fangs connected with plastic it pulled away only momentarily to readjust, then it came snapping back. From behind it I saw Genevieve wind up her knife

came snapping back. From behind it I saw Genevieve wind up her knife arm, and then she buried the blade deep into the creature's back. As she pulled it out the Feral roared, and she would've stabbed it again if the other two that had been fighting with each other didn't reach us. One of them lunged at her, and she disappeared behind the teeth snapping at my face to fight it off.

My Feral recovered before I had time to follow up Genevieve's attack. Once more its teeth were digging into the plastic at my arm, its hands making starving grabs at my head. It was pushing against me with such a furious strength that inch-by-inch it was getting closer, and soon a simple shift would bury its fangs in my cheek. Gathering every ounce of energy I had I began to push back, letting out a shout as if it would give me more power. I managed to shove the Feral off, and this time I thought about my reaction. Right as the Feral reached for me I pushed one of its arms away, stepping to the same side so its other arm would miss. Then I drove my knife straight into its chest.

It wasn't even completely dead before my eyes shot past it to search for Genevieve, desperate to make sure she was alright. Blake had come to her aid, and as far as I could see she and the other guys looked completely healthy. My eyes then wandered to the plastic shield at my arm. I raised it to angle the guard toward the moonlight, shivering at the glow reflecting off the infected coating of saliva. Never again would I complain about the suits Genevieve wanted us to wear.

"You okay?" Genevieve asked, leaning to get in my line of sight, to get my gaze off the plastic. The horror at how close I could've been to infection must've shown on my face, because then she asked worriedly, "What happened?"

I shook my head and dropped my arm to my side. "Nothing. I'm fine." Fine, but I wanted to give her the biggest fucking hug I'd ever given anybody. Instead I offered a reassuring smile. "I'm good."

"Everyone else?" she prompted, turning to the other four soldiers, all of who confirmed. She pointed to Hunt and Lee, telling them, "Run back to the truck. Tell them they can drive it up now."

Hunt and Lee hurried off, and the rest of us strode back to the fence to wait for the truck to arrive. The remaining part of the section that Harvey had to work on was only two hundred yards long. What we'd been doing the last few nights was using the truck as a buffer, so any Ferals trying to get at Harvey would have to go around the truck. From there the rest of us formed a protective arc, keeping an eye out for any danger while Datsyuk and Morgan helped Harvey with the fence.

Once the truck was parked where Harvey had easy access to the supplies, Genevieve and I trekked to our post at a part of the fence where he'd already finished. Here we started our watch duty. We'd only been standing there for a few minutes before I already started to get bored. This had been the worst part of the last few nights. We'd already cleared the area, so all we'd be doing now was standing here in the cold. To entertain myself I took in a deep breath of frosty night air, holding it for a few seconds in my lungs to warm it up, and then let it out in one strong but careful burst. It created a perfect foggy circle that floated into the air in front of Genevieve and I. When Genevieve saw the ring reflected blue in the moonlight she whipped her hand through the air, sending the fog scattering.

"Hey," I objected, "That one was perfect."

She glanced at me sideways, her mouth already set with irritation. "Can you just relax for one hour? You've been fidgeting every night for the last three days."

She was right. I'd been stomping pictures in the snow with my boots, playing with the magazine of my pistol, blowing fog rings, and even trying to talk to her. She'd had little interest in keeping my mind occupied, so I had to find something.

"I'm bored," I answered, unconsciously pulling my pistol from the holster at my thigh.

Before answering and before I could slip the magazine out of my gun just to jam it back in, Genevieve's hands landed on mine, and she directed the weapon back toward the holster. "Put that away."

While I stowed the gun I rolled my eyes, though it made me partly self-conscious that she was paying so much attention to my fidgeting. I had to do something with my hands that wouldn't annoy her. I reached out for the fence beside us, about to grab a wire simply to twist the metal between my fingers for a bit. The moment I reached Genevieve grabbed my wrist.

"Don't touch it!" she warned in a panic, yanking my hand away. "Just sit still."

"It's not live yet," I told her through a laugh, ignoring her command. I didn't know everything about what Harvey was doing, but after he'd finished this part of the fence he'd said something about completing the circuit. At least I knew that meant the electricity wasn't flowing yet.

"Are you sure?" she asked skeptically, glancing between the fence and I.

The opportunity to tease her was just too enticing, so before she could react my hand shot out. Once I curled my fingers around the wire I stiffened, shaking my whole body in vibrating convulsions. Genevieve gasped, and her eyes widened in instant terror. I could only stand it for a second before I started cracking up. When she realized it was only a joke her eyebrows furrowed, and she pushed me by the shoulders.

"You're such a little shit sometimes," she grumbled, reaching out to test the wire for herself. She was making it way too easy to tease, and the moment her hand touched it I grabbed one of her shoulders to scare her. Her whole body twitched with fright and she jumped backward, narrowing her eyes at me. "Fucking Echo." But even through the anger one corner of her mouth was curled in amusement. The next second she'd swung around and jumped on my back with her arms around my neck. "Eat snow!" she chuckled, her foot connecting with the back of my knee and sending us both to the ground.

She giggled even harder when it actually caused me to face plant in the snow. I'd been laughing too, but when I landed on the ground I did it leading with my still injured cheek. It scared me more than it actually hurt, but it was enough that I twisted rapidly, throwing Genevieve off with more force than necessary

force than necessary.

"For real?" she mumbled like she was peeved, pushing herself onto her knees to brush the snow off her riot suit. "PTSD or what?"

"Sorry." Still on my back I pressed my fingers to my cheek, finding the bruise was even deader than I thought. It really must've been the cold that scared me, because I could poke at it without much pain at all. "I thought it hurt my cheek."

At that Genevieve crawled over, her face appearing above mine as she knelt at my side. "You okay?"

Before answering I blew another fog ring at her face, and she swatted it away with a smile. "Maybe." I couldn't help but smirk as I pointed to my cheek. "Plant one right here and I'll be even better."

Genevieve was in such an unexpectedly good mood that I assumed she'd find that funny. Instead she sighed, dropping onto her backside and scooting away from me. "Why do you always take it there?" she asked frigidly, even going so far as to throw a snowball at me with frustrated indignance.

It hit me in the face. "Ow," I complained, though it really didn't hurt that bad. It hurt more that she got so distant so suddenly. She'd been doing that more lately – being unusually playful or nice, and then tensing up the moment I acknowledged it. She didn't say anything now, and appeared to be waiting for me to respond to her question. "Why do *I* always take it there?" I repeated with a sarcastic huff. "Let's make sure we agree on something real quick. I kissed you in the woods the very first time. I instigated." She gave an unsure but concurring nod. "Okay, but every time since then, you've come on to me. So why do *you* always take it there?"

"Every time except in the-" Genevieve scoffed but stopped short, and when I cocked my head at her curiously she finished in a timid whisper, "The cabin."

"That doesn't count," I told her seriously. "You were trying to take it there

and you know it." She gave me an incredulous scowl. "Fine, *almost* every time, you've come on to me."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," she said flatly, standing up to move further away from me.

"Too bad." I pushed myself off the ground to follow her, somewhat surprised at how quickly things had taken a turn tonight. "We're already talking about it. What is it about me that terrifies you so much?"

Even in the dark I could see her eyes narrow at me. "I'm not afraid of you. I've told you that."

"No?" I asked in disbelief. "Because I can't see what else is holding you back."

"From kissing you?"

"From being with me," I sighed.

"I don't want to be with you," she said with an apathetic shrug, leaning back against the nearest tree. "That's what's holding me back from being with you."

I studied her for a minute, trying to decipher the meaning behind that. It couldn't have been a lie, but the sex didn't feel like revenge anymore – in some ways she cared about and wanted me, I was certain of it. She'd proved it. Still, revenge was the only thing that made the most sense for why she wanted me without romance.

"Okay." I ran my hand through my hair as I let out a defeated breath. There was no way I was going to make progress with this conversation, and I wasn't in the mood to argue, especially because this took such a serious turn so fast. "Fine."

Now Genevieve studied me for a minute, squinting with curiosity. "Really?" she asked eventually. I raised an eyebrow for explanation of her surprise. "You usually push harder than that."

I shrugged, striding to her side and propping myself up against the trunk right next to her. "Maybe I'm learning to pick my battles."

We were facing opposite directions now, but after a couple seconds I heard her huff with amusement. "Where did you come from?" I turned just enough to give her an inquisitive look before folding my arms across my chest and leaning back again. "I mean, were you like this before the outbreak? In high school."

I was quiet for a second, trying to figure out whether or not she was going to take this in the direction I didn't want it to go. At least she was talking to me. It was fairly new for her to recover so quickly after getting annoyed. Usually it made her avoid me for a while. "Was I like what?"

"I don't know," she started unsurely. "Would you have argued with me like you do now? You used to take so much shit."

"How much do I take now?"

"You pick and choose." She shrugged. "I mean, you were always mysterious, but now it's like you do it on purpose."

That idea was so absurd it made me laugh. "I'm not mysterious, and I definitely don't do it on purpose."

"But you are," she argued thoughtfully, almost sounding like she was talking to herself now more than me. "Back then it was because I barely knew you, but now it's like…" she paused to think, during which her head turned briefly toward me. "There's this dichotomy about you. And sometimes I feel like I know you. You feel so familiar, but then I think about it, and I really don't know you. I never knew you."

My eyebrows furrowed, and I glanced over at her with an amused smirk. "Did you just use the word 'dichotomy'?" She nodded searchingly. "I'm a little surprised you know what that means."

"Don't be a dick," she said with an involuntarily tickled curl of her lips.

"Dichotomy," I repeated after my amusement faded. She *was* taking this

where I didn't want it to go, toward Hayden. So I avoided addressing the fact that she didn't know much about me. Most things from after the outbreak, except for what I'd already told her, she probably didn't want to know, and the things from before *I* didn't want her to know. Not yet. "That's funny coming from you. You're more confusing than I am."

"I didn't say you were confusing," she replied seriously. "I said mysterious. I don't know what drives you."

"Sure you do," I countered.

She rotated to lean her shoulder sideways against the trunk, and her eyes scanned me searchingly until she realized what I was implying. "That's not what I meant. I meant drives, as in what makes you who you are." I refrained from replying, instead offering a single shrug to let her know I didn't have an answer. "Since you mentioned it though," she continued when she was sure I wouldn't say anything. "You want to know why your feelings for me makes you mysterious too?" When I nodded she raised one hand to tap my chin indicatively. "I can't figure out if this is what drives Echo, or Hayden." That put an instant and sinking heat into my gut, and I pulled my face away from her hand. "You might think I'm hot and cold, but you," and she poked my vest, "You're two different people entirely."

"There's only one of me," I said, glaring at her coldly. "Just Echo." She hummed with disbelief, which succeeded in making me angry. She knew I didn't like it when she brought this up, and she did it anyway. "Hayden's dead, and this drives Echo." I grabbed the neckline of her vest and pulled her closer to me so I could whisper hotly, "Want to know why you should believe that?" This time she hummed with interest. "Because if Hayden was still around, you'd have broken her heart by now."

When I said that Genevieve's face fell, she looked so disappointed, and I let go of her to pull away with surprise. Her expression hurt me because there was something more behind it. Something telling. "If that's why you're doing this," I started, scanning her face and trying not to let her see that part of me was panicking. "If you're sleeping with me because you're trying to bring her back," but it made me so upset that I pushed her

shoulders angrily, "Then fuck off."

She opened her mouth to say something, looking more shocked than I felt, but nothing came out, and I was already walking away. I strode to the fence, staring at Fort Mayor behind it and reluctant to let her see the wounded fury on my face. That new reason made almost as much sense as revenge. This wasn't the first time she'd brought up Hayden, and she'd told me before she thought that part of me still existed. Maybe she was doing it for both reasons, and that was worse than only one because just maybe she did have the power to bring Hayden back, and then she'd get her revenge because the way she constantly treated me would be devastating.

"That's not-" Genevieve said, but after a pause she didn't finish. She didn't want to lie to me. I risked a glance back at her, only to find that she looked completely confused. "That never crossed my mind." I didn't know how to respond – it might not have crossed her mind, but she didn't deny it – so I just stood there without saying anything. Eventually she asked, "Would it be the worst thing for you to admit she's still in there?"

I released a sigh that came out a half-frustrated groan. "If by some odd miracle I could even still convincingly *act* like the girl you used to know, would you want to be with me then?"

Her gaze fell away from mine, alerting me like it always did to the fact that she wouldn't give me a real answer. "I don't know." That's why it was a surprise when a moment later she added decidedly, "Probably not."

Like I had earlier, and even if I was still aggravated, I figured now was the time to give up. I had to keep picking my battles. All this conversation did was hurt, and it wasn't going to get me anywhere. There was no progress to be had. To shift things away from it I trudged to the backpack I'd dropped a few feet away, and pulled out the new pack of cigarettes I'd grabbed while getting Genevieve's gloves. She looked surprised when I didn't respond to her last statement, but when I offered her a cigarette she took one with a knowing and grateful smile.

"What are you afraid of, if not of me?" I asked, rejoining her at the tree and leaning against it once more. "What's your biggest fear?"

"Well, I'm not afraid of dying," she began to list. "To be honest, sometimes I think it might be easier than this." At that I looked at her concernedly, and reading the expression on my face she chuckled. "I'm not suicidal. I'm just saying." Then she shrugged. "I guess my biggest fear is being alone." I nodded, and she turned toward me with intense curiosity. "What's yours?"

I smiled at her enthusiasm. "Why do you look so incredibly interested all of a sudden?"

"Part of the mystery," she answered readily. "You've been alone, so that's not it. You lived with raiders, and I'm sure you've stared death in the face more times than I know of. You can't be afraid of dying. You had-" Genevieve hesitated for a moment before continuing cautiously, "Valerie… and your family, and now me. You're not afraid of loss or love. So what is it?"

I took in a breath of smoke, and let it out before telling her honestly, "Getting bit." To try and lighten the mood a little I added teasingly, "Or being psychoanalyzed."

Genevieve gave an almost apologetic chuckle, and then cocked her head at me. "You never act scared around Ferals."

"Doesn't mean I don't feel it," I replied simply.

"Why is that your biggest fear?"

"We don't know what happens once the Feral takes over," I told her. "When I was with the raiders, I did everything I thought I could not to kill. But what if when you get bit, you're still in there, only you can't stop it? What if you see and feel it every time?" I knew what severe guilt felt like. I couldn't imagine being stuck in my own body, having nothing but a remorse that increased with every uncontrollable kill.

A look of obvious concern washed over Genevieve's face when that thought caused me to shudder. "I won't ever let you get bit," she said sincerely.

"Clearly," I laughed, holding my arms out to motion to the full riot suit I was being forced to wear, but even as I said it I gave a grateful smile.

Genevieve shook her head seriously. "I couldn't even let it happen when I hated you."

This time I cocked my head. "Why do you say that like it's past tense?"

"It's not," she stammered defensively, "I just meant when I, you know, hated you with fiery passion."

"What kind of passion is it now?" I asked with amusement, tossing my cigarette butt into the snow. "Luke warm?"

I wasn't offended, and my question hadn't been terse or bitter, but Genevieve got suddenly grave. Her eyes refused to meet mine, and she shrugged and spoke in an almost reluctant murmur. "No passion."

"Just mild pleasure," I offered teasingly.

Her brown eyes finally looked into mine, and with an emotion I could only perplexingly pinpoint as sadness, she nodded. "Something like that."

Given her mood, I wasn't necessarily sure how to respond. She was being so unpredictable. So I did what usually came to mind. Changed the subject. "How should we pass the time?" One eyebrow and one corner of Genevieve's mouth twitched with uncertainty. "Want to make out?"

"For the love of God," she huffed instantly.

"Kidding!" I confessed hastily so she wouldn't get furious, though I couldn't help it that I was poorly holding back my laughter. "Geez, you're so sensitive. You'd think you're the one getting your emotions toyed with."

"Echo, I swear-"

"Yeah, yeah, alright," I interrupted, attempting to appease her. She seemed wound so tight lately, and I was beginning to notice that it was especially whenever I mentioned us. It was only okay when she wanted

especially whenever I mentioned us. It was only okay when she wanted it, and God forbid I even bring it up mid-act. "Sorry."

"Just," she gave a light sigh. I was a little surprised she was even dwelling on it, but when she spoke again she sounded pleading. "Stop treating it like a joke."

That made me feel unexpectedly bad, and when she shifted to lean back against the tree I moved in front of her. "Is that what you think you are to me?" Even though I wanted to, I kept from taking her face in my hands because I knew she'd just pull away. "A joke?"

"No." Even though I'd moved in front of her she refused to look at me. The snow at our feet was where she'd focused her gaze. "But you never take it seriously when I don't want to talk about something. Like I don't have a reason."

She was being so sincere. And not only that, but whether she'd meant to or not, she'd just expressed a feeling about our relationship. Discomfort or torment, I wasn't sure which, but neither could have been easy, and it was a feeling other than hatred. Nor had she told me what those reasons might be, but either way, the fact that she'd done it was more progress than I could've predicted I'd make tonight. Picking my battles was working. However, receiving meant giving. That's how relationships worked, and that's what I wanted.

"Genevieve," I said softly, and paused to wait until she'd look at me. Eventually she did, and there was such a vague sense pain in her dark brown eyes that I genuinely wanted her to understand. "Me joking around isn't the same as not taking you seriously. That's just me…" Receiving meant revealing a vulnerability of my own. "Coping." A twinge played across her eyebrows when I said that, and a look came into her eyes similar to when I told she'd have broken Hayden's heart. "I'll try to be more restrained," I assured her, desperate to eliminate any kind of distress I caused.

It seemed like she did understand, because as if she really cared she asked, "How will you cope instead?"

"I don't know," I said with a shrug, and even though I'd just told her I'd try not to joke around as much, it was a habit that was tougher to break than I thought. "Check you out more often when you aren't looking." It was such a relief when she chuckled that I kept babbling. "Or, you know, more than one orgasm every once in a while would definitely make coping easier." I was expecting one of two reactions when that slipped out of my mouth. Either Genevieve would get mad, tell me how that wasn't restraint, and do something like shove me, or she'd find it amusing, maybe even playfully tell me off.

It was a surprise when she squinted at me with shocked curiosity. "Can you do that?"

I snorted with laughter, almost buckling over because I was so pleasantly amused by her reaction. Then, when I realized she was serious, I had to clear my throat to force it away. Still, there was a final, hiccupped giggle before I could answer. "How bad do you want to know?"

By the sly smirk that turned up both corners of Genevieve's mouth, I was almost convinced she might seriously give in to my flirting. Needless to say, I was disappointed when it was her turn to laugh. "You think you're so suave." Though she did it lightly, I was so unprepared for it that it was even more of a surprise when she smacked my face. "And you're lucky that caught me off guard." Unpredictable. She'd gone from upset to playful again in a matter of seconds.

Before I could say anything her eyes dropped to my lips. I could see the thought reflected in her eyes. She wanted me. Plus, she was always so good at turning these things around on me that I wanted to win this round. "You're dying to know," I observed.

"Don't tell me," she countered, and she had a proud smirk on her face when she leaned forward to whisper in my ear, "I think I might find out for myself."

She was only flirting with me like that to be a pain in the ass, but when she said that I blurted unintentionally, "When?" Genevieve gave a smug shrug of her shoulders as she walked away to look down the length of fence toward the truck. "No. Dammit, Genevieve." Now every time she

fence toward the truck. "No. Dammit, Genevieve." Now every time she kissed me I'd be wondering. Every time she touched me I'd be hoping it would continue. I couldn't handle the tension that came with that kind of uncertainty. "God," I groaned at her back, "That's already torture." So much for winning this round.

Her shoulders were shaking with entertained laughter. "Seriously, Echo, you brought that on yourself."

I pouted at her disappointedly. "Tease."

"Flirt." After staring into the distance she turned back toward me. "Teach me how to blow smoke rings?"

I squinted at her suspiciously. "Why?"

"It'll be better for both of us than you fidgeting or trying to flirt with me," she answered. In order to be more restrained, I held back a comment about her blatantly flirting with me. Instead I pulled the pack of cigarettes from my bag, and while she reached for the one I was offering she asked, "Did Valerie teach you?"

"Why couldn't I have known before the outbreak?" I tried to maintain a playful tone, but I never could predict the tone our conversations would take when Genevieve started in certain directions.

My question made her laugh, and she shook her head, entirely unconvinced. "There's absolutely no way you could make me believe that."

She was right, and I chuckled to let her know that. "A guy named Halsten."

"One of your raider buddies," she predicted knowingly, but there was an underlying scorn to her tone. It made me not want to talk to her anymore.

"They weren't all bad people," I told her defensively, and she practically rolled her eyes. Her playfulness was gone again.

I'd been as lighthearted as I could, and it was clear that both of us were

trying so hard to make our nonphysical relationship as smooth as possible. But there was the Hayden thing, and then her being sincere, and then being snide about the smoke rings when she'd specifically asked me to teach her. She was all over the place. I could only take so much at a time, and I was reaching my limit.

"It's not just black and white," I continued. This was a battle I wouldn't give up on, because there were people like Valerie and Halsten who deserved better than what Genevieve thought. "You don't know, and you don't get to judge because you weren't there. Yeah, Halsten was a raider buddy. And you know what? He was there for me."

Her mouth set in a thin line. Emotionally, this had been a strange night for both us so far, and it seemed she was reaching her limit too. "You left him behind."

"For you," I growled.

"Because you were scared they'd kill you," she corrected callously.

"No," I huffed, growing more and more aggravated. At least we were clearing the air. I'd always been honest with her about my intentions, but now I was laying it all out. "Because you saved me, after I took something you loved." When I said that her face twisted with agony. "I tried to stop bringing it up because it made you so angry. But why do you think I stuck around before my feelings for you ever came back?" She didn't answer, but even though I could tell she knew, I supplied it in words. "To make it up to you."

Genevieve stressfully massaged her fingers over her eyes, letting out a distant sigh. "Why are we *still* talking about this?" She was trying so hard to shut me out. I could see it all over her face.

"You think I'm a mystery," I answered gently. "Because you think I'm joking when I say that you're what drives me, and I'm trying to help you understand."

She was done. She dropped down into the snow and propped her back up against a tree. She pulled up her knees, folded her arms across them,

and buried her face so she wouldn't have to look at me. However, now that I'd started I couldn't finish until I'd made my point.

"Surviving is so easy now that I'm not alone, and not with raiders. It's almost boring." I knelt down in front of her, hoping she'd look me in the eyes and see that I was exposing myself. "I don't care about the camp, or this base, or a damn cure." I wouldn't tell her I loved her when she asked. To be honest, I wasn't even sure I knew what love was anymore – this was never what I had in mind. I wasn't even sure if the love I had to give was worth it, if it would mean anything to her coming from a murderer. This was the best answer I had. "I wish I had another purpose, another motivation, Genevieve, but you're all I've got."

"Stop," she mumbled into her arms. "I don't care."

"Maybe not," I consented. "But you know what it's like living for someone else. I see you do it every day, because you do care about camp, and this base, and a cure." Before continuing I reached around her arms to place one hand under her chin, forcing it up to make her look at me, to make her see the sincerity on my face. "You can play with my emotions, you can get mad and be mean, but don't discredit the things I'd sacrifice for you." I hadn't meant to get emotional, but now, especially since it looked like I'd reached her, I couldn't keep from sniffling. "You don't have to tell me what its worth to you, but sacrifice is the only valuable thing I have left to give. Please don't act like it's worth nothing."

"Echo," Genevieve whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut tight while taking in a deep breath, and then refused to open them again. Like she couldn't say what she wanted if she was looking at me. "No matter how much I might hate you, it's worth something."

"LT!" called a deep voice from somewhere in the dark, searching but not afraid.

It sounded like Lee, and normally Genevieve would've pushed me away, afraid of being seen so close even if I was only on my knees in front of her. This time she let out a lengthy breath, and rubbed her fingers into the furrowed creases of her forehead. I almost wanted to ask if she was

okay. It had been clear how stressed she was about this mission since the beginning. And with the ways she'd been treating me fluctuating more than normal, maybe she was losing her mind. Already snapping under the pressure.

"You're really confusing," I told her instead, not wanting to push her too far and change that she was being sincere again.

"LT?" This time it sounded like Hunt.

Genevieve gave me the smallest of conciliatory smiles. "I wish I didn't have to be." Then she called in the direction of the soldiers, "Over here."

She stood, pulling her flashlight out of a pocket of her riot suit and clicking it on in the direction of the voices so they could locate us. I straightened up too, and a few seconds after the crunch of boots in the snow became audible Hunt and Lee appeared in the beam of Genevieve's light.

"Harvey says he's done," Lee informed her.

That put a smile on her face. We were one step closer to bringing the civilians here. "Perfect." At a beckoning wave I grabbed my backpack and followed Genevieve to the truck with Hunt and Lee. The moment she saw Harvey she asked, "Is it working?"

"Not yet," he answered, hurling what remained of the electrical wire onto the bed of the truck. "When the sun comes up tomorrow and hits the solar panels it should go live."

"And the batteries will store power?" In response to his nod she gave him a grateful pat on the back. "Alright, let's pack it up."

After gathering the remaining supplies and loading them back onto the truck, Genevieve and I got into the cab. She followed a dirt trail to the road, and then the road to the gate, where Blake and Jarvis got out to open it up. The main entrance couldn't be electrified, so after Bravo had finished fixing the broken spots of fence Genevieve had them line the gate with barbed wire. There wasn't much else I could think of yet to

make our defense much better.

While Blake and Jarvis heaved open the gate my eyes wandered toward the nearest building, of which we'd been sleeping on the roof come daybreak. I'd only been looking so I could scan the building next to it, curious about what type it was now that we'd start clearing them. However, it wasn't the adjacent edifice that caught my eye. It was something between the two. Through the dark it was too hard to make out anything revealing – male, female; feral, uninfected. There was no way I could tell. Almost like a still black specter, it was just standing there, peering from behind the corner of our building. I leaned forward in the cab, squinting to try and get a better glimpse through the windshield, but it didn't help.

"What's the matter?" Genevieve asked, starting the truck forward through the open gate.

The question tore my focus away, and I glanced over at her. It couldn't have been a Feral, or else it wouldn't have just been standing there. But Second Platoon had done a recon without spotting any sign of survivors or raiders. Plus, Bravo had to be almost done locking up all the buildings on the base. They'd been at it for the last night and a half. There was nowhere an uninfected could have come from. When my gaze darted back out the windshield, searching for the figure I'd seen, it was gone. My eyes had to have been playing tricks on me, bending shadows for some entertainment.

I shook my head. Genevieve would probably take it more seriously than I did, even if I was wrong, and the last thing I wanted to do was add to her stress. "Nothing."

Genevieve pulled the truck up to the curb outside our building, and while we got out of the cab the rest of the soldiers jumped off the bed. It wouldn't be long until daybreak now, so instead of going out to look for Bravo we trudged up to the roof to wait for their return. Tomorrow night we'd start clearing Fort Mayor of Ferals, and I strode to the edge of the roof to stare out over the expanse of base. But as I got there I saw it again, disappearing around the corner of another building. It was only a fleeting glimpse of a running foot I saw this time. Or that's what I thought

fleeting glimpse of a running foot I saw this time. Or that's what I thought it was. It just as easily could've been a small animal, but at the back of my mind, I was growing skeptical.

Rarity of Truth

Haunt by Bastille

Rarity of Truth

Genevieve

"What do you think we should do then?" asked Blake. "Split Alpha and Bravo, and clear two buildings at a time?"

I nodded side to side in slight agreement. Most of the base had a suburban composition, with houses and one or two story offices making up a majority of it. Splitting up would definitely get the job done faster in those cases, but I couldn't shake the fear that Ferals *everywhere* might be grouping. Then there were the barracks, a hotel, and a medical complex that was almost the size of a small hospital. For the medical complex there was no way we could split up, the space and possibilities were too large.

"I think we can split for these areas," I told him, holding my flashlight out and pointing to the large map Bravo had found last night. My finger circled around the homes and offices. "For the barracks and hotel, what do you think about a wake and shoot?"

"A wake and shoot," Blake repeated with pleased laughter. "We haven't done that in a while."

"What is it?" Echo asked, leaning over to look more closely at the map, as if that would give her some indication.

"With barracks and hotels, there's always a lot of doors in one hall," I started to explain, and Echo nodded knowingly. "So first we check any room with an open door, usually that's where we'll find Ferals. Afterward, we go down the hall, pounding on one door at a time to wake up any Ferals inside. If there's Ferals, mark it, come back once they stop pounding on the door enough to open it, they come bottleneck at the door on the way out, and we shoot them."

on the way out, and we shoot them."

She grinned, giving one satisfied nod. "I like it."

"We'll do the medical complex last," I finished. "Together."

Blake glanced past Echo and I to the rest of the soldiers lounging around on the roof. "What about Harvey?"

I followed his gaze while I took a minute to think about it. "He knows how to use a gun. We can't afford to let anyone sit out right now." I looked at both Blake and Echo to check if they agreed. Seeing that they did, I gave a long, high-pitched whistle to signal that I wanted everyone's attention.

"Here's how we're going to do this," I said as all my soldiers moved closer. "Tonight we'll do as many houses and small offices as we can. Alpha and Bravo are splitting up. Bravo, if you come across a group of Ferals that outnumbers you, leave if you can and remember where, we'll do it together." I paused, waiting to see some nods of acknowledgment before continuing. "Alpha, before the houses we're going to clear one of the barracks with a wake and shoot. I don't know about you guys, but I could go for sleeping on a bed in the morning." Everyone appeared excited about that.

"Last but not least," I concluded. "Keep an eye out for a radio, if the parts are small enough bring it back with you." Again there were nods from my troops. "Grab all your stuff. Let's go."

Once I'd finished I folded up the map and shoved it into my backpack. As I did I noticed Echo tugging at the neckline of her vest, though she didn't gripe about it out loud. She even stopped pulling at it completely when she realized I noticed, giving me a small smile instead of complaining.

It was a short trek to the nearest set of barracks. The building was only two stories and the stairs were on the outside, with only a couple entrances leading to an indoor setup that I imagined was similar to college dorm rooms. There was an identical building right beside this one, but for now all we needed was one.

The main entrance to the first floor of the building was a set of heavy

The main entrance to the first floor of the building was a set of heavy metal doors, each with a single window set near the top. Bravo had secured it with a lock and painted the code on it just like I told them to. Being at the head of the group, I twisted in the code and removed the chain, tossing it over my shoulder so we could take it in and secure the doors from the inside. However, when I pulled on one of the door handles, it wouldn't budge. They were locked.

I briefly glanced down the length of the building, trying to come up with a solution when my eyes landed on Echo. Normally I'd have had one of the guys kick it in, which always caused more of a racket than I liked. I'd completely forgotten Echo was always prepared for something like this.

"Still got your bobby pins?" I asked her, motioning toward the keyhole.

That was all the prompt she needed to pull the pieces out of her bracelet and kneel down in front of the door. "Keep your light on it for me."

Doing as she requested, I aimed the beam of my flashlight toward the lock, watching while she stuck her bobby pins into it. It was completely lost on me what exactly she was doing. One hand moved while the other twisted, one pushed up while the other pulled, but she was made for finesse like this. Her delicate fingers were dexterous but firm, never doubting for a second she knew what she was doing. And she did this cute thing when she was so intently focused where the tip of her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth. I'd never noticed that before.

There was a soft click as Echo used the pins to twist the lock, and she pulled one out to use that hand to turn the handle. She moved to my side while she held the door open, and at my signal the rest of Alpha squad filed into the building ahead of us. I strode in after them and turned to chain the doors from the inside, but Echo hadn't moved. She was just standing there, staring off into the darkness as though something had captured her attention.

"Psst," I whispered. She moved forward and into the building, refusing to remove her eyes until the door blocked her vision. "Here." I reached into my backpack and pulled out a can of spray paint, watching her thoughtfully and trying to figure out what she was thinking. "Two-two-four-

seven." She finally glanced at the lock I had draped over my shoulder, and when I curled it tight around the handles she used the paint to re-mark the code on the inside of the door.

Fortunately, the building was straightforward. There were two rooms on either side of this short main hall, which intersected one other long hall with twenty doors in each direction. Not a single Feral was to be found on a simple walkthrough of the first floor, so we trudged up the stairs at the end of one hall to the second. There weren't any up here, and neither were any of the unit doors open.

When we reached the first floor again we went back to the first room near the main entrance. There, I slammed the butt of my rifle hard against the door. We were all tensely silent, waiting to see if any noises would come from the other side. I hit the door one more time, and when there wasn't a sound we moved on to the next one. We got through the entire first floor without a single Feral. It wasn't until we were halfway done with the second that my pounding resulted in a snarl.

"Mark it," I told Echo, because she still had the can of paint.

While she drew an 'x' on the door we finished the rest of the floor. It was just that room that had an unknown number of Ferals in it. Returning to it after our search I gripped the handle, not too surprised when I found it was locked.

I nodded for Echo take my place. "Work your magic."

She undid this lock with greater ease than she had the first one, but instead of opening it right away she stored her bobby pins back in her bracelet. I stuck my arm straight out, signaling to my soldiers to form a row in front of the door. They all stood directly across from it, each shining their lights on it with one hand while gripping their knives tight in the other, prepared for combat. I grabbed the handle once more, and at the same time I threw it open I let out a loud whistle.

The sound was met with the expected snarl, but when the Ferals came rushing out there was only one. Hunt shot forward without hesitation, dispatching the creature with a single plunge of his knife. After that we all

dispatching the creature with a single plunge of his knife. After that we all just looked back and forth at each other, unsure of whether or not to believe it was that easy. No others came sprinting out, so I motioned my troops in to check the rest of the unit. That was the only Feral in the entire building. It had probably recently got itself locked in, and it's group had wandered off.

"Alright," I said aloud, unconcerned with my volume seeing as we were almost certain the building was secure. "Clear the rest of the rooms and then we'll move on. We'll scavenge later."

"Ma'am?" Jarvis prompted, and I raised my eyebrows at him questioningly. "Do you want us to kick the doors in?" It kept slipping my mind that most of these units might be locked. In response to his question I passed Echo a pleadingly toothy grin.

The moment she recognized the request behind my smile she glanced up and down the hall we were standing in, taking in the number of doors. Then she looked back at me with disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

I offered a shrug and a slightly apologetic smile. "It'd be nice if we didn't have to break them."

All she did was sigh and start trudging back down the stairs to the very first door. Every time she finished unlocking a door, however, the room before that had already been cleared. She couldn't unlock them as fast as we could clear them, and after ten doors I could tell she was getting sick of it.

"Guys," I said to my soldiers, not wanting Echo to feel too much pressure. "Wait here, get something to eat while Echo does the rest of the locks."

They all nodded, and I followed Echo across the intersection to the last half of this floor. "Thank you," she sighed, kneeling down at this door instead of squatting because her legs must've been getting tired.

"Take your time," I told her, folding my arms across my chest and leaning back against the wall while she focused on the lock. She was sticking her tongue out again, and I didn't mind observing this newfound quirk.

Eventually she'd undone every lock on this floor, and I followed her up to the second story. When she dropped down in front of the door, however, she just plopped back on her butt and laughed, "My hands haven't been this cramped since our essay writing days."

"I'm surprised you got this far without stopping," I admitted with a chuckle, reaching down to take the bobby pins from her. I examined them for a minute before suggesting, "Teach me?" Learning wouldn't just give her a needed break, but it also seemed like this was a valuable skill to have.

Echo watched me silently for a few seconds, almost as if she was trying to decipher my intentions. "Sure," she agreed eventually, moving out of the way so I could kneel down.

In position, I stuck both halves of the bobby pin into the keyhole like I'd seen her do a dozen times already, but after that I was lost. "Now what?"

She pushed herself up to shine her flashlight at the door, and scooted herself to my side. "You want to give this one some tension," she instructed, setting her hand on mine and showing me the right amount to pull. "On the inside, there's pins, so with this one," and she pointed to my other hand before sitting back on her heels, "You have to push them up one by one."

I nodded, and while keeping tension on the bobby pin in my left hand I felt around with the one in my right. It took me all of two minutes before I gave up. No matter how much I searched I couldn't even locate the pins she was talking about on the inside.

"Help," I pleaded. "I can't feel the pins."

Echo laughed and moved closer again. This time she reached beneath my arms to set her hand under mine. But she didn't just rest it there. In order to direct the grip of my index finger and thumb with her own she had to get her other fingers out of the way. So she slipped the remaining three right between mine, and for some reason I gulped.

"Okay," she whispered thoughtfully, using her fingers to guide mine, directing the bobby pin around the lock. "There," she said happily,

moving my grip up and down. "Feel how it shifts, that's a pin. There are six in here." She glanced over at me to make sure I was following along. Her face was so close to mine. "Keep playing with it until," she mumbled, continuing to adjust my fingers until the pin froze and the tension I was putting on the other bobby pin shifted, "That happens."

She looked over again to see if I understood, but I was stuck staring at her. It had been so long since I'd been with her, so long since I'd done anything but kissed her. I was craving it, had started craving it again after the way she touched me the night we got the riot suits. I could easily do it now. Take her lips with my own. Push her down the hall to the last room we'd opened. I could make it so quick nobody would question how long we were gone. Wrong. So wrong.

"Am I too close?" Echo asked quietly. Those gray eyes kept running over my face like she couldn't figure out exactly what I was thinking, but I could tell she was trying to be restrained by not flirting.

I felt myself give a slow, uncontrollable shake of the head, but the very next moment my mouth came to the rescue, and I blurted, "Yes."

Without a single protest Echo removed her hand from mine, but there was a visible disappointment as she plopped her back against the wall beside the door. "If I had to sum our relationship up into a reaction," she said with a humorless chuckle, "That would be it." I didn't say anything, using the lock as a distraction to try and force myself into control. "Your body says one thing," she continued to herself, "And your mouth says the complete opposite. Which one will Genevieve act on tonight?" I turned my eyes on her, about to plead with her to let it go. She could see it on my face, and she threw her hands up in surrender. "Shutting up."

I immediately focused all my attention on the bobby pins in my hands. It was so consuming that I started to grow frustrated when I failed to make any progress. Five minutes later I sighed and dropped my tired arms.

"I can't," I groaned. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"You're great with your hands," Echo said with a hint of teasing in her tone. "But you aren't exactly accustomed to being gentle." I resented that

tone. "But you aren't exactly accustomed to being gentle." I resented that, especially because it was quite clear by the depth of her laugh line that she wasn't just talking about lock picking. "You're forcing it."

"I'm not forcing it," I grumbled.

Finding determination in the desire to prove her wrong, I raised my arms to the door again and reinserted the bobby pins. But I was terrible at this. I had none of her artistry… Or her patience. The more I tried, the more I failed. The more I failed, the more frustrated I got and the harder I jerked at the lock.

Another five minutes later Echo repeated boredly, "You're forcing it."

"I'm not-" I yanked the bobby pins out and fell back onto my heels, taking a deep breath to keep from fuming. What I wasn't accustomed to was failure. "I'm done. I'll try again later."

I gave the bobby pins back to Echo, and we switched places so she could jimmy it. It took her less than a minute to get the door open. She made it look so easy, and I couldn't help but give her a cranky scowl as she moved on to the next one. A few of the rooms had already been unlocked, and after Echo undid the rest we went back down stairs to begin double-checking the units for Ferals. Easy was an understatement when it came to clearing this building.

On our way out I secured the chain once more around the outside of the door, and we moved on to begin clearing houses and small offices. The cold winter, lack of food, or Ferals grouping somewhere else made our job simple, and the most exciting detail of the night was that we found an old ham radio in a closet of one of the offices. As sunset neared we carried it back to the barracks in pieces. I had Hatfield, who was good with communications tech, put it back together while Harvey worked his magic with the electrical supplies. With every one of my soldiers sitting around the empty room we'd set it in, Hatfield dialed in camp's frequency.

"All set, ma'am," she told me once the crackle of static started coming through the speaker, and she handed me the microphone.

"Thanks." I waited until all eyes were on me to speak into the radio. "Hey, Sam, I

¨Thanks,¨ I said gratefully, and then spoke into the radio, ¨Home Squad, this is First Platoon. Come in Home Squad. Do you copy?"

The static continued for a second as I waited to see if anyone could hear us. "Reading you five, ma'am," came the response. "Standby for Cap."

It took a few minutes for whoever was on the other side to find Cap, but eventually he arrived, and I could hear the smile in his voice when he greeted, "Genevieve. Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, Old Man," I replied, comforted by how relaxed he sounded. "Just checking in. Fence is up and running. Supplies and ammunition good. Roger so far?"

"Roger."

My mood fell when I realized the part I had to tell him next. Casualties. "Sir, we lost Stackhouse. Over."

There was a pause, during which the soldiers around me fell so silent that the only noise was the soft static of the radio. "Copy that," said Cap's voice, but he didn't sound as upset as I'd predicted, and a moment later I found out why. "Tripton found a doctor." At that there were murmurs from the soldiers in the room, it lifted the mood instantly, and I almost didn't believe my ears. Tripton was the man who'd volunteered to search the country for a doctor that might be able to develop a cure. Years later, and he'd finally done it. "In San Diego, California. I sent half of Second Platoon. They're going to bring him to you. Over."

From the resulting noises amongst my platoon, I could tell they were excited about it. "Roger." But I couldn't say the same for myself. The camp was already compromised enough with us gone for so long, and now he'd sent more soldiers away, leaving it even more vulnerable. I didn't like it, and I would've told him that if it weren't for the fact that all my troops were sitting around. "Over and out."

While my soldiers filtered out of the room to go to the units they'd picked for themselves, I turned off the radio. Once they were gone it was only Echo and Blake that remained, both of who looked tired.

"Goodnight, ladies," Blake mumbled, pushing himself off the floor and giving my back an affectionate pat on his way out.

"Sleep tight," I said after him, and when he disappeared out the door I dropped my head onto the table the radio was on.

It got so quiet that I'd almost forgotten Echo was still here, until she said, "Camp will be okay." I lifted my head to look at her, surprised that she knew exactly what I was thinking. "I could see it on your face," she explained, "When Cap told you about Second."

I smiled gratefully for the attempt at comfort, but I just didn't want to think about it any more. All it would do is cause stress, and it was done. There was nothing I could do to change it. So I motioned to Echo that we could leave, and I followed her down the hall to our separate rooms. We reached her door first, however, and then I couldn't bring myself to pass it. She walked right in, pulling off her bulletproof vest before she'd even crossed the threshold and tossing it to the floor.

"Do you think that doctor will be able to make a cure?" she asked, glancing back at me because I was standing in the doorway.

The craving was back, and as she stripped away the riot gear it grew with each discarded article. "Maybe," I answered with a shrug. "I hope so." Eventually Echo was down to her usual cargo pants and shirt, and as she sat on the edge of the bed to take off her boots, I closed her door from the inside. We were finally alone.

When she heard it click shut she glanced up from untying her laces. "Are you sleeping in here?"

I shook my head. I still had my hand on the doorknob, and I was trying so hard to convince myself to open it back up and walk out. But what I just realized was that Echo was becoming an addiction in every way. My grip on the handle kept tightening as I told myself that I shouldn't be doing this. Then I felt the itch of withdrawal, and it loosened back up as I rationalized that I could walk away if I really wanted to. Only, I didn't have to walk away because this would be the last time, and next time I'd have the strength to resist. But just this one last time.

the strength to resist. But just this one last time.

I could tell by the look on Echo's face that once more she knew exactly what I wanted. "What are you waiting for?" she asked, using each foot to kick the boot off the other.

My grip tightened again hopefully. "For you to say no." But I could see that she wouldn't, and my hand dropped from the doorknob completely. I took a step toward her, followed by another, and another.

"You can't even say no to yourself," she answered, gaze locked on mine as I reached her. "How can you expect me to?"

There was no verbal answer for that. All I had to offer in response was setting one hand on her shoulder, giving her a push to lay her down. My fingers had become expert at working the button of her cargos. They knew which way to twist and with how much pressure so well that all it really took was a flick of my wrist. As I slid the zipper down I climbed onto the bed, setting one knee on each side of her to sit over her hips.

I had no control anymore. It didn't cross my mind again that I shouldn't be doing this. I wasn't thinking about how I'd feel afterward because right now it didn't matter. All that mattered was the fix. All that mattered was the gratifying moment I slid my hand down her pants, and that she closed her eyes and took in a relieved breath because I finally touched her.

When her eyes opened again they were looking up searchingly, and I watched them land on a pillow. The moment she reached for it I leaned forward, and grabbed her wrist with my free hand to stop her. The sounds she made were becoming as necessary as the rest of it. If this was going to be the last time then it had to be completely satisfying.

"Blake's room is right there," she whispered in protest, but she hadn't granted me any noises yet. So I made a long, slow stroke against her favorite spot, and when her eyes fluttered closed again she pursed her lips, stifling the resulting moan into a pleasured squeak.

"Just be a little quieter than normal," I told her, releasing her wrist and straightening back up when I was sure she wouldn't grab the pillow.

She didn't, but it caught me off guard when she pushed herself up to sit, to meet my body with her own. I was still wearing my vest, and her hands instantly set to work undoing it. I continued my motion against her, and through another suppressed noise she breathed, "Take this off."

"Why?"

"If you want me to stay quiet without being silent," she said, pulling my hand out of her pants to raise both my arms. "Then you have to compromise." Out of curiosity I left my arms raised to let her lift the vest over my head, but she didn't stop there. She undid the zipper for the upper half of the long-sleeved suit, pulling my arms out of it until all I had left was my tank top. "I need a distraction."

Her hands slid up my hips and around to my back while her eyes followed, moving up my body until they locked on mine. When I made no immediate signs of protest she pressed against my back to draw me closer, meeting my neck with her lips. It was so new, so incredibly and unexpectedly arousing, that when her mouth opened against the side of my neck I couldn't think to stop her. Nor was it her who made the next pleasured sound, because mixed into the startled breath I let out was an involuntarily throaty moan.

Addiction. This was a high unlike any I'd ever experienced with her. I'd never had a thrill like being so unprepared for the heat of her mouth against my skin. Never felt a rush like when I shoved my hand back between us, and she hummed against my flesh at the return of my touch. I was so lost in the fog that my head tilted back for exposure, and my free hand tangled in her light brown hair. I was so lost in the fog that when her mouth trailed to my chest, and one of her hands boldly came around to work under my shirt, sliding up to massage over the sensitive skin of my breast, all I could think was, *yes*.

With every sound she made my excitement heightened, and with each rise I touched her more lustfully, increasing the desperation of her mouth's hold on me, of her hand's hold on me. It was so intoxicating that I was disappointed when she removed her hand and it joined the other at my back. Even though it was to pull me closer still, to squeeze me tight

against her in order to release all the tension of reaching the end, because the reverberating moan into the crook of my neck just wasn't enough.

It lasted so long, and the whole time I loved that I could feel the slightest grinding of her hips against my hand. Even after it was done she kept her grip around my waist, panting for air against the exposed skin of my chest. But I wanted her to come down from it slow. I wanted this final high to fade, not vanish like every other time. So I leaned back just enough to get her to look at me, and then I kissed her. I felt the lips that had released such a stirring sound, tasted the tongue that had caressed the flesh of my neck, and it was her who ended it, if only because she was still struggling for oxygen.

"You," she began with another breath, her hands absentmindedly running up my back. She had to suck in air in order to speak again. "You never kiss me after."

No. I felt an instant panic. *Fade, not vanish*. Dammit Echo. I reached behind me to remove her hands.

"Shit, no, no, no," she uttered pleadingly. "Don't pull away."

My heart sank. "Oh God." I pushed myself off her and stood. It sank in what I'd just done, again, and I realized that I couldn't have walked away if I wanted to. That this wouldn't be the last time, because that's not how addiction worked. I'd rationalize it every time, like I had now, because my body was working against me. It turned my mind against me so I'd tell myself whatever I needed to make it feel okay, then once it was over I'd remember why it wasn't. And now all I had left was failure, and regret, and self-loathing. "Fucking hell." I hurried for the door.

"Genevieve," she called after me. "Please."

"I hate you." I slammed the door behind me.

I was shaking, my hands trembling as I rushed to my own room. That wasn't a fix. It was an overdose, and now I felt sick. I turned the handle of my door, and when it didn't budge I assumed it was because of how

unsteady I felt. So I did it harder, but it still wouldn't move. There was so much panic in my gut that I grabbed it in both hands, shaking violently, pleading with it to open.

"Dammit!" I growled, slapping my bare palms against the locked door.

As if it wasn't bad enough, Echo poked her head out of her room. She noticed instantly what was happening, and without saying a word she strode over and knelt in front of it. After sticking the bobby pins in, however, she stopped, thought for a second, and then pulled them out.

"Please don't," I begged. "Not right now."

She sighed. "Genev-"

"Just open the fucking door!" I shouted, pounding a hand against it again.

She went through a moment of visible shock, which shifted to fury as she stood. "You don't get to be mad at me for what just happened," she said angrily. "Not one goddamn bit."

"I'm not mad at you!" I said in a loud whisper, desperate to be left alone and realizing that some of the soldiers might hear. "Why can't you see it, Echo? I'm mad at me. Always." I groaned and bumped my forehead against the wall. "I'm mad because I can't stop, and you won't stop me, and it's a mess." I refused to remove my forehead from the wall so she wouldn't see the tears stinging my eyes. "It's all a fucking mess."

"What's a mess?" she asked, and I took a frightened step back when she tried to set a comforting hand on my shoulder.

My head. My heart. I felt sick to my stomach, and the corner of my mouth kept tugging down with misery, but there was an undeniable longing in my chest, and a powerful desire for contact hovering beneath every inch of my flesh. There wasn't a single part of me that didn't feel confused. "I am begging you," I said quietly, blinking away the tears, "To open the door. Please."

She studied me for a minute, appearing like she was trying so hard to

find something to say. Kneeling down once more she undid the lock with ease. She was barely on her feet again before I opened the room and hurried in, but as I tried to close the door on her she put her hand on it to stop me.

"You want to know what I do see?" she asked gently, but she continued before I could respond, "I see you trying so hard to keep me out. And I see you failing." I just stared at her, too afraid of what would come out of my mouth to even try replying. "Tell me I'm wrong." I began closing the door again, but she pushed against it even harder. "I could be good to you, Genevieve," she told me pleadingly. "I try, even now." The pain in her eyes cut me to the bone. "I don't understand why you won't give me a chance."

All I really wanted to do was hug her, and apologize over and over again for how much I was hurting her. Just looking at her, knowing I couldn't walk away but could never give her what she wanted, it was excruciating. So I steeled myself as best as I could. "For being so smart," I began coldly, trying to upset her so she'd deny me next time, but I already felt the steel breaking down. "You can be pretty fucking stupid." And I shoved the door shut.

As I walked deeper into the room a single, heavy thud boomed against the door. It was unexpected enough that I jumped, but I knew immediately after that Echo had hit it out of anger. That was it though. One punch and she must've walked away, because there wasn't another sound, and everything went quiet. In the midst of the silence I dropped face first onto the bed, burying my face into a pillow. A moment ago I felt like crying, but the silence gave me the focus I needed for composure. I forced away everything, every unwanted thought and feeling, and eventually I fell asleep.

It was still a couple hours until sunset when I woke up. The rest of my soldiers were awake too, so we hung out in the community room with the radio to kill time. Some of them had been up on the roof shooting Ferals, but they informed me that there really weren't very many wandering because we had to have successfully locked them all up. Echo didn't come out once, and when it was finally time to leave and continue the mission I had to go to her room to get her.

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I knocked on her door, loud enough so she'd hear me if she'd simply been sleeping the whole time. "Echo." I waited a minute and there was no answer. "We have to start clearing houses again."

A few moments later the door opened, and Echo was completely dressed in her riot suit and ready to go. But her mouth was set in such a consistently emotionless scowl that even her laugh line had disappeared. "Here," she said flatly, and she tossed my bulletproof vest into my arms with more force than necessary. "You left that in here last night." Then she marched past me without saying another word to join the rest of the soldiers in the meeting room.

"Listen up," I said as I followed her in, gaining my troops' attention. "You guys are doing good." I dropped my backpack on the floor to put my vest on while speaking. "We're going out with firearms tonight in split teams of four. Harvey, you'll stick with Datsyuk, Morgan, Hunt, and Lee." I glanced over at Bravo Squads sergeant. "Powers, I'll let you designate your groups. Everyone should be back at the truck at the latest an hour until sunrise. Questions?" Everyone shook their heads. "Let's move out."

While everyone filtered from the room to head to the truck outside, I wandered over to Echo, who'd been sitting on the edge of a desk while I talked. When I reached her, however, she immediately got up and tried to pass me. "Hey," I said, putting my hand on her arm to stop her before she walked away. "Are you mad at me?"

She gave a sarcastic huff of laughter, but then her face grew serious. Her eyes met mine with that dry gaze for a moment before she tried to walk away again, but I tightened my grip. Echo hadn't been mad enough to ignore me since I'd almost let her get bit, and when it wasn't severe she was usually vocal about her anger. What I did last night was nothing compared to almost letting her get bit, but for some reason she was angry enough to want to avoid me.

Just a month ago she was so concerned with getting me to like her that she let me get away with almost anything after letting me know how she felt. I'd hurt her feelings and the next minute she'd be trying to joke

around, trying to make *me* feel better. This time was different, like she was getting tired of it. I just wasn't sure how that would manifest. Didn't know if she'd be aggressive and we'd start fighting again, or if she'd just ignore me forever. It was yet another example of the control I'd lost, but the greater fright to me was that I cared more about her not talking to me than about that loss.

When I didn't let her leave she turned back to me, leaning in to whisper so the remaining soldiers wouldn't hear. "You're a friend to me, you have sex with me, you kiss me like it meant something, you tell me you hate me, and then you insult me and slam a door in my face." She wrenched her arm out of my grip while narrowing her eyes at me. If only she knew how hard it was to treat her like that. "How about you save us both some time and stop asking stupid questions." Then she paced toward the exit.

"Do you want an apology?" I called after her sincerely, fully prepared to offer one if it would earn back favor.

"Another stupid question," she announced as she disappeared out the door.

It was just Blake and Jarvis who were left in the room by now because they were going with Echo and I, and both of them watched her leave before glancing back at me curiously.

"Hell has no fury like a woman scorned," Blake recited knowingly.

I sighed and reached for the backpack on the floor, throwing it over my shoulders. "You have no idea."

"You know, ma'am," Jarvis began candidly, "Echo seems like the type that might enjoy a serenade – sappy love songs and the like. Always worked for my girlfriend."

Blake snickered with amusement, and even though I was trying not to burst into laughter myself I shot him a playful glare. I couldn't tell if Jarvis was joking or being completely serious, but the advice was so completely useless that even though I was trying not to, I let slip a chuckle. "Thank you, Jarvis, for the insight," I said with entertained sarcasm as I started

for the door.

The soldiers were all waiting in the bed of the truck when I reached it. Echo must've felt like driving, because she'd already posted herself in the driver's seat, and when I hopped into the passenger side she fired it up immediately. It was a short drive across the base to the final two neighborhoods, and from there I had the Bravo teams stay put while my two Alpha teams trekked a few streets to the second one.

Echo was silent the whole walk, even while Blake and Jarvis chatted at both of us. By the time we got there I was desperate for her to stop being upset with me. I wasn't sure exactly what to say to her, especially since we weren't alone. So when we got to our first house and found it locked even after removing the chain, I cheerfully prompted her for the bobby pins.

"You're learning how, huh?" Blake asked curiously when I knelt down to try my hand.

I turned my head just enough to give him a smile and a nod. "It's been so useful I figured I should."

"You're rubbing off on her." Clearly trying to cut some of the tension, he playfully bumped his elbow into Echo, who was leaning her shoulder against the side of the house to watch me. "We'll have two criminals on our hands before you know it."

Echo didn't so much as look at him while she said pointedly, "I couldn't have an effect on her if I tried." But that wasn't true, so even though I usually tried to hide it, I swiveled my head to let her see the flash of discouraged emotion it put on my face.

Nobody really spoke after that, but I couldn't complain too much since the silence helped me focus. I still couldn't get anywhere with the lock, and after a few minutes I glanced up at Echo. "Can you help me?" It wasn't just that I needed the help. I could tell she liked being close to me, and in order to make amends I was perfectly comfortable letting her do it even with Blake and Jarvis standing there. It wasn't like all the soldiers didn't know something was going on anyway.

know something was going on anyway.

She held her hand out for the bobby pins. Thinking she'd use them to demonstrate, I gave them to her as I stood. But while she knelt down in my place she mumbled, "Later," and unlocked the door on her own.

I would've been more disappointed about it if it wasn't time for action. "Weapons ready," I announced.

Holding my rifle in one hand I stood off to the side, reaching for the knob with my other. My three teammates raised their weapons, and I swung open the front door. I moved in behind Echo, closing the entrance behind us and pulling out my flashlight. Our beams illuminated a living room straight ahead, sectioned off from the open first floor by two large couches set perpendicular to each other. To our immediate right was a kitchen, and beyond it, in the far corner where I expected to see a dining room, was a grand piano.

There was a set of sliding doors between the piano and the kitchen, but before checking the outside we had to clear the second floor. We moved silently toward the stairs between the piano and living room, and stalked upward. There were two bedrooms and a bathroom, all three of which after a journey through the hall were empty of Ferals. Last was the backyard.

I flipped the latch to unlock it, and then eased one of the sliding doors back as quietly as possible. The grass was so overgrown I could barely see the top of a bench sticking out at the far end, part of the fence had collapsed from years of neglect, and the branches of the tree in the corner had grown so large and heavy that they hung down into the lawn. It was impossible to see from the porch if there were any Ferals in the yard. We'd have to comb it.

The moment we took a step as a group to leave the concrete porch, a bright light illuminated the entire yard. It scared me so bad that my heart started pounding, and by the terrified looks on my companions faces I could tell it had a similar effect on them. Once the shock wore off I searched upward for the source – a pair of solar powered, motion detector floodlights.

All at once thirteen different bodies sprang from the grass, visible only from the waist up. The collective roar was deafening, and it did nothing to calm my already rallied pulse. We began to fire at the same time the large group rushed toward us. I squeezed the trigger, confident enough that I hit my target that I didn't even pause to make sure before moving to the next. The Ferals were closing in fast across the small yard. Only another fifteen feet separated us. My finger tensed again, dropping another one as I shifted my aim, immediately pulling the trigger a third time.

Between the four of us, we'd only managed to hit nine before the distance was closed. I'd set my sights on the closest Feral to me, ready to shoot right before it made a grab, but what I didn't notice as I fired a fourth time was that another Feral was already in mid air lunging at me. It hit me so hard it knocked me off my feet, and the angle it came from sent us sideways into a bucket of gardening tools.

A large pot shattered against my lower back, but it hardly registered against the panic of trying not to get bit. I had one hand wrapped around the Feral's emaciated throat to keep it away while my other hand made a frantic search for the knife at my thigh. Before I could find it, Echo's arm wrapped around the Feral's neck from behind. She yanked it off just enough so the spray of blood wouldn't hit me when she pressed her pistol to its temple and pulled the trigger.

I took her hand when she offered it to help me up, but once I was on my feet there was a sharp pain in the back of my hip. It hurt enough that I whimpered, and even though Echo was still mad at me I draped an arm around her shoulders to take some of the weight off.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly, stowing her pistol and leading me to the wall of the house.

"I think I pulled a muscle," I grunted, setting a hand against the wall when she propped me up against it for support. "I just need a minute."

Echo leaned around me just enough to shine her flashlight over my back, but when she did her eyes widened, and she swiftly got behind me. "Holy

but when she did her eyes widened, and she swiftly got behind me. "Holy shit." When she said that Blake and Jarvis moved behind me too, and one of them sucked in an exaggerated breath through his teeth.

"What?" I asked, beginning to panic all over again.

"Dude," Blake said in an almost amused huff. "There's a chunk of ceramic sticking out of you."

"Shut up," I breathed in disbelief, trying to twist to get a glimpse. It hurt to move like that, but eventually I bent backward enough to see it – two inches of bloodstained ceramic protruding from a seeping wound in the back of my hip. "I'm going to be sick."

"It's not that bad," Echo told me reassuringly. I would've thought she was making it up if she didn't appear so calm when she squatted down to get a closer look.

"Are you sure?" I reached around to feel for the shattered piece of pottery, but the moment my hand brushed it the pain became agonizing. "Fuck me," I growled through the pain, weakly leaning my head against the brick house and trying not to get woozy. "Get it out."

"Okay." Echo set my arm around her shoulders again and helped me limp indoors. She led me to the island in the kitchen with Blake and Jarvis following behind, and there she began to unstrap my bulletproof vest. "We have to take this off." I let her lift it over my head and set it aside, and it seemed with an almost reminiscent pain that she undid the zipper of my riot suit. "You might need stitches after I pull it out," she explained, directing my arms out of the suit. "It'll be easier to take it off now, before the bleeding really starts."

She lowered the suit as far as she could without pulling it down over the jutting piece of ceramic, and then motioned for me to lie on top of the waist high island in the center of the kitchen. I pulled myself onto my stomach to stretch out over it with some difficulty, and once I was in a comfortable spot I plopped down. Echo dropped her backpack onto the floor and turned to search the cupboards in the kitchen.

While she looked for whatever it was she wanted, I glanced at Blake and

While she looked for whatever it was she wanted, I glanced at Blake and Jarvis. "You guys can search the rest of the house for supplies. Try to keep it to critical needs for now."

They looked kind of reluctant to leave, and I chalked it up to them just wanting to see the gore, but after a moment they nodded and strode off. The next second Echo set something on the granite by my ear, and I swiveled my head back her direction to see it was a bottle of vodka. She screwed off the cap and poured some over her hands to clean them, and once she set it back down she gave me an apologetic smile.

"Here we go." I felt her hands set gently near the shard.

"Count to three," I pleaded so I could brace myself for it.

There was an increase of pain as she gripped the piece in her fingers. "One," but the very next second the ceramic was ripped out of my flesh.

I clenched my teeth so I wouldn't yell at her. It was the agony that made me furious, but if I opened my mouth I knew I'd take it out on Echo. I still let out a rumbling groan, but it wasn't over. As if the stabbing wasn't enough, Echo poured the alcohol over it, resulting in a sting that burned so bad I swear I could feel it across my entire back.

"Worst part's over," Echo said, extending the bottle before me so I could take a drink.

I wanted to decline because we weren't done with the night's work, but good lord did I need something to take the edge off. While Echo opened a sealed package she'd got from her backpack, I took a long swig, coughing down the burn and handing the bottle back to her. At least now that the wound was clear the pain faded enough for me to be able to tune the rest out. I'd had stitches before, and I knew I could handle that.

Seeing as we were alone and I wasn't sure if Echo was still mad at me or not, I figured I should try to make conversation while she worked. "How'd you learn to do stitches?" I asked, watching her try to thread the curved needle.

Her gaze passed over the eye of the needle just briefly to focus on me

Her gaze passed over the eye of the needle just briefly to focus on me, and then she went back to trying to fit the thread through. I almost thought she wasn't going to answer me, and even though she did, it was clear she was still upset. "I lived with raiders," she mumbled. "Injuries were common."

It was even clearer how upset she was when she passed the first stroke of the needle through my skin without being as gentle as I knew she could. I winced, biting back a curse. It was only the first stroke that was rough though, as if she was using it to make a point that maybe she didn't want to talk, because the next one was so delicate I hardly felt it.

At the risk of getting aggressively poked again, I asked gently, "Will you accept an apology now?"

"Are you going to act like that again?" she replied readily.

"Probably," I admitted reluctantly, bracing myself for another rough stroke. "If you don't deny me."

"Then no," she answered to my original question.

She didn't make the final stich more painful than it needed to be, and while she reached for a piece of gauze I twisted enough to look at her. "Why are you so upset about it this time?"

"What do you want Genevieve?" She dropped her hands in frustration. "Ninety percent of the time you're mad at me, but now that I'm the one that's mad you can't stand it. Do you even realize how confusing that is?"

"You're not being entirely fair," I retorted. In response to that she slapped the gauze onto my sutured wound, causing me to whine with pain. It was frustrating, so I continued with aggravation, "You're mad at me because you refuse to see the sex for what it is. For what I've repeatedly told you it is."

She pressed tape down over the gauze and motioned that I could sit up. "And what's that?"

"Sex." I breathed in frustration, painfully pushing myself up to sit on the

"Sex," I breathed in frustration, painfully pushing myself up to sit on the edge of the island. "Pure and simple."

"You're full of shit, Genevieve," she snapped. "I've had the kind of physical relationship you're talking about, and you know what? It couldn't compete with our worst moments. Not even when you're rough and bitchy, because no matter how hard you try I *always* feel emotion from you." She folded her arms across her chest angrily, taking a breath to fuel the next part of her rant. "And sex just for the sake of a physical need goes both ways, but you don't let me reciprocate. There's no mutual give and take, which means there are reasons you won't tell m-" she stopped short from finishing, and her head shot in the direction of the open sliding doors.

"What is it?" I whispered, reaching for my rifle while Echo took a step toward the door.

She'd pulled her pistol out of its holster, and she raised it as she strode closer. Everything went dead silent except for the barely audible footsteps of Blake and Jarvis upstairs. She crept closer, and I tensed, ready to spring into action in case we'd missed any Ferals or attracted some new ones. She'd just reached the threshold to the yard when something jumped onto the island and landed at my side.

"Ah!" I shouted in surprise, hopping off the island and nearly tumbling to the ground because of the unexpected soreness in my hip. Echo turned with her pistol aimed and ready to fire. "No, wait!" I hollered as my eyes focused. It was just a cat. A scrawny, blue-eyed Siamese that strode to the edge of the island and meowed at me. "Where did you come from?" I asked in a friendly tone, inching forward to let it sniff my hand.

It's nose brushed my fingers for a second before it rubbed the side of its face against my hand. Echo chuckled, holstering her pistol and coming back over. I scratched at the top of the cat's head, grinning at its contented purrs. It had been so long since I'd been around a feline that I'd forgotten, until a moment later I sneezed. It scared Echo more than it did the animal, and once she recovered she laughed.

"Genevieve Moretti has a weakness after all," she said teasingly,

extending a hand to run it down the cat's back.

"I'm not *that* allergic," I told her amusedly. I wrapped my arms around the friendly animal to bring it closer. It stood to put its front paws on my shoulder and nuzzle its head against the side of my face. I sneezed again. "He's so sweet I can't resist."

"Yeah," she agreed slowly, her voice sounding almost suspicious. "He is really sweet, isn't he?"

"What?" I prompted, knowing she was thinking something.

The cat dropped down from my shoulder, and Echo reached over to scratch under its chin and produce more purrs. "It's just… I haven't seen a cat in years that wasn't wild."

We locked gazes, and at the same time both of our heads rotated toward the open sliding door. I knew by the sudden tension that we were both thinking the same exact thing – this cat was friendly because he was familiar with humans.

Long Way From Home

The Next Right Thing by Seth Glier

Long Way From Home

Dugan

"Here," Namiko said with a soft smile, extending a handful of painkillers.

I picked out three of the six pills, saying before I tossed them into my mouth, "The pain isn't as bad."

Both her and Kara had been monitoring me closely for the last week and a half. You'd have thought I had something terminal the way they were constantly watching with worried, attentive looks on their faces. Even now, after I swallowed the meds we'd found in our gas station, Namiko put an ear against my ribs, instructing me to breathe deeply. She'd said a few days ago she was keeping an eye out for pneumonia, and that's why it was important for me to keep taking medicine even if it stopped hurting so bad.

I did as I was told, and while the air flowed into my lungs and Namiko listened, her eyes wandered up to my face, watching for a reaction. My brow furrowed with a slight cringe toward the end of the inhale, and as I let it out she straightened up.

"Lungs sound good," she told me in a confident but quiet voice. "The pain?"

"It's more of an ache," I answered. Breathing only bothered me now when I took deep breaths like that one. There was still sharp pain any time pressure was applied, but that wasn't a problem seeing as we'd been taking it easy since my injury.

Wolf had been sore for a couple days, mostly in his hind leg, but he was completely fine now. I could just see Kara out the front door, and every half a minute he brought the ball back to her so she could throw it up the

half a minute he brought the ball back to her so she could throw it up the road for him again. I hadn't seen joy like that in years. Kara laughed and praised the dog every time he returned with the tennis ball, and Wolf watched her with his tongue lolling out until she threw it once more.

"That dog isn't tired yet?" I called to Kara playfully. They'd been at it for thirty minutes already.

She leaned back to look at me through the door. "He's a free spirit." She threw the ball with a forceful grunt. "He needs to run!" At that she chased after him, and a few seconds later they both went tearing past the door the other direction.

"Stay close at least!" I hollered so she'd hear me, and yelling like that caused a twinge in my ribs. It was the middle of the day, but that didn't stop our stalker Feral from attacking me, and I wasn't sure if there were any more out there.

Namiko gave her usual, quiet giggle. "Worrying is bad for the healing process," she joked shyly, and her hand gave my chest a timid pat. She'd been getting a lot bolder recently, but she was clearly still adjusting to being playful again.

"I was a dad once," I agreed with a chuckle, reaching into the bag of fresh figs on the counter beside me. "You don't have to tell me twice."

I was about to throw a fruit into my mouth when Kara shouted from somewhere behind the building, "Dugan!"

The fig fell from my hand, and my fingers closed around my rifle as I shot out the door. Ignoring the pain in my ribs from running, I sprinted to the back of the gas station. Kara was standing in the brush with Wolf at her side, but neither of them looked to be in danger.

"What?" I asked, somewhat impatiently given the stabbing in my ribs.

She waved me over, and when I got to her side she pointed. It took me a moment to see what she wanted me to, but eventually the trail of dust stood out against the distant horizon. On a road a couple miles away it looked like a few vehicles were kicking up dust. I raised my rifle to get a

looked like a few vehicles were kicking up dust. I raised my rifle to get a closer view through the scope. Sure enough, there were two of them. One was a dark green truck with a camouflage tent over the bed. The other was a tan tank with a big flag and some kind of bug painted on the side. Both were very clearly military vehicles.

They weren't headed our direction. In fact, the small caravan had already passed by our gas station and was continuing on. Still, I couldn't forget our encounter in that deserted town. The single dying man who'd told us not to trust them. Some mysterious they, who looked like military but were really something far worse.

"Who does it look like?" Kara asked, and because I was in such deep thought about our options I handed her my rifle. She raised the scope to one eye, watching for a minute before observing, "Soldiers." She remembered that dying man too. "You think it's those bad guys?"

"I don't know," I mumbled. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't, but I wasn't taking any chances. Even though they'd already driven by, it was always a possibility that they'd come back this direction and stop here to check for supplies. No way in hell we'd be here if that happened. "We aren't sticking around to find out." I turned back to hurry toward the gas station.

Namiko had come out to make sure Kara was alright, and was standing near the corner of the building. "Shouldn't we wave them down?"

"No," I answered, passing her hastily. "We're leaving. Kara, come on."

Both Kara and Wolf ran past me and into the shop, and I could hear Namiko's footsteps keeping an easy pace behind me. "What if they have a safe zone?" she asked, sounding confused at my reaction.

I walked through the broken door, explaining as I reached down for our replenished duffel bag of food. "Before we found you, we went through a city where all the Ferals had been killed." Even though Namiko appeared to have doubts, she began to collect her things with an appreciated amount of trust. "There was a man trapped in a house with a few Ferals. We couldn't save him, but he told us that a group of people impersonating soldiers locked him in there."

I raised the duffel bag with a wince, preparing to set it over my shoulders when Namiko put a hand on my arm to stop me. She motioned for me to hand it to her.

"It's heavy," I protested, reluctant to make her carry it over a long distance even if I was injured.

She nodded knowingly. "Which is why you need to let me."

"She's right," Kara agreed, coming over with her axe dangling over one shoulder and giving me a slap on the back. "You can be macho later."

It was still with reluctance that I gave up the bag, but I offered her a grateful smile. "At least let me carry your backpack then."

Namiko traded with me, and after I'd thrown both her backpack and mine onto my back, I grabbed the bag of figs off the counter. "Kara," I prompted, passing it off, "Go get as many as you can in here."

Kara bounded off with the dog on her heels while I did a final walkthrough of the shop, checking for anything we might want to take that we hadn't stored already. Everything we'd need was already in our packs, but I strode to the warm refrigerators. Opening one of the doors I grabbed a few glass bottles of cola, wishing there was more nutritional value to them so I'd have an excuse to bring more along.

"A few for the road," I told Namiko, handing her one of the bottles and slinging my rifle over my shoulder.

We left the store right as Kara was climbing out of the fig tree. She tied the handles of the plastic bag together so none of the fruit would fall out when she shoved it into her backpack, and then she picked up her axe and shotgun, ready to go.

Just like that, after a week and a half of recuperation, we were on the road again. After traveling with Kara these last months, it had been nice not to worry about where we were for a while. The gas station had been remote, and there was plenty of food to last a while. But staying in one place was hardly any safer than constantly being on the move. At least

this way we were getting closer and closer to Kara's forest refuge.

It seemed to get colder the more we walked, and it wasn't just because we'd started our journey in the afternoon. We'd begun veering north a while ago, and the more northeast we got the more the weather changed. As the sun set I zipped up my coat, noticing that Kara had taken her gloves out of her backpack and slipped them on her hands. The cold wasn't the only thing that kept us from conversing like we normally did. I was tense, and even though Kara's step had its normal, youthful bounce, I could tell she was tense too. It was long dark by the time we came on a sign that lightened our moods with accomplishment.

I pulled out my flashlight, shining it at the reflective blue billboard. "Welcome to Oklahoma."

"Discover the excellence," Kara read, and she jogged toward the sign. "Woo!" she exclaimed happily, jumping as she passed beneath to slap her palms against it.

"Should we call it a night at the next place we get to?" I asked, restoring my flashlight. Part of my wanting to stop was because Namiko was leaning under the weight of the duffel bag. I would've offered to trade with her if it weren't for the other part of wanting to stop. Just the two backpacks I was carrying had been causing a consistent ache in my ribs for the last hour.

"Sure," Kara agreed, and when I glanced over at Namiko she nodded eagerly.

It took us another twenty minutes to finally reach a good place to stop. It was only a small community of about a hundred mobile homes. By the looks of it, most of them were run down even before the outbreak. Others had started leaning or collapsing from the years of abandonment, and even in the cold the area smelled of decaying vegetation.

"Discover the excellence," Kara repeated as we strolled into the crumbling neighborhood. Then she corrected in an exaggerated southern accent, "More like discover the trailer park."

I started to chuckle at that, until Wolf let out a low, rumbling growl. Because of what had been following us the last time Wolf got grumbly, I instantly pulled my rifle around, raising it to be ready. The volume of his growling escalated, so I pulled out my flashlight once more, lighting the beam in the direction his ears were pointed. The moment I turned it on two bright, yellow eyes were reflected back at us. My heart skipped when the owner of them leapt into action. Snapping a twig beneath its hooves, the deer pranced off into the darkness, and I let out a relieved sigh. We definitely weren't in the desert any more.

Wary of being out in the open for too long, I searched for the nearest mobile home that wasn't collapsing. Pulling my knife out and motioning for Kara to have her axe ready, I strode toward the door. The screen door opened without a problem, and I let Kara hold it while I reached for the handle of the front door. I gave the knob a gentle twist, and finding it unlocked I opened it slowly, trying to avoid a squeaky hinge. Once the entrance was completely clear, I took in a deep breath, preparing myself for the possibilities of Ferals.

As I let the breath out I leaned the front half of my body into the home, shining my light over every inch of observable floor, searching. The kitchen was visible at the back of the long house, and from the entrance I could see just two other doors across the living room. I stepped in, hearing the door click shut behind me after Kara and Namiko had entered. We crept across the carpet toward the open of the two other rooms. It was a bathroom, and other than my own reflection in the mirror giving me a bit of a start, it was empty too.

Last but not least, next to that was the single bedroom. I eased open the door, moving my beam around to check for Ferals. There'd been a scuffle here at some point, probably at the start of the outbreak. The blankets from the bed were all over the floor, and the bed itself had been knocked to a disordered angle. Items from the nightstand and small desk in the corner had been scattered on the ground. We searched under the bed, the desk, and in the closet, and even though the place was a mess, there was no danger.

"Looks clear," I said aloud, trudging back out to the living room.

While Kara picked up the disheveled couch cushions off the floor and replaced them on the furniture, I made my rounds to all the windows to pull the curtains shut. Kara gave a loud sigh as she plopped onto the couch, pulling her feet up halfway so there was room for Namiko to sit. I dropped the backpacks I was holding on the floor, and then carefully tried to massage my fingertips over my ribs to work out some of the soreness.

"Why don't you guys get some sleep?" I offered. "I'll take first watch."

"Are you sure you're not tired?" Namiko asked, and I could predict exactly what she was thinking because of how thoroughly she'd been looking after me. Sleep was important for the healing process.

I nodded. "I'm good. I'll look around for supplies."

In response Kara's mouth opened with a wide yawn. She stretched her arms over her head and then leaned her head back over the armrest. Wolf had curled himself up on the floor, but after Namiko got comfortable and I strode away to search the house, he got up to follow. The dog was proving to be more loyal than I thought he could, given how unaffectionate he'd been treated at Van's. But while I trudged from cupboard to cupboard in the kitchen he trailed me so close I could feel him against my leg the whole time.

There wasn't much to be had in the kitchen. The old remains of boxed foods, none of which were good anymore, was about all I could find. Giving up on this section of the house I wandered back into the bedroom. I pushed around the items on the floor with my foot, shining my flashlight down and looking for anything useful. It scared a spider out from under a pad of paper, and when Wolf caught sight of it he pounced. He was so distracted playing with it that he stopped following so closely while I moved to the other side of the bed.

There was a closet on this side, and something in it had vaguely caught my attention on our first search for Ferals. Now that I had more time to look at it, it was even more promising than I thought. It looked like a gun safe, three feet tall and a couple feet wide. I squatted down in front of it and twisted at the spired handle. The only problem was it was locked tight, and without the code there was no way I could break into it.

tight, and without the code there was no way I could break into it.

I straightened up thoughtfully, glancing around the room. There was a computer on the desk at the opposite side, and from where I stood I could see some sticky notes still posted around the monitor. None of them were of any significant help though. Just reminders of appointments and a couple for computer passwords, though those were all words when the code to the safe was a series of numbers. On a whim before walking away I lifted the keyboard, almost laughing at the appearance of a last sticky note beneath it.

"Zero, three, eight, one," I murmured, shoving the note into my pocket and going back to the safe.

I dialed in the numbers and gave the pronged handle another twist. This time it gave, and the door popped open almost as though it was dying to be searched. Despite my excitement, it wasn't as profitable an endeavor as I'd hoped. The only thing that was in it was a box of .57 caliber ammunition, which didn't work for any of our weapons. The owner must've taken everything else years ago.

Finished with the search, I meandered back out to the living room. Namiko and Kara were fast asleep, and it put a smile on my face when I saw that Kara had moved over so she was now resting her head on Namiko's thigh. Before getting comfortable I grabbed a blanket from the bedroom, shook the dust off it, and carried it back out. I set it over Kara, but it was big enough that I could tuck it in and up, that way it folded around to cover Namiko's lap too. There was an armchair near the couch, so I plopped into it to rest while I stayed awake for watch. A few hours later Namiko woke up, and after silently motioning to me that she'd take over, I fell asleep.

"Hawooooo!"

The holler woke me in the morning, and I shot up to see that Namiko had been in mid sprint from the kitchen toward me, about to wake me up and warn me of something coming. The noise scared Kara too, because she was now sitting on the couch, wide-eyed. It sounded again, and while the howl cut through the still morning air, it was very clearly human. No doubt

it was drawing attention too, because moments later the first claps of gunfire pierced the air.

"Keep him quiet," I instructed Kara while I darted off the chair and to the living room window.

"Hawooooo!" The shout sounded again, this time accompanied by several more.

I pushed aside the curtain just enough to peer out right as a Feral went sprinting by. I adjusted to watch its course, only to see it get twenty feet from the first tank coming slowly up the street, and then get mowed down by the burst fire of the machine gunner on top. My heart dropped. The three were completely different vehicles than the ones we'd seen yesterday. There were two tanks and a truck here. What were the chances? But I had no doubt that our luck had completely run out, because the obnoxious, reckless method of this invading group matched the motive of our rogue impersonators.

Wolf let out a growl then, and I turned my head to shoot a warning at Kara. Her bottom lip tensed, and she grabbed the dogs face in her hands sternly. "Stop it," she scolded in a whisper.

The rapid fire of the machine gun was consistent now, and aided by the sounds of other automatic weapons. I looked out again to see that all the Ferals in the area were being drawn to the vehicle. There were other soldiers sitting on top of the tanks near the machine guns, and every one of them was hooting and hollering, having a disturbing amount of fun shooting at the onslaught of Ferals.

My mind was racing. My only plan to get out of the house was to wait until they passed by, and then to make a break for it. That plan was shut down when the steady squeak of the tanks' tires came to a halt outside our mobile home. There was one sole exit to the entire house, and that was the front door.

As the tanks came to a halt I peered out the window again, watching as one of the men in military camouflage kept firing into the pile of bodies that had accumulated in the street. He continued until another guy

that had accumulated in the street. He continued until another guy smacked him on the back of the head.

"Hey asshole," the guy yelled at him over the roar of the engines, "Stop wasting ammo."

There were twelve people in total sitting on the outsides of the two tanks, both men and women. They were all wearing dark blue camouflage that matched the reckless shooter's, and they all hopped off when the vehicles shut down. The exit hatch of the first tank popped open, and a man's upper body appeared.

"Who's wasting my ammunition!" he shouted angrily, lifting himself out and throwing himself off, landing on his feet on the worn asphalt with a whomp.

The same guy must have done it before, because the man I assumed was the leader looked right at the culprit with a fierce glare. He was massive, almost six and a half feet of burly muscle, visible because he was in the frosty air in nothing but a black t-shirt and the same blue camo pants. Even from here I could see his bald head was covered in a dark tattoo that stemmed down beyond the neckline of his shirt. He had dark auburn facial hair, carefully trimmed in a square around his mouth and down his chin. There was a large automatic weapon hanging over his back, and a pair of massive knives sheathed to either side of his belt. A single look from him would've been enough to terrify me if I was in the culprit's position, but the smaller man didn't look fazed.

"You had a long drive, boss," the guy grinned, pulling a flask out of one of his pockets and tossing it over. "Have a drink."

The boss unscrewed the lid of the flask, taking a long swig while someone else appeared from the hatch. It was another man, only a few inches shorter than the leader but more than a hundred pounds lighter because he was so scrawny. His hair was the same color as the leader's facial hair, but it was long and messy, and it hung down over his eyes. He swung down from the tank with an almost eerie, creature-like grace, dropping onto the culprit's back.

"Who's [illegible]?" he cackled with [illegible]

"Where's mine?" he asked with a laugh, perching himself on the man's shoulders.

"Get off me, freak!" The man bent over, grasping at the lanky one and trying to pry him off.

The rest of the guys were watching with grins of amusement, including the four others that had come out of the second tank and truck. The scrawny man slapped the culprit in the face, eliciting laughter from the group before nimbly jumping off. While he landed on his feet I noticed someone else had appeared through the exit hatch – a woman, who was sitting at the edge of it now with her legs dangling into the tank. She had on the uniform pants, but her shirt was a dark blue, and over that was a hooded, black leather jacket of which she'd pushed up the sleeves. She was equipped much like the leader, though it was a pair of pistols dangling at both her sides instead of knives. Everything about her was dark. Her clothes, her skin, her hair half-buzzed on one side from the temple down, all the way to her gaze. Cold. Watchful. Calculating.

"Tell me what you called him again," the leader commanded, and at his voice the amused laughter died down. The culprit finally seemed struck dumb. "Tell me!"

It looked like the culprit cleared his throat, repeating himself too quietly for me to hear from inside the house. The leader's lips curled into a tiny smile, and he handed the flask to the freak, who began to take a long drink. Once his hands were empty the leader clenched his fist, and before the culprit could blink he'd been hit in the face so fiercely he stumbled back and fell. The freak guffawed hard enough that he spit alcohol all over the place, and there was uproarious laughter from the group.

"Mia, baby," the leader called to the woman on the tank. "Come down here, stretch your legs."

Mia jumped down, taking the flask the freak was handing her. She tilted it to her lips, more and more until it was empty. Resecuring the lid, she strode to the culprit, who was sitting on the ground still recovering from being hit, his lips tinged with blood. I was afraid for him, unsure of the

cruelty behind the woman's cold stare, but when she reached him she offered a hand and lifted him off the ground. She slipped the flask back into his pocket, said something that he nodded to, and then gave his shoulder a friendly pat.

A silence fell over the mass of nineteen, and the boss's eyebrows furrowed as he glanced back and forth at those surrounding him. "Well, get to work!" he bellowed. "You know what we're looking for!"

Shit. I'd been so interested in watching the group that I'd stopped thinking about our escape. "Grab your things," I whispered in a rush, turning from the window and throwing my own backpack over my shoulders.

While Namiko and Kara picked up their packs, I grabbed the duffel bag and rushed to the bedroom. The men outside were dispersing no doubt, and we probably had mere seconds to get out the window and make a break for it. I shot to the bedroom window, hearing Kara and Namiko come in behind me. I pushed up on the bottom pane, but it wouldn't budge. In my sudden panic I'd missed the latch, and now I flicked it to unlock it, pushing up on the window again. It still wouldn't move.

Squinting, I peered through the dusty glass, only to find the window was nailed shut from the outside. We had to try and sneak out the front. There were unkempt bushes around the sidewalk that we might be able to use for cover. I backed up, about to turn around and lead the way to the front door, when Wolf growled. Kara's eyes shot wide, and she knelt to keep him quiet, but before I could continue there were voices from outside the living room.

"I had a buddy that used to live here," a man said, and I heard the screen door pop open.

"Closet," I murmured hastily. "Go, go, go."

Kara and Namiko hurried into the closet, but it was too small for all three of us and Wolf to fit, so I dodged to the other side and ducked under the desk, out of immediate view from the doorway.

"Kept an emergency stash in the wall," the voice continued, louder now

"Kept an emergency stash in the wall," the voice continued, louder now as an unknown number of men came through the front door.

My heart was racing. These people were wild, violent. Unpredictable. If they found us we were probably dead. Across the way I could see that Kara and Namiko were terrified too, but Kara was on her knees, dutifully pressing her hands over Wolf's ears to try and keep him from giving us away.

"Let's see it, then," said a second guy.

There was a crash and a shattering of glass as they shoved the TV off the stand and onto the floor, and then a loud whap of something breaking through drywall. They dug around for a minute, breaking the wall further and further, searching for something hidden.

"Ha!" the first man exclaimed. "Told you!"

The other chuckled, "Nice." They were quiet for a few seconds, no doubt gathering whatever they'd found. "What do you make of that radio signal the boss intercepted?"

"Military camp outside Pittsburgh?" the second one clarified. There was a confirmatory hum. "Worth a look. We've been running low on ammo, they should at least have a shit ton of that."

The screen door popped open again, and a moment later a British-accented female voice sounded in the house. "How you doing in here?"

"Mia, baby," the first guy greeted in a tone sarcastically similar to the one the boss had used.

"You find anything?" she asked impatiently, ignoring his teasing.

"Look," boasted the second man.

Mia scoffed. "That's heroin, you useless cock."

"Wasn't so useless to you the other night," retorted the first guy. "And I know what it is. Here," there was another knock on the drywall, and then

the crinkle of plastic wrap. "This what we're looking for?"

"Better," Mia agreed. "Put it all in the bag."

"Sorry, sweetheart," he disagreed. "Heroin's mine. Boss gets the crystal."

"You're not getting any of it," Mia told him with unexpected ferocity.

"We get none?" the man asked angrily. "While his brother gets to do whatever the fuck he wants? That's bullshit and you know it."

"You get plenty," Mia told him. "And if you don't get your greedy, junkie hands off it he's going to be *very* angry."

"No."

Mia sighed. "You're new here, so let me explain something to you," she said, and a moment later I knew she was talking to the second guy. "What Nicky's hinting at here is a mutiny." There was a gunshot so loud and unexpected that I flinched, and next came a thud as a body hit the floor. "Mutiny means death. Got it, dear?"

Not even Kara's hands could keep the sound of the gunshot from reaching Wolf's ears, and in response to it he snarled. I felt all the blood drain from my face when Mia audibly shushed her companion. We had to do something. I pulled my rifle around, motioning across the room for Kara to cock her shotgun. I could hear the creaking of the floorboards as Mia and the man crept closer to the room. Wolf growled menacingly again.

"You come out now," Mia called at us, "And we won't hurt you."

I gripped my rifle tighter in my hands, and suddenly I thought about the duffel bag of food on my back. If we had to run, it would slow me down considerably, but there was no way in hell I was dropping it so these dangerous criminals could have it. My eyes wandered across to Kara and Namiko, and then dropped to the safe. An idea forming in my mind, I pulled the paper with the combination out of my pocket, memorized the number one last time, and then tucked the note under the frame of the

desk where it was hidden. Then I pulled the duffel bag off my back, pointed at it so Namiko could see, and mouthed the word 'safe'.

Namiko nodded with understanding, so I wound up, preparing for the pain in my ribs that I knew would come with hurling the bag across the room. I threw it, but right as it left my grip the criminal pair appeared in the doorway. The man raised his automatic weapon, instinctively aiming at the duffel bag. His sights followed it all the way to Namiko, but the moment she caught it Kara was already prepared. She pulled the trigger of her shotgun, littering the man's torso with shrapnel while Namiko stuffed the bag into the safe and shut the door. The very next second Wolf took off, leaping at Mia before the woman could get a shot off.

"Go!" I shouted, making a break for the bedroom door.

We leapt over Wolf, who had his jaws clamped tight around Mia's gun arm. When we got past, Kara turned. "Wolf!" she called.

The dog's eyes looked up, it released its hold on Mia's arm, making one last intimidating snap at her before running after us. I threw open the front door, and right as we darted out of it Mia's first bullet went whizzing by my head. The closest cover to the mobile home was the forest across the street, on the other side of the tanks. We were headed directly for it, but Mia had already shouted for help. As we reached the edge of the first tank a few men were running for us. Wolf changed course, backtracking to sink his teeth into the first guy he reached.

"Wolf!" Kara shouted again, hesitating when she looked back and saw that three other guys were closing in on the dog.

I skidded to a halt, turning on my heels to rush back and grab Kara by the arm, to drag her away because her life was more important. That moment of hesitation was enough for another man to catch up. He plowed into my side, taking me straight to the ground with such force that I felt a shooting pain rip through my chest. Wolf yelped as one of them kicked him in the side.

"No!" Kara yelled, and as the man who tackled me shifted to stand I saw that Kara had been grabbed by two more, each of them holding one of

her arms. "Let go of me! Dugan!"

Wolf was snarling fiercely, head whipping every direction as he was surrounded now by a group of five. The man who'd tackled me was on his feet, and he sent his foot crashing into my already broken ribs. I couldn't breathe, and I curled into a ball, in too much agony to think about fighting. I couldn't even make a sound, I couldn't find the breath to call out for Kara or Namiko.

"Somebody put that vicious beast in the goddamned cage!" roared the leader.

The man above me had pulled his gun, and with it in one hand he hauled me off the ground. Once on my feet I could barely stand, the pain in my ribs was excruciating. Plus I was panicked, breathing fast to try and supply my body with oxygen, but every time I inhaled the pain tripled. I could barely get any air. If my lung hadn't completely collapsed, it was at least torn.

That's when I realized I hadn't heard a peep from Namiko. I couldn't keep myself straight, I was bent at the waist praying not to get hit again, but I lifted myself just enough to look for her. She hadn't made a sound because the freak had got to her, and now he was holding a knife to her throat. And he looked so happy about it. He was grinning, leaning around Namiko to see the fear on her face. Now that I was finally closer to him I could see that his teeth were yellow and rotten. He was pale, and feeble looking, but what stood out more than anything was a crescent shaped scar on his neck. Perfectly visible, human tooth marks.

"Dugan!" Kara yelled again.

She struggled to get out of her captors' grasps, until one of them rapped the butt of his gun against the back of her head. Anger flared within me as she dropped to her knees. I started forward, intent on beating the shit out of the one that hit her, but the man with his gun on me sent his fist hard into my stomach. It knocked the wind out of me, and trying to get it back I took in a deep, wheezing breath that only caused a pain in my ribs so severe it put white spots in my vision.

A metallic clatter drew my eyes toward where Wolf was still surrounded. They had a Feral in the cage they'd just set on the ground, but they shot it like it was nothing and dragged it out. Still snarling and baring his fangs, they closed in on the dog, backing him toward the crate. The moment he entered it one of them lunged forward, slamming the door on him. Wolf snapped, almost getting the man's hand, and when he realized he was trapped his snarling intensified. He threw himself at the walls of the cage, trying to break loose.

"Shut up!" one of the men yelled, ramming his foot into the side of the cage with such power it knocked Wolf off his feet.

The man at my side pushed me forward, directing me toward where Kara was still kneeling next to the leader and Mia, while the freak dragged Namiko over. We were surrounded, our weapons had been taken, and I was too injured to put up any kind of fight. We were completely out of options and with nowhere to go. We were dead.

"They had a bag," Mia told the leader. She was clutching at the arm Wolf tore into. Blood was dripping down her fingertips. "They stuffed it in a safe."

Things grew eerily quiet while the leader looked us over. The only audible sounds were my weak, gasping breaths and Wolf's diluted growls. After a minute he strode up to me, studied me for a bit, and then nudged my ribs. I let out a cry of agony and dropped to my knees while laughter erupted from the group around us.

The leader squatted down so he was eye level with me again. "Dugan, is it?" I stared him straight in his cold brown eyes, glaring. "I'm Jed." He glanced behind him at Kara while he asked, "She's not your daughter, right?" Then he looked back at me. "But you look after her." I clenched my jaw, debating about the right time to make a move. My knife was still in my pocket, the only weapon I had left, but I couldn't reach for it without them noticing. "I respect what you're doing, you know. Kids, they're the future."

"Yeah?" I asked with venomous disbelief. "Then let us go."

He sucked in a sarcastic breath through his teeth. "See, I can't do that. You killed one of my guys, your dog hurt that beautiful woman there, and now I find out you're hiding things. What are you hiding?" I narrowed my eyes at him, slowly inching my hand toward my pocket. "Food, ammo, meds… You know the code to that safe?"

My hand reached my pocket without being noticed, and in a flash I pulled the knife out and flipped it open. I lunged forward, but for being so large, Jed was swift. He jumped out of the way before I could stab him, and I hit the ground on my stomach. Two men instantly pulled me up by the shirt, and the knife was wrenched out of my hand.

Jed was laughing, his perfect teeth glowing amidst his copper facial hair. "You shouldn't have done that." I braced myself for a hit, preparing for more pain. Instead, Jed turned leading with his fist, and his knuckles caught Kara in the side of the face.

"Son of a bitch!" I shouted, pulling forward only to be yanked back. The barrel of a cold gun met my temple, and when I stopped struggling at the threat, Jed's smile grew.

"What's the code to the safe?" he asked.

"Don't tell him," Kara coughed, spitting blood from her mouth and straightening back up to give Jed a defiant scowl.

"Mia," Jed requested without turning his gaze from me, and Mia's fist caught the cheek on the other side of Kara's face. I took in a series of furious breaths, clenching my jaw and fists angrily. "My littler brother," Jed began, pointing to the man who still had a knife to Namiko's throat. "He loves blood. Sick kid would probably bathe in it if you gave him the chance." He finally looked away from me to turn in a circle, motioning to all his followers. "Isn't that right?" There was a collective and intimidatingly loud agreement from everyone at once.

"If that freak," I growled, remembering how Jed had reacted when the culprit used that word, "Hurts her, I'll kill him."

Jed's lips pursed with rage, and he turned again, smashing his fist once

more into Kara's face. Wolf let out a ferocious snarl as Kara dropped, lying with her nose to the pavement while her ribs expanded with an agonized breath. It took her a minute to recover before straightening back up, but when she did I felt an enraged and heartbroken misery. She was trying her best to be tough and take it, trying her best not to be afraid. But there was blood trickling from a fresh wound on her cheek, and her eyes were spilling tears.

Once Kara was back up Jed grabbed her by the coat collar, raising his fist in the air while he glowered at me. "I want the combination!" He didn't even wait when out of the corner of his eye he saw Kara shake her head at me. He laid into her again, keeping her from falling with his grip on her jacket. "A girl her size," he snarled at me, "How much you think she can take before it kills her?" He wound up once more.

"Stop!" I hollered, water stinging my eyes, but he was already mid swing. After he hit her a final time he let her go, and she dropped to the street. "Don't," I pleaded, sniffling, resisting the urge to run to her because it would only make them hurt us more. "Zero, three, eight, one." I shouldn't have let this happen. I should've told him the combination before he ever hurt Kara. "Please. Zero, three, eight, one."

Mia nodded at a woman standing nearby, and she scurried off into the mobile home to check the safe. She came back out hardly a minute later with our duffel bag in hand, and dropped it to the asphalt at Jed's feet. Jed squatted down, unzipped the bag, and pulled out a can of food in each hand.

"That's a beautiful thing," he boasted, dropping the cans back and handing the pack to someone else to load into the truck. "I got mouths to feed. You understand."

I nodded compliantly. "Now let us go," I whispered.

His gaze wandered to his brother and Namiko. "Murph," he prompted.

I looked over, almost relieved that he was going to let us free. But when my eyes locked on Murph's, every one of his disgusting teeth shone in an evil grin. He swiped his blade across Namiko's throat in one swift stroke

evil grin. He swiped his blade across Namiko's throat in one swift stroke, and took a step back as he pushed her forward.

"NO!" Kara screamed, and she tried to lurch forward but was caught by the men behind her.

I didn't get a chance to react before Jed grabbed my coat in both his fists and pulled me to him menacingly. "I ever see you again," and he made an indicative glance toward Kara, "You'll be begging me to put you both out of your misery." He shoved me away from him. "You have sixty seconds to get the fuck out of my sight."

I ignored the stabbing he'd put back in my chest and sprinted to Kara. I pulled her out of the men's grasp. "Let's go."

But she wouldn't come. She tried to lunge forward again, intent on getting at Murph. I wrapped one arm around her torso, trying desperately to hold her back.

"Kara, please," I begged. She was kicking, yelling incoherently as she fought my grip. She kept knocking into my broken ribs, it felt like she was stabbing them into my lung every time, but I ground my teeth through the pain. I wasn't going to lose her.

I dragged her toward the woods across the street, desperate to find cover because I wasn't sure Jed wouldn't come after us. Kara was screaming for Namiko and Wolf, trying to pry my arm from her waist. The pain she was causing me wasn't just excruciating, but she was making me exert energy that I simply didn't have. I could barely breathe just standing around, and the more she fought the more oxygen I needed that I wasn't getting. I pulled her as far as I could into the woods until I couldn't take it anymore, and then she broke free of my grasp.

"Dugan!" she yelled furiously, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You just stood there! You stood there and let them kill Namiko! They have Wolf!"

"Stop," I wheezed. I felt so weak. I could hardly keep on my feet. "You need to be quiet." Tears filled my own eyes once more. I felt guilty. I thought we'd saved Namiko, but all we'd really done was bring her a

faster death. Now Wolf was gone too, and Kara would never forgive me for being weak.

I didn't hear anyone coming after us, but I couldn't be sure. I staggered forward, about to take hold of Kara again because I didn't know if she'd try to run back and save Wolf.

"Let me go!" she cried, pushing against my chest to back me up.

The pain, the panic, the fighting, the lack of air, it was too much. At her shove I dropped to the forest floor. My vision was blurred, and I felt light headed as I gasped for each shallow breath.

"Dugan?" Kara finally calmed enough to notice my state, and her voice came out a worried sob. "I'm so sorry." She was fading. "Dugan, I'm sorry." She dropped to her knees at my side. "Don't go," she pleaded. A bloodstained tear dropped from her chin and hit me in the cheek, but I was so far gone that I couldn't even feel it. "I don't know what to do. Please!"

I blacked out.

Need You Here Now

*** Woot! Update :). Hope this one didn't take too long compared to the last break.*

So, sometimes you guys make accurate/semi-accurate predictions in your reviews, and I literally spaz out because I wanna be like, 'Yeah! It's coming! Just wait!'. Lol, but I can't 'cause that would ruin everything… Anyway, here ya go. Hope you guys weren't too pissed at me for that last update, didn't hear from too many of you haha.

Enjoy :)

Night Flowers by Thom Quentin Leigh

Need You Here Now

Dugan

I paused from searching through my backpack to glance across the small room at where my wife and daughter were. Christina was trying to sleep with her head in Patricia's lap, but she hadn't done much resting since I told her Topper had run away, and it didn't help that sunlight was pouring through the curtainless windows. Then we'd had to leave our apartment. There was no remaining food to be found in the building. After a few weeks it was time to leave, and since then none of us had hardly slept.

Now there was only one can of food left in my backpack. I was hungry, and I knew I wasn't the only one. I pulled it out, my eyes wandering from it to Patricia. She met my gaze, and then her big brown eyes dropped to the can in my hands. She knew it was the last one, and she also knew what I was thinking. That Christina should have it.

"Chrissie," Patricia nudged her to get her to sit up. "Have something to eat."

I popped the lid off the tomato soup, carrying it over with a spoon I took

from the bag. Christina had to be starving, because even though she hated tomato soup, she didn't protest when I put the cold food in her hands. As I strode back to my bag to zip it up, Patricia followed. She'd been so quiet lately. Ever since she saved me from that man in our apartment. Sometimes she disappeared in her own mind, and it took an effort to bring her back again.

"We need to find food," I murmured, turning to face her and sitting down at the edge of the table my bag was on. We'd made our way to the condo we were in, hoping to find some, but the entire place had been emptied.

She nodded, reaching around me to set her hand on the end of the bat we'd brought. "I should go out tonight, while you stay here with Christina."

"No," I protested immediately. The mere thought of her going out there alone filled me with fright. It wasn't just Ferals I was worried about. There were survivors, some of who would do anything to take what we had.

"You're stronger than I am, you can protect her," she argued quietly so our daughter wouldn't hear. "But I'm smaller, I can get into places more easily. I'd be back before you knew it."

"Trish, no," I said more firmly. "What if you didn't make it back?" I reached up to take her face in my hands. She was disappearing again, and I needed her to look at me. "We have to stay together." The idea of losing her or Chrissie was too much. Letting either of them out of my sight terrified me.

"Dugan-"

"No," I repeated, and her gaze fell with the undertone of frustration. "Hey, look at me, baby," I said gently, and waited until she did. "We'll figure it out." I dropped my hands to her shoulders, and pulled her close to hug her. "And we'll do it together."

When I let Patricia go she backed away, sniffled and wiped a hand across her cheek. She wasn't okay. I knew it weeks ago, but I didn't know how to bring it up. Didn't know if she wanted to talk about it, and the last

thing I wanted to do was force her to relive it.

Not knowing what to say to her, I strode over to our daughter, who was dipping her spoon into the can as I sat down. "How's your soup?"

"Gross," she sighed, tilting the can toward me so I could see that she'd eaten half of it. "I'm not hungry anymore."

I took the soup from her and held it out to my wife. "Trish."

She was still at the table, the fingers of one hand still toying with the bat, but she waved her other hand with dismissal. "I'm not hungry."

"Please," I pleaded. It hadn't just been sleep we weren't getting, but Patricia hadn't been eating much either. I wasn't sure if it was her emotional state, or if she was trying to sacrifice so Christina and I would have more, but I wouldn't allow it now. Not when I wasn't sure if or when we'd be eating again.

She paced over to take the can from me, and then went back to sit at the edge of the table and eat.

"Come here," I said to Christina, patting my lap. She climbed onto my legs, stretching her own legs out and slouching down so she could lean her head back on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her tiny torso while asking, "Did you fall asleep at all?"

"A little," she answered, dropping her small hands over mine with tired discouragement.

"Did you have any good dreams?"

Her head shook against my shoulder. "Only a bad one."

I squeezed her a little tighter to offer some comfort. "You want to tell me about it?"

Christina took in a deep breath to explain sadly, "I dreamed that Topper was looking for us." My eyebrows furrowed instantly with emotion, and

when I glanced up I found that Trish had looked at me when Chrissie said that. When I met her gaze, however, she glanced away. "And he was crying, and the monsters got him."

"Oh," I hummed consolingly, "I'm sure Topper's just fine."

Before I could say anything else the can clattered down onto the table. Trish dropped it noisily, and then tramped to the second story window to look out it. I'd explained to her why I had to kill Topper, but she didn't agree with it. She thought we should've set him loose, even if he'd follow us, and given him a chance to fend for himself. But the dog would've been eaten alive if we did that. He wasn't wild, or tough. Just a domesticated house pet a step away from being a lap dog.

I ran my hand over Christina's forehead, brushing back her curly black hair. "Try to sleep some more, okay? Daddy's right here."

She did, and it wasn't long after I leaned my head back against the wall that I fell asleep too. By the time I woke up again the sun had gone down. Through the moonlight that shone in the windows I could see Patricia's silhouette sitting once more on the table. She had the bat between her dangling legs, spinning it in slow, thoughtless circles.

"Did you get any rest?" I asked, but she didn't hear me. She was gone again. "Trish." Still, nothing. "Patricia," I prompted louder, and this time her head turned toward me. "Did you get any rest?" I repeated.

"I've been sitting here," she whispered, her head turning toward the window, "Thinking that I should've gone out while you were sleeping. To find food."

"I told you not to," I said worriedly, almost panicked that she was considering it that seriously.

"I know what you said," she mumbled.

I shifted my daughter off my lap, careful not to wake her, and then stood to make my way to Trish. "Hey," I said quietly, and when I reached her I moved the bat away so I could stand between her legs. "What's going on

with you?" Her head dropped, and she leaned forward to rest it against my chest. I folded my arms over her back and sighed, "Trish, you're exhausted."

"What are we doing, Dugan?" she asked, sounding frustrated as she picked her head up. "We don't have a plan. No real weapons. No food." Her hands clutched at the denim over her knees. "You killed our daughter's dog. I killed a…" she choked on the word, "A man. A real human being." She wiped a stream of tears from her face. "Everything we built, for her," she said, pointing at our sleeping daughter, "Is gone, and she's going to grow up in this. Terrified, every minute of every day. What if she ever has to do what we've done? Our baby." She buried her face against my chest again, taking in a deep breath to calm herself. "What are we doing?"

"I'll tell you what we're doing," I said. "We're surviving. You grew up in South Central, I know you know what surviving is." At that she let out an amused huff against my chest. Glad that I'd almost gotten a laugh, I pulled back so I could get her to look at me. "We've been through so much together. I mean, I survived your mother all those years." This time she did let out a teary-eyed laugh, and gave me a swat on the shoulder. "Don't get distant on me now," I begged, taking her face in my hands again. "I can't do this without you. Chrissie can't do this without you."

Patricia nodded, and after pecking me on the lips wrapped her arms tight around my waist. "We should go look for food," she mused as she pulled away. "While it's still dark out."

"Are you sure you're up for it?" I asked, taking in her state of exhaustion, the dark circles beneath her brown eyes. "We can wait if you need sleep." She shook her head. "I want to search the place real quick. Can you wake Chrissie up?"

This time she nodded, and I wandered off to do a brief search through the condo. Eventually I'd found my way to the balcony, where whoever had lived here stored their water gear. There was a wet suit and snorkel gear, but what caught my eye was the fishing spear. It had three sharp prongs at the end of it, and was just short enough not to break if I

stabbed at any Ferals with it. There was also a dive knife, complete with a sheath that I could strap around my forearm.

By the time I found my way back to my wife and daughter, they both had their backpacks on and were ready to go. I passed Trish the spear, so she could look at it approvingly while I pulled my own bag over my shoulders. After she handed it back we trekked to the front door, and I put one finger to my lips to remind Chrissie to be quiet while I opened it.

We hadn't gotten to search any of the other three condos attached to this one. The first thing we did was make our way across the short outdoor hall to the unit across the way. I tried the handle, but it was locked tight. Reluctant to kick the door in because of the noise it would make, I studied the outside, glancing around the corner. There was a window around the side of the building that I could see was open.

"I'm going through the window," I whispered, handing Trish the spear so I could climb my way to it. In response to the concerned look on her face, I pointed at the weapon strapped to my arm. "I have the knife."

I strode to the railing that enclosed the hall of the second floor we were on, and climbed up onto it. There was a gutter pipe attached to the outside, so I used it to steady myself while I stretched one foot toward the windowsill. It was just too far for me to reach, and making a jump was the only way I'd get there. My eyes wandered to the ground some twenty-five feet below me. If I fell, at least it probably wouldn't kill me.

I took a deep breath, gathering the nerve to make the leap. Then I hopped sideways. My first foot landed on the ledge, but as the toes of my second foot touched down they slipped. I teetered backwards, hearing my wife gasp as I lost balance. Right before I dropped completely, my arm shot backwards, and I set my palm against the down-hanging lip of the roof. I was still leaning uncomfortably back, and now my heart was beating hysterically, but at least I was still safe. Stretching my free hand toward the open window only got me within inches of it. I was going to have to push off the lip and risk falling again.

I shut my eyes tight and took another deep breath. Then I bent my arm,

working up the rhythm. I pulsed again, gathering the strength. After the third time I pushed off the lip as hard as I could, reaching for the window with my other hand. My fingers tore through the screen and closed around the inside of the frame. The rip of the screen was loud, and after I knew I wasn't going to fall I perched there tensely, waiting to see if there were any Ferals inside that had heard it.

No sound came, so I popped the screen off and set it quietly on the inside. Climbing through the window, I still kept an eye out for any threats, and made my way to the front door to unlock it. Patricia and Christina wandered in when I opened it for them, and my wife handed me back the spear. I went through every room with my family at my side, me with the spear in both hands, ready to stab, and Trish with the bat poised over her shoulder, ready to swing.

It was clear, and even more worth celebrating was the plethora of canned and boxed goods in the kitchen. The boxed things like cereal were too bulky to take in our backpacks, so I reached into a cupboard and pulled out three massive bowls.

"You want Fruit Loops?" I asked Chrissie, pointing to one of the boxes. "Or Cocoa Pebbles?"

"Cocoa Pebbles," she said with an eager grin.

I poured my daughter a large bowl and stuck a spoon into it. "Trish?"

She held her bowl toward me. "Fruit Loops."

"There you go," I said happily, dumping the contents into her dish.

Then I filled my own to the brim with a mixture of the two. Chrissie giggled at me for mixing them, and I playfully poked my spoonful of variety at her lips. When she finally gave in and was about to take the bite, however, I snickered and stuffed it into my own mouth. She giggled even harder, giving me a lighthearted push. Even though there was no milk, it was a delicious meal, made better by the fact that we could stuff ourselves on it because we wouldn't be able to take it all. We finished off

two whole boxes, and then I took a bag of Cheerios out of its box and, because my pack was full of the canned things, stuffed it into Patricia's bag.

"*Next place?" I asked, to which my wife nodded.*

We exited the unit, and crept down the stairs to one on the first floor. The door to this one was cracked open. It put me on edge instantly, and I motioned to Trish to have the bat ready.

I eased open the door and shut it behind us once we'd all made it in, but the curtains to the windows of this condo were pulled shut, and no moonlight could brighten the interior. Pulling the small flashlight from my pocket, I clicked it on and moved it around the living area. There was nothing there, but when my beam made it to the kitchen it illuminated two sleeping Ferals. I hastily clicked the light off, worried it would wake them. Then I grabbed Chrissie by the shoulders, moving her into the safety of the corner near the door.

Trish and I started forward, our second-rate weapons at the ready. We'd only made it a few steps before something crashed to the floor. My head whipped toward the source, only to find that Trish had frozen. I don't know if it's because of how dark it was, or because she wasn't at one hundred percent because of how little sleep she was getting, but she'd bumped into an end table and knocked a lamp onto the floor.

The Ferals shot up at the noise, and when their sights landed on us, one of them roared. I pulled back my arms as the first one came charging at us, and when it got close enough I jammed forward, springing the tips of the spear into its chest. The second one shot toward us, and Trish lunged ahead of me, brining the bat down on it with a massive thud. I fought with the Feral at the end of my spear. It kept pushing against the weapon, trying to get at me as though it didn't feel any pain at all. There was another wallop as Trish hit her Feral a second time. I pushed against the spear, taking the Feral to the ground and plunging the point even deeper into its heart. Another thump. The creature's fighting died down, and moments later ceased.

I yanked the spear out, immediately hurrying over to my daughter. She'd turned away, and now she had her face buried in the corner. "Chrissie." I pulled her from the wall, turning her around and hugging her to me. "It's okay. Don't cry."

I was about to tell her she was safe, but in the quiet I heard a shuffling through the bushes outside. I let go of my daughter and crept to the window, leaning my head closer to listen. Just as I pulled away there was a massive thud against the front door. Chrissie shrieked with fright.

…

My eyes shot open to a dark world, and I gasped for air. The pain tore through my chest with a vengeance, permeating straight down to my stomach. I turned onto my side as I retched, clutching at my agonized chest while the sheer pain caused me vomit. Kara dropped to her knees at my back, and her hand barely set on my arm.

"Dugan," she breathed worriedly.

I threw up again, and spat to get the putrid taste out of my mouth. Even though I needed air that I could only get by breathing deeper, I took fast, shallow breaths, terrified of reviving the severe torment. I dropped onto my back, and shut my eyes tight against the ache that simply moving caused.

Kara sniffled. "Please stay awake," she pleaded, squeezing my hand like she was afraid of touching me anywhere else.

As I took in a wheezing breath there was a click, and when I opened my eyes I found that Kara had grabbed the lighter out of her backpack and flicked it on. What I saw put tears in my eyes. I don't know how long I'd been out for, but during that time her face had swollen. One of her eyes was nearly shut because of a gaping wound in her cheek, surrounded by a miserable rainbow of black and blue. Her bottom lip was busted, and her eyes were soggy from crying.

"Kara," I whispered as I felt a hot tear slide out the side of my eye. I raised a hand, dismally touching the backs of my fingers to the healthier

side of her face. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," she whimpered, "Just please stay awake. Dugan, I'm scared."

My eyes fluttered closed against another achy breath. "I can't," I mumbled, already growing weak. Before I faded once more I managed to murmur again, "I'm sorry."

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My hand shot over Chrissie's mouth to stifle the remainder of the shriek. It was too late, and after a collection of muffled snarls from the other side of the door a Feral slammed against it again. I frantically searched for an escape. The sliding doors across the living room.

"Go!" I whispered loudly, motioning toward the exit.

I followed behind Trish and Christina toward the doors as there was an even harder thud. Just when we got them open three Ferals came crashing through the front. We rushed out, and while Patricia vaulted over the waist high fence that enclosed the small yard I slammed the glass doors shut. When I reached the fence I grabbed Chrissie under her arms, throwing her over it. She took off sprinting ahead of Trish, who waited for me to propel myself over the wood.

My feet touched down as glass shattered behind us, and we started across the expanse of grassy field toward a collection of houses across the park. The Ferals' heavy breaths were sounding close behind us, and in mere seconds Trish and I had caught up to Chrissie. I scooped her off the ground, pushing my legs past their limit with the extra weight, and it didn't help that the grass began to slope uphill.

Trish slowed to run at my side, but slowing down allowed the first Feral to catch up. With the bat in hand, Trish spun, knocking it to the ground as it made a grab for my shirt. I forced my feet to carry us faster, and as the metallic ping of the bat crashing against the next Feral sounded through the air, we reached the back of the first house.

There was a ladder leaned up against the side, leading to the roof. I threw Chrissie onto it, instantly turning to stab my spear into the closest Feral. I kicked the dead creature off as Trish smashed the bat against another, and was about to lunge for the next one when she pointed toward our daughter.

"Go with her!" she called, winding up for another hit.

I launched myself up the ladder to make sure Chrissie was okay at the top. I got three quarters of the way before a Feral's hands clamped down around my ankle. It nearly pulled me all the way back down, but I tightened my hold on the ladder and shook. It's grip loosened enough for me to grab the ledge of the roof, and then it fastened its fingers around me again. I shook once more, relying on all my arm strength to keep me up while I took both feet off the ladder, trying to kick the Feral off of me. I smashed the sole of my free shoe against its face, and as it plummeted back down it reached for the ladder, taking that down too with a crash.

I pulled myself onto the roof. Because these houses were built on a hill, where this roof ended the second floor of another unit began. I backed Chrissie to the wall of the connected home.

"Don't move," I instructed, and then sprinted back to the edge of the roof.

With the ladder fallen Trish couldn't climb up, but with two Ferals on the ground there was no time for her to set it upright again. Her bat smashed against the shoulder of a Feral, but the second one was getting off the ground to lunge at her. I pulled my arm back with the spear in hand, hoping my aim was even a little accurate. Then I sent it flying. It sailed through the air, piercing through the Feral's thigh. The creature dropped with a furious roar, clutching at the spear.

"Trish, jump!" I said frantically, knowing she only had a moment before either Feral recovered and attacked her again.

She sprinted, her feet landing against the side of the house for leverage as she made a leap upward. I dropped to my knees and bent over enough to grab her hands, and then began hauling backwards, dragging

her up onto the roof. We both fell back when I pulled her up, panting for air. She hardly waited to recover before her gaze darted up, searching for Chrissie. The moment Trish found our daughter I watched her eyes widen with terror.

"NO!" she hollered, pushing against the roof to scramble up.

I turned my head just in time to see a Feral drop from a second story widow level with the roof. Its feet hardly touched down before it thrust itself at Chrissie. I rolled and vaulted up. But it was too late for either of us to do something. The Feral crashed into her, and as it buried its teeth into her shoulder and took her down, she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Patricia dashed forward, in such a panic she didn't even take the bat with her. I sprinted after her with the weapon in hand. She lunged at the Feral, tackling it away from our daughter, and before it could take a bite out of her too I cracked the bat over its forehead. Trish rolled, scooping Chrissie up while I hit the Feral again. And again. Until I was sure it would never bite anyone ever again.

Chrissie was bawling, clutching at the wound in her shoulder. Trish had tears streaming down her face as she squeezed our daughter to her.

"My baby," Trish sobbed.

Through the fresh, heartbroken agony in my chest I felt my eyes fill with fiery tears. But I could hear the Ferals below clawing at the wall of the house, trying to get up here.

"We have to get inside," I told Trish.

I ushered her toward the window the Feral had climbed out of, and went in first with the bat still in hand. There was one more Feral inside, but when it snarled at me I rushed forward with hot fury. I whipped the bat around, hitting the creature so hard it tumbled a few feet sideways, finally landing on its back on the floor. I didn't give it a chance to rise. I jumped forward, bringing the bat down repeatedly. I was so upset I don't know if I ever would've stopped. The only thing that snapped me out of it were

Trish's cries.

It took me nearly a minute to turn, I was so terrified of what was coming next. We'd climbed into a bedroom, and Trish had set Chrissie on the bed, and now she was kneeling at the side, tears dripping from her eyes into the light fabric. I hurried over, bringing my backpack around to pull a large piece of gauze from the medical supplies. My eyes blurred as I climbed onto the bed and pressed the gauze against Christina's shoulder.

Her skin was already so hot. She wasn't bawling anymore. It didn't even look like she was in pain. She just kept looking from me to her mom, and the only reason it appeared like she was still letting out soft whimpers is because of how scared we looked.

Trish sobbed, taking in hard breaths as she buried her face against Chrissie's stomach. I wiped my arm across my eyes, trying to work the tears loose so I could see what I was doing with the gauze. But once they came loose they wouldn't stop. They kept cascading down my cheeks.

"It's okay," I told Chrissie. Really I was only trying to convince myself. "It's going to be okay."

Chrissie believed me, because she lifted her head to look at Trish. "I'm going to be okay, Mom."

What little composure Trish had fell apart. She lifted her head as her face twisted with agony, and she dropped back away from the bed. She groaned, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them so she could hide her face again. And she released a muffled wail.

I tried to hold it together. Chrissie didn't know what getting bit meant, and I didn't want to frighten her in her last minutes. "Chrissie," I whispered, leaning to plant a despairing kiss on her forehead.

"I'm cold," she replied, body shaking with a shiver.

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing out the tears so I could see her face

clearly. It could only be a minute now until the fever took her. She was too small to fight it for long. Trish was quiet now, but her shoulders kept rocking with consistent sobs. Chrissie blinked slow, like it took an effort to open her eyes again.

"I love you," I told her, brushing her hair from her face, and wiping a small tear from her eye. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Daddy," she whispered tiredly. She blinked slow again. And the next time her eyes shut, they didn't open again.

With the fresh misery I let out an angry yell, and out of frustration I threw the useless and bloodstained gauze across the room. Trish mumbled something into her arms, but I couldn't make out what she said, and I was too miserable to ask.

Eventually she glanced up, tears still streaming down her cheeks. "You can't let her turn." I'd known it, but actually hearing it caused a flurry of panic, and my eyes shot from Trish to our sleeping daughter. "You have to do it," Trish said with dismal urgency. "You have to do it before she turns," she said frantically, sniffling and running a long sleeve of her flannel beneath her nose.

Chrissie had at least a day before she turned or the fever killed her, but I knew sitting around waiting for it would be torture for the both of us. My eyes wandered from my daughter to the knife around my arm. My fingers brushed the handle, causing a pang in my heart that made me purse my lips to hold back a sob. I pulled the blade from its sheathe, tightening my hand around the grip. I didn't know where to do it, and I raised my other trembling hand to work my fingers into my creased brow.

Now my whole body was quivering; with terror, with despair. With guilt. I set the pointed tip of the blade against the center of my daughter's chest, and took in a deep breath to try and work up the nerve. My eyes shut tight once more as I held that breath in, and everything went quiet around me. I love you, Daddy. That was all I could hear. Repeated in my ears again and again. I held that breath so long I felt lightheaded, and when I finally let it out again it happened through a wretched sob.

"I can't," I wept. I slid off the bed, tossing the knife across the room before I collapsed to the wood floor. "I can't." I buried my face in my hands, sobbing so hard the tears seeped through my fingers.

It was only minutes later I felt the bed move just slightly, and then I heard the soft sound of a kiss, and I knew Trish was saying goodbye. My wife sniffled, but the next moment I felt a shift of energy. A horrifying change of mood that caused me to look back. Patricia had her eyes squeezed shut, but tears were still slipping out, because she had one hand over Chrissie's mouth, and the other against her nose.

I looked away. I couldn't watch, didn't even want to think about what she was doing no matter how necessary it was. But that energy escalated. I love you, Daddy. The bed shifted again, a dying twitch from a limb of that precious child. I love you. I sobbed harder, shaking my head, trying to get that voice out of my mind. Daddy. I shoved my hands over my ears. I couldn't breathe. I felt light headed again. I wanted to scream. I LOVE YOU, DADDY.

Silence.

The whole world stopped. I couldn't feel it anymore. Couldn't feel anything. Everything was still for what seemed like hours. Then Patricia strode around to my side of the bed, and continued past to the door. When she reached it, I finally looked up. I met her sad brown eyes, but she looked angry with me. She didn't want to be here right now. I didn't want to look at her either. I couldn't.

She only watched me for a moment before going out the door, and she pulled it shut behind her.

…

"Chrissie!" I called, my eyes shooting open again. At least this time I didn't inhale deeply.

Someone dropped down at my side. "Dugan," she said. "It's me. It's Kara."

I couldn't help it, my eyes flooded, and I threw a hand over them so Kara wouldn't see me cry. It only took a few seconds for me to compose myself. This poor girl had been sitting here for God knows how long, probably worried sick about me. And scared. I remembered her telling me that. It was daylight now.

After a sniffle I took as deep a breath as my broken body would allow, and then I removed my hand. "Kara," I sighed.

I must have looked a little better, or at least like I wasn't going to drift off again, because her busted lip pulled into a smile. "I thought you were going to die," she said, her voice broken by a mix of crying laughter.

I motioned for her hand, needing help to sit up. "You're not-" I grunted as she helped me upright, and adjusted to lean back against the nearest tree. "You're not getting rid of me that easy."

Moving around like that gave me the urge to cough, but that seemed like it'd be even more painful than breathing. So I cleared my throat, fighting back the impulse. Kara knelt in front of me, looking she wanted to do something to help, but unsure of what that could be. We didn't have any food for her to offer, or any water. Clearly neither of us knew how to care for broken ribs and pierced lung.

"Sit down," I told her, patting the ground beside me. "I'm okay."

She got up to grab something a few feet away, and then sat down near me with the stick in her lap. In one of her hands she was holding a small rock, which I could see she'd been using to sharpen one end of the stick to a point.

"How're you feeling?" I asked her.

"My whole head hurts," she answered quietly, staring down at the stone. "But my heart hurts more."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I pursed my lips in a sad smile. "How long was I out for?"

She ran the rock hard over the end of the stick before saying, "A day."

"Kara," I breathed sincerely. I couldn't imagine how frightened she'd been. "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged. "It's not like you could help it." She rubbed more fiercely at the makeshift spear, like talking about it was making her angry. "They did it to you."

"Kara," I prompted. Through the force she was applying to the stick she grunted in acknowledgement. "Is that for protection?"

"No." She picked up her furious pace, working so rapidly that I began to worry she might cut herself on the sharp point. "I'm going to ram it through Murphy's heart, and then Mia's. And then I'm going to kill Jed a thousand damn times."

"Slow down," I pleaded gently. The day I'd been unconscious was enough for her to stew in the events, to turn her heartbreak into a need for revenge.

"For what they did to you, and me," she continued angrily. "For Namiko. And if they hurt Wolf, then it's for him too."

"Kara," I repeated, but she wasn't listening. I huffed with pain in order to lean forward, grabbing her hand to stop her. "Kara." She froze, and when she finally looked up her dark hazel eyes were full of tears. "Come here, kid," I said endearingly, holding out one arm.

She scooted herself all the way to my side, leaning her head against me after I dropped my arm over her shoulders. "What are we going to do?" she asked through a sniffle. "They took everything."

"Did you hear those guys talking about the military base outside of Pittsburgh?" Kara nodded while carefully wiping her fingers over her moistened cheeks. "We're going to go there, and if Jed didn't make it yet then we're going to warn them. We're going to tell them who Jed is, and who Murphy is, and Mia."

[illegible] with [illegible] "What if [illegible]?"

Her shoulders shook with a delicate sob. "What if we're too late?"

At her question, all I could see was Murphy's sadistic smile when he killed Namiko. Was Jed's fist laying again and again into Kara's face. They were still out there, still dangerous. Still capable of hurting other people the way they'd hurt us. "Then we'll scour the country looking for them, and if Wolf is still alive, then we're going to rescue him no matter what it takes." She leaned forward and turned to look at me, in shock that I felt almost the same way she did. "Keep that spear, Kara," I told her with resolve, "Because I promise you, we'll find them."

Hard To Be Soft

Breathe by Cillo (Vocal Mix)

Hard to Be Soft

Genevieve

"It's just around the corner, ma'am," Powers said excitedly while everyone else and I followed behind him.

It was the start of our day, and we'd checked behind every single door on base except the one Powers was taking us to. Apparently during Bravo's search they'd found a one-story structure the size of a small house, but it wasn't built like any of the other offices or homes. They said it would be easier to show than it would to tell, and as we turned a corner and reached it, I could see why.

I strode close, and when I reached it I rapped my knuckles against the side. The entire thing seemed made out of reinforced concrete, and as I did a lap around the building I could see that the only entrance was a single, heavy steel door at the front. The only thing securing the door was a built in bolt, trapped in place by a thick padlock.

"Genevieve," I heard Blake call from the side of the structure.

I limped over to him through the soreness in my hip to find that he was pointing up toward some black, painted on stencil letters near the top. 'Brigade Armory'. The words caused a slow grin to spread across my face, and I heard a few happy laughs from the soldiers who'd come over curiously. Echo hadn't followed, and when I made my way back to the door she was studying the padlock.

"What's up?" I asked, wondering what she was thinking.

The lock fell from her hand, and shook her head with chagrin. "I can't open it."

"What?" I'd have thought she could open anything. "Why?"

"I've seen these locks before," she answered, smacking at it resentfully. "They're top of the line. Can't be picked."

I sighed, trying to think of a better solution. "Step back." Echo did as I instructed, and when I checked to make sure everyone else was a safe distance away I raised my rifle, firing once right at the lock. The bullet made a metallic ping, and ricocheted off into the dirt beyond the building. "Can't be shot either."

"I could've told you that," Echo replied with a laugh.

"What about those keys?" Powers suggested.

I let out another sigh, set my backpack on the ground, and then knelt at it with some difficulty. We'd found three rings full of keys in one of the major offices. There were more than fifty keys between the three of them, and over half looked like small padlock keys. They were labeled, but with letters and numbers rather than full words. I'd been hoping we wouldn't need to test any of them, and I definitely didn't want to be the one to do it.

"Here, figure out which one it is," I said, handing them over to Powers. "Everyone else, I want to split up and do a final sweep of the base just to make sure we didn't miss any Ferals. Canvas for supplies, but leave anything medical at the medical complex. We'll also start twelve-hour radio shifts. Hatfield and Carlson, you're up. Make sure camp knows you're online." I motioned for everyone to get moving, and while they scattered I turned back to Powers. Knowing how strict Cap was about the armory back at camp, I said, "Don't take anything out if you get it open. Just keep track of the key, and I'll come back and do an inventory."

With that I nodded at Echo to start following me. The closest area to us was the neighborhoods of homes, and seeing as it ached my hip just to walk, I wasn't up for traveling too far. At least I didn't find it necessary to wear the riot suits anymore, it only added more weight to my injury. Plus, the sooner we got this done, the sooner we could go back to camp and bring the civilians here. The sooner we could make a new home.

"It's weird," I mused as we walked, tilting my face up toward the sun. "Being out in a city during daylight."

Echo was quiet for a few seconds, deciding whether or not to answer. Even though it had been a few days, she hadn't completely gotten over being upset with me, though she wasn't being as brusque. "It'll take some getting used to," she agreed, sticking out a hand to run it over the overgrown blades of grass that lined the sidewalk. "It's a different world."

We trekked into the neighborhood, stopping at the first house on the street – the one I'd gotten injured at and where we found the cat. It looked completely different in the light. It was a sophisticated kind of homey, with an off-white exterior, and a blue front door and shutters on the windows. Just sticking out of the long grass was the faded, dull yellow top of a plastic car; the kinds small kids could get into and drive along while pushing with their feet.

"Hey, look," Echo said happily, wading through the grass to a homemade wooden swing hanging from the tree in the front yard. When she reached it she turned around to sit.

"That's probably-" Before I could finish she plopped down into the seat, but the rope was so worn from years of exposure that the moment she put any weight on it, it snapped. She dropped straight to the ground, nearly disappearing in the untamed lawn. "Not a good idea," I finished, buckling over because I was laughing so hard.

Echo reappeared slowly. "Ow." As she trudged back over to me she rubbed her hands over her butt, massaging out the pain.

I was still giggling, but seeing as Echo was still mad at me, she didn't find it as amusing as I did. So I tapered off my amusement and led the way inside, reexamining the home in the light of day. The first thing I noticed upon walking in was a blue and red flag, hanging on the wall right inside the door. It hadn't stood out the other night.

"They were Giants fans," I told Echo, pointing to it. I couldn't help the flush of nostalgia, and I ran my hand down the fabric thoughtfully.

"My family wasn't big on sports," she replied, continuing past me.

I reached for her before she got too far away, dragging her back. "You have to press your forehead to it, like this." I demonstrated on the center of the flag.

Echo's eyebrows furrowed like she thought it was silly. "Why?"

"For good luck," I shrugged, and even though I tried not to let it show, my face fell. "It's tradition." It was obvious she had no idea what it meant to me until she read my expression. Then her eyes softened. She gave an apologetic smile and touched her forehead to it. "Thanks."

She nodded and continued further into the house. I walked over to the kitchen, opening the first cupboard to check for any canned foods. There was one unopened bag of rice, so I set my backpack down on the counter to stuff it in. I was just about to open up the next cupboard when a deep, rich sound filled the house. A moment later there was another of a different pitch, and it had been so long since I'd heard music that I didn't realize it was the piano until I turned around.

Echo was standing at it, pressing down on different keys like she was testing the sound. When she seemed to get a feel for it one of her hands began a consistent rhythm on a single key, and the other picked up playing across different ones. It was a deeply toned, eerily slow song, but there was beauty in the sadness of it. I took a silent step in Echo's direction, in awe and not wanting it to stop. But only a few notes later she played one that didn't seem to belong. She'd messed up, and reluctant to continue she stopped. But she didn't pull her hands away. She ran her fingertips down the length of the white keys, sadly wiping at the layer of dust.

"I didn't know you played piano," I mused, crossing the remaining space until I was standing behind her.

Her head turned just slightly like she was going to look at me, but her eyes never made it past the floor. "I don't," she mumbled irritably, pulling the cover down over the keys. "Not anymore."

"Why do you do that?" I asked, growing unexpectedly impatient.

She turned and raised an eyebrow at me. "What?"

"Let me catch the slightest glimpse of a softer side, and then shut down." The piano was clearly something she'd been attached to, something from before the outbreak. I could hear that in the music, and I wanted to know that part of her.

"Maybe you're not gentle enough for my softer side," she quipped.

Even knowing how upset she'd been with me the last few days, the bite behind her reply was unexpected, and quite frankly, it hurt. It was almost an instinct to retaliate for the woundedness I felt, especially because I just couldn't take her being mad at me anymore. So I set my hands on her waist and pushed, jamming her hips back into the piano.

The mixture of flirtation and animosity caused my voice to come out a soft growl as I pressed my body against hers. "I think you like it rough."

Her smoky gray eyes scanned mine searchingly. I swear she could read the offense on my face, because when she spoke again a few moments later her voice was apologetically gentler. "I don't."

I went from feeling angry to sympathetic so fast that I didn't know right away how to react. She said 'I don't,' as though every time we were together she didn't like it. For the first time it truly made me feel like I was using her. "Then how come you never stop me?" I asked seriously, easing back and removing my hands.

She adjusted herself so she was sitting more comfortably against the edge. "You know how I feel about you."

I backed away from her a little farther. That was the exact reason she should deny me. "You should stop saying things like that."

"Why?" she prompted rhetorically. "Because you're incapable of being gentle with me? Or because you're afraid of how you're really starting to feel?"

I wanted so badly not to even think about her last statement that I ignored it completely. "I'm perfectly capable," I corrected, turning to walk away because I was anxious about where this conversation was heading.

Echo's hand slipped around mine before I got out of arms reach. "Prove it."

I glanced back at her while I considered it. I knew what she was doing, it wasn't the first time she'd tried reverse psychology to get me to kiss her. But I couldn't get the tune of the piano out of my head. I wanted the source, and I wanted her to stop being mad. "I'll prove it," I said, turning to face her completely again while I pulled my hand from hers, "If you *verbally* acknowledge who you really are."

Her head dropped, and she let out a deep breath. "Genevieve," she mumbled reluctantly. I stood there expectantly, not saying anything because I'd declared my terms. It took her so long to speak again that I assumed she was declining, but as I made to walk away once more she sighed, "Okay." My eyebrows rose with shock while I moved closer to her once more. She was so adamant about that part of her being gone, I never expected she'd really do it. She took in a resolute breath before choking out the short sentence, "My name is Hayden."

I shook my head with dissatisfaction. "That wasn't very convincing."

"Then convince me," she challenged.

I readily raised one hand to cup her face, but the movement was sudden enough that she flinched. I didn't like that. That even after I told her I'd be gentle there was a part of her that didn't believe it. It made my desire to prove it to her so acute that I barely set my hand against her face. The caress of my thumb was so light I could hardly feel the tiny hairs of her cheek, and when my other hand went up too, it was slow, and consoling.

Echo's gaze never left my face. She kept scanning my expression, glancing at my lips and then back up at my eyes. There was a clear distrust in it. Like she still didn't believe I'd keep being tender, or like she thought I wouldn't see it through. But I didn't want her to be mad at me anymore. I wanted her to know on some level that I hated being rough

anymore. I wanted her to know on some level that I hated being rough. So I leaned into her, and with the next stroke of my thumb I pressed my lips to her forehead.

It was different to kiss her like that, and I closed my eyes to let a wave of feeling sink in. My nose was so close to her hair that all I could smell was her scent, delicate and sweet. It was so quiet around us all I could hear was her breathing, soft and slow and almost indistinguishable from mine. All I could feel was her – her thighs against the outsides of mine, the warmth of her chest seeping into my heart, the smoothness of her face against my fingertips. After only the first few seconds I felt impossibly vulnerable, and at the same time completely indestructible.

I pulled away from the prolonged peck to rest my forehead against hers. "Say it."

"Not yet," she pleaded quietly.

I wanted her to say it, but greater than that I wanted more of the extraordinary, obscure emotion I'd felt just moments ago. I found it when I touched my lips to hers. Found it in the way she kissed back, and matched every unhurried movement of my lips but for the first time didn't push. She didn't deepen it, or try to get more. When her hands landed on my hips she didn't caress me, or try to touch me anywhere provocative. She just set them there. She let my entire focus be in her taste. In the sufficiency of every kiss being the barest brush of our lips, the slightest graze from the tip of her tongue. It *was* gentle.

It was Hayden. Whether she'd say it or not, that's who I was kissing, and this time it wasn't just a glimpse. I felt her in every part of me, recognized her in every one of my five senses. And there was no guilt. There was no voice telling me to regret this, or that it was wrong. This is what Echo wanted, a mutual give and take, and I could give myself to Hayden. I could do that because she wasn't the raider, and if I did then Echo wouldn't be mad at me anymore.

I lowered my hands from Echo's face to her own. As I directed her from my hips to the button of my jeans I tasted a trace of salt on her lips. Her fingers tensed over the button, preparing to undo it, but when my hands

returned to her face I felt the wetness against her cheeks. The salt registered. Her fingers froze at the same time my lips did, and I pulled away from the kiss.

"I can't," she whispered, another tear falling from her eye. She returned her hands to my hips to back me away from her, and then stood. "She's gone, Genevieve." She sniffled and brushed past me. "Just accept it."

I was so baffled I couldn't even look at her. It was the first time she'd ever refused me, and she'd done it when I was about to give her what she wanted most, and she hadn't done it because she was mad. "When are you going to stop lying to yourself?" I asked before she left through the door.

There was no answer, and when I turned I found she'd frozen with her fingers around the handle. "When are you?" she said without looking at me, and then she was gone.

What she didn't understand was that I wasn't lying to myself. I knew with perfect clarity what I was beginning to feel, what I'd just felt, and I knew exactly how little it mattered. I also realized for the first time that in certain ways we'd both been wrong about Hayden. She wasn't gone like Echo said, but there wasn't a split either, it wasn't one or the other. It was both. A fusion. I could never have Hayden without Echo because there could be no Hayden without Echo. They were just names, parts of a personality that contributed to a whole. What Echo had said when I told her about the split was right. There was just *her*. But the parts of her that Hayden contributed to, the deeply vulnerable parts, the innocent parts, Echo rarely let those show.

I let out a sigh that cut through the new silence that filled the house. Retrieving my backpack from the kitchen counter, I searched the rest of the home for supplies by myself. I didn't know what to expect from Echo when I finally walked out. Wasn't sure whether or not she'd still be crying, or mad at me.

She was leaned up against the wall beside the front door, and when I stepped out she took in a deep breath that forced down all the emotion I could see on her face.

could see on her face.

"You, um," I began, suddenly timid, "You want to talk about it?" All she did was shake her head without looking at me. I was kind of relieved about that, seeing as whenever we talked about something it just meant I had to hurt her. "You want to move on to the next house?"

At her consent we started up the sidewalk toward the next home. It was so quiet while we searched through the various rooms. Echo didn't say a word. I no longer got the vibe that she was upset with me about the other night. It wasn't an angry silence. I couldn't put it into words, but it made me feel bad. Not the guilty kind of bad, but the kind like after she'd had to shoot that raider kid. I wanted to offer comfort. Only, I couldn't, because I was the cause of the discomfort.

It had been so silent the entire time we were looking through the house that it caught me completely off guard when Echo's arms wrapped around my waist from behind. "It's really important that you don't push me away," she whispered urgently.

"Why?" I asked quietly, a mixture of fear and curiosity forming in my gut.

"Turn around," she instructed. I turned in her arms, taking in a speechless breath when her lips connected with the sensitive flesh below my ear. "Don't act surprised, be normal." She kissed lower on my neck. "Someone's been following us."

I was in such an unexpected daze from the way she was kissing me that it took little effort to keep from appearing shocked. "How do you know?"

"I've been seeing shadows," she answered. "And I just saw a figure in the window." Her mouth tickled against my ear, causing muscles in random places to tense with pleasure.

I couldn't help that my arms slid around her neck. It was all because of what I felt in that first house. It was toying with my resolve. "You have a plan?"

To make the fact that she was coming on to me seem more natural, she moved her kisses to my mouth. I parted my lips a little too eagerly. I was

moved her kisses to my mouth. I parted my lips a little too eagerly. I was hardly even registering the importance of what she'd just revealed to me. But all she did was peck my bottom lip. "I'll hide while you go outside to smoke." She kissed her way along my jawline, back to that wonderful spot beneath my ear. Is this what it would be like if I always let her do what she wanted? "With you as a distraction, I should be able to sneak up on them."

I had to clear my throat in order to ask, "Why can't you be the bait?"

Echo moved back to my mouth, saying against my lips, "Because you're injured. You can hardly walk without limping, if they run, they'll get away." All I could think about was that she wasn't really going to kiss me. I couldn't stand it, so tilted my head forward desperately to catch her lips. She returned it for a few moments before pulling away enough to say my name. "Genevieve?"

"Hm?" I hummed, tightening my arms to kiss her again.

It took her longer to pull away this time. I even felt her hands slide up my waist lustfully, but eventually she whispered with something of a smile in her voice, "You can push me away now."

My eyes widened, and just like that, guilt. "You tricked me!" I said, pushing her shoulders to back her up. "Dammit, Echo."

Her eyebrows furrowed. I could tell she was able to read the sincerity behind my tone because she rolled her eyes. "I don't even know how I deal with you half the time," she complained.

"I need a cigarette," I grumbled loud enough for our spectator to hear, and because I didn't have any it was Echo's backpack that I grabbed off the floor.

I limped out to the front yard, took Echo's cigarettes out of her backpack, and lit one up. All I had to do now was wait patiently and try not to look anxious. It was harder than I thought, knowing someone might be watching me and trying not to search for where. I trusted Echo, but that didn't mean I felt entirely comfortable being used to draw our follower out. I finished an entire cigarette, and still nothing happened. It made me

I finished an entire cigarette, and still nothing happened. It made me impatient, but I pulled out another one to keep waiting, hoping this would work.

It got so quiet while I was waiting that eventually I could hear Echo pull the hammer of her pistol back around the side of the house. "Don't move," her voice said.

I began to walk toward the side of the house since it sounded like she'd caught the person, but a moment later a hooded figure came bursting into view. They passed me in a flash, and right after that Echo came bounding out from around the corner, giving chase. I couldn't run, but out of instinct I reached for the closest item – a brick from the planters – and I chucked it at the retreating figure before it got more than twenty yards away. The rock struck the person in the back, and they stumbled over their feet just long enough for Echo to catch up. Echo plowed into them, taking them hard to ground and immediately sitting over them to aim her pistol.

The person's hands immediately shot upwards in surrender. "I'm unarmed!" hollered a female voice.

I hobbled over as fast as my injured hip would allow, and when I reached them Echo handed me her pistol. I kept the weapon aimed at the still hooded woman while Echo grabbed her by the jacket and pulled her up.

"Make any sudden movements and I'll shoot you," I warned.

The first thing Echo did when she had the woman on her feet was search her pockets. "This what you call unarmed?" Echo asked, tossing a pocketknife to the ground. She frisked the remaining places the girl might be hiding a weapon, and then pulled down her hood.

Big, bright brown eyes met mine, and then wandered to Echo, who was now keeping a tight grip on her coat. She was Native American, with a light brown complexion and long black hair that was pulled into a ponytail. By the looks of it she couldn't have been much older or younger than Echo and I. My guess was a year or two older. She was tall and lanky. Her heavy jacket and jeans hung loose over her frail, flat frame, and her

full lips were pursed with misfortune.

I nodded at Echo to lead her back into the house, and followed behind with the pistol still aimed at our mysterious follower. Once we reached the inside Echo sat the girl in a chair, and with the handcuffs I kept in my backpack we secured her hands behind her back. She was silent the entire time, watching Echo and I observantly but not with fear.

"Who are you?" I asked our prisoner, returning the gun to Echo.

The girl's eyes followed the weapon, and without looking at me she said, "You first." I folded my arms across my chest to let her know that I was in charge, but she didn't seem to care. "Genevieve, right?" she guessed, finally looking at me. Then her eyes went back to Echo. "And Echo," her head cocked curiously, "Is that your real name?"

She clearly wasn't afraid of us, and if she'd truly been following us since we got here then she had to know we weren't the violent type. Trying to be intimidating didn't seem like it was going to work, but I had little enough patience to be nice for long. "You know our names. What should we call you?"

She looked at me for a few brief seconds, watched Echo again thoughtfully for longer than I was comfortable with, and then returned her attention to me. There was so much focus behind her glance that I doubted she didn't know everything about us already. The problem was that we knew nothing about her. "Imogen," she answered eventually.

"You alone?"

Imogen ignored my question to present one of her own, and as she asked it the gun was the center of her attention. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Depends on why you were following us," I answered honestly, pausing so she'd have a chance to address my first question.

Instead of giving an answer again, she looked once more at Echo. "Is Echo really your birth name?"

"Hey!" I snapped my fingers impatiently and motioned to myself, "Over here."

"Can she ask the questions?" Imogen said nonchalantly, nodding her head toward Echo.

My patience was wearing thin. "Why?"

"She's holding the gun." Imogen took her eyes off Echo just long enough to glance at me. "And she's obviously more dangerous than you are."

I scoffed irritably. "What makes her more dangerous?"

"You're limping," Imogen offered readily, a smirk on her face like she was finding humor in this. "The gun. She's got more scars than you do." She gave an unconcerned shrug, "And she's prettier." I pursed my lips, clenching my fists to keep from reacting. It seemed she was testing us, I just couldn't figure out what she wanted to discover. "You can take the cuffs off too."

"There's no way in hell we-"

"Genevieve," Echo whispered, leaning over to talk into my ear. "It's fine. I'll ask the questions." Then she spoke loud enough for Imogen to hear, "And she already took the cuffs off anyway."

My eyes widened with surprise, immediately darting over to the girl as if she'd attack us now that we knew. All she did was chuckle, nodding her approval while she tossed the handcuffs to the floor and then set her hands freely in her lap. "She's sharp," she complimented at Echo. *And you're a pain in the ass,* I thought.

"I'm also the dangerous one." Echo held up the pistol indicatively. "You alone?"

"Yep," Imogen answered without hesitation. "Is Echo your real name?"

"Yes." Echo leaned back against the island at my side. I didn't like how even though Imogen glanced at me every few seconds, she was

completely focused on Echo. "How long have you been watching us?"

"Since you got here. Liar, what's your real name?"

These questions were coming in rapid fire, but Echo seemed able to keep up without a problem. "None of your business. Why are you watching us?"

"First to find out what you guys were doing," Imogen answered quickly, and then nodded toward me. "And then we wanted to see what kind of leader she was. Where did you come from?"

"I thought you were alone," Echo replied. Imogen's mouth opened with response, but a moment later she smiled and huffed with laughter.

"How many others?" I asked eagerly, unable to spectate any longer.

Imogen shook her head. "I'm not telling anything until our lives are guaranteed."

"If one of your friends hurts any of my men," I started threateningly, assuming by now that Echo and I weren't the only ones being watched. "I won't guarantee a goddamn thing."

"You guys are planning on moving here, right?" she asked, once more ignoring what I'd said. Once more wearing on my patience. She took our silence as the affirmative. "What if I told you that you couldn't stay?"

"Then I'd say go fuck yourself," I snapped, "Because we just cleared *and* fortified this place and you didn't say a thing."

"That was something called a hypothetical question," Imogen said flatly, and then glanced at Echo, "Is she always this hostile?"

I was so on edge that I glared at Echo, daring her to respond to that. She cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably at my side, causing Imogen to laugh. "I'm done playing games," I grumbled. "How about we talk like adults, or I will get hostile." I paused, and then added sneeringly, "Hypothetically."

Imogen gave an amused smile, and when she stood up from the chair I tensed unsurely. She confidently strode to the other side of the island, leaning forward against it and setting her arms on the top. She was still smirking, and as she drew in a breath to speak again her eyes scanned Echo up and down. She was being so unconcernedly smug that I wanted to punch her.

"There are three of us," she said, and at least I couldn't complain that she was going to start cooperating. "We've been living on this base for a couple years now."

"Are your companions armed with something more than a pocketknife?"

"It's my turn," Imogen replied. "Are there more of you than just the soldiers?"

"I want to know my soldiers are safe," I told her stubbornly. She dropped her arms to straighten up with irritation, which only made me glare. "Keep your hands above the counter."

She rolled her eyes, deliberately holding her hands up so I could see they were empty and then putting them flat against the counter. "One has a machete, the other has an automatic rifle." Her voice gained a bit of impatience as she then repeated, "Are there more of you than just the soldiers?"

"Yes," I answered. Imogen twitched her head with dissatisfaction. "Civilians. There are almost two hundred of us."

"No shit," she breathed, straightening up again in shock.

"Hands," I reminded grumpily.

"Your girl frisked me," she quipped with annoyance. "I'm clean. I should have you guys put your weapons down." But she replaced her arms on top of the counter without another complaint, and leaned forward with sudden excitement. "You're bringing them all here?"

I nodded. "How have you been getting in and out of all the buildings we

locked?"

"Ask me again when I trust you more." Imogen paused while she raised her arms to adjust her ponytail, and during it her eyes wandered over Echo again. I was scowling at her when she looked back at me. In response one corner of her mouth tilted with another smirk. "So you're in charge of all those people?" she asked, a hint of disbelief in her voice.

"You have a problem with what you've seen so far?" I retorted callously.

"You cleared this entire place without losing anyone," she started more kindly, trying not to offend me too greatly. Though there was still a bit of condescension to her tone, as if she didn't believe me capable. "I'm impressed." It felt like a backhanded compliment.

"I'm in charge of the soldiers here," I corrected, ignoring the aggravation she was causing. So far she didn't seem dangerous, the last thing we needed was violence where it wasn't necessary. "I answer to the captain."

Imogen's gaze wandered to Echo once more, directing the next question at her. "What's he like?"

Echo glanced from Imogen to me, as if asking whether or not she should respond. Then she nodded my direction, "She knows him better than I do."

"Which means she'll be more biased," Imogen answered.

Echo took a second to think before telling her, "He's fair."

"Uh huh," Imogen hummed. "How do you feed everyone?"

"Farming," I interjected since her question had been directed at Echo again. "And hunting. What do you eat?"

"MREs." Imogen outlined the shape of a large square with her hands. "We found boxes and boxes of them. Thousands." She shrugged. "Taste a little funky after all this time, and they don't quite hit the spot, but one has all the calories you need in a day."

has all the calories you need in a day."

"You've been living off one meal a day for the last few years?" I repeated in shock, to which Imogen nodded. "How many do you have left?"

"Enough to share," Imogen began, her lips curling into a grin, "If you got room for us in your well-earned metropolis."

"I need to meet your friends first," I told her instantly.

Her chin dropped with a knowing nod. "I have some conditions of my own." I raised one eyebrow to prompt the conditions. "We'll contribute however you want, but I get full disclosure and input on all major decisions. I'm in charge of my group, I'm sure you can understand that." This wasn't exactly a democracy, but I nodded that I did. "If we don't like how your captain runs things, then we're free to leave whenever. *With* enough supplies each to last at least a week."

"If I like your friends," I reminded.

"Deal." She stuck out her hand.

I began to reach for it, but paused thoughtfully. "You wouldn't mind temporary supervision, right?" Even though I'd phrased it as a question, my tone said it was anything but. "I'll pair each of you with two of my soldiers."

"Who you going to pair me with?" she asked with a smile in her voice, and her eyes went over to scan Echo again.

"Keep dreaming," I told her with irked assertiveness, and I heard Echo clear her throat awkwardly once more while her hand went to rub the back of her neck.

"Are we making you uncomfortable?" Imogen laughed amusedly.

My eyes narrowed even though the question hadn't been addressed to me. "*You're* making her uncomfortable."

"You guys were, uh, about to," Echo started, stumbling over her words.

Her cheeks were a bright pink, and while I knew it was just because of how uncomfortable she was, I hated that she was blushing in front of Imogen. "Um," she fumbled again, and then whined pleadingly, "Just make the deal."

Imogen watched Echo with an entertained smile while extending her hand to me once more. I took it in my own, squeezing so hard to get her attention that she winced. When I let it go she stuck it out to Echo, and Echo gave an unsure side-glance at me while taking Imogen's hand to give it a brief shake. At least Imogen didn't make it linger, and the moment she released Echo's grip she straightened up and motioned toward the door.

"I'll follow you."

I wasn't exactly comfortable yet turning my back on Imogen, but she was too talkative to walk ahead of us for any length of time. I couldn't tell if she just had an outgoing personality, if she was excited to be around new people, or just excited that we might accept them into our home. Maybe it was all of the above, but almost immediately after leaving the house she was striding along right between Echo and I, no longer guarded or being a pain in the ass.

"You guys hungry?" she asked cheerfully, head turning back and forth between us. I didn't want to be good friends. Mostly it was the way she kept looking at Echo. Secondly it was because we hardly knew her yet.

"I could eat," Echo told her timidly when I offered no response.

"There's a cafeteria with a bunch of tables and stuff," Imogen said with a grin. "We could have a dinner thing in there and eat some of the MREs. We could celebrate what you guys did here."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Echo shrug, and then Imogen looked at me as though asking for permission. Even if I wasn't crazily fond of our newest civilian yet, it was generous that she and her companions were so willing to share their food. It felt like she was putting a lot of faith in us in a rather short time, but then I remembered that they'd been watching us for the past week.

as for the past week.

I nodded my approval. "Sure."

It was quiet for a few seconds before Echo asked, "How have you been getting in and out of the buildings?"

"We haven't," Imogen answered, trudging toward the sidewalk and stomping on a metal grate. "Storm drains and sewer tunnels. They can get you almost anywhere."

"That's genius," Echo praised, leaving me in the street to walk over and look down through the grate Imogen was standing on.

"Thanks." Imogen gave her a grateful smile, and then took her by the shoulders to move her over a bit, facing her another direction. "That tunnel takes you straight to the park," she said, pointing down at a gap underground.

"You know all of them by heart?" Echo sounded fascinated.

"Hello!" I called impatiently. "Can we keep moving?"

They returned to my side, Echo looking somewhat embarrassed as we started once more in the direction of the arms room. All three of us were silent for the rest of the short walk. Powers and Barns were sitting outside the door when we got there, and when they saw Imogen both of them stood, watching curiously. It wasn't until we nearly reached them that Powers took a few steps forward.

"Ma'am," he said, handing me a single key. "It's a thing of beauty."

With the key in hand I strode toward the entrance, opening the arms room door. It swung open with a loud metallic wrench, a cold, stale air spilling out. It was too dark for me to see anything, so I pulled out my flashlight.

"Whoa," Imogen mumbled. "You guys got the armory open!"

I heard her footsteps pick up in my direction, but Echo must've known I'd

get mad because I didn't trust her yet, and stopped her. "Not a good idea," Echo warned quietly, Imogen's footsteps ceasing.

I crept into the small building, adjusting the beam of my flashlight to get a good look. It truly was a thing of beauty. It was obvious that half the weapons were gone, probably removed when the troops here had been called to deal with the start of the outbreak, but the remaining half were plenty in number. Even without doing a complete walkthrough I could see assault rifles, long-range rifles, pistols, grenade rifles, and machine guns along with crates and crates of ammunition.

I exited the armory with a grin on my face. After I relocked the door and stuck the key in my pocket I gave Powers an approving pat on the back. "Nice work."

"Thank you, ma'am."

I made my way back to Echo and Imogen, the next task already on my mind. "Where can we find your friends?"

She shrugged. "They're following some of your guys. If you get all your people back here they'll see me, see that I'm not in danger, and they'll come out."

"Okay," I murmured thoughtfully, and then motioned for Powers and Barns to come over. "This is Imogen," I told them.

"Nice to meet you," Imogen greeted, sticking out her hand for both to shake.

"Stay here with her," I instructed. "Echo and I are going to take the truck and start sending everyone back here."

When they nodded understandingly Echo and I trudged to the cargo truck. My soldiers were so scattered around base that it took us a while to even find everyone. We weren't sure who was being followed, so I had to make everyone walk back that way Imogen's friends would be able to keep up. A few hours later I'd counted that I'd seen all my soldiers who were scavenging, so we began heading back to the armory.

By the time we got there I was surprised to see two men that didn't belong to my platoon, sitting comfortably and having what looked like an entertaining conversation with Imogen and a group of my soldiers. Imogen wasn't joking, her friends must've come out of hiding the moment they saw she was unharmed. I had to admit it was more than comforting to me that they already appeared friendly with my men. At this point I doubted we'd have any issues with our newcomers.

I still wanted to meet the two new guys without the influence of any of my soldiers. So after parking the truck and getting out I stood near the door. "Imogen," I called, waving her over while Echo strode around to lean against the truck at my side. "Bring your friends."

The three of them came over, and once more I noticed how Imogen's brown eyes seemed especially interested in Echo. "Genevieve, Echo," she began, and then motioned to the first of her companions with the assault rifle. "This is my brother, Cyrus."

When she said that, I could tell immediately that they were related. Though Cyrus had a thicker build, he was tall and lean like she was. The structure of his face was hidden behind a scraggly black beard and mustache that matched his ear length black hair, but he had the same full lips, and the same big, bright brown eyes. They looked so much alike that I'd have thought they were twins if he wasn't so obviously older.

"And our good friend," Imogen said, pointing to the other guy with the machete, "We call him Ty."

Ty nodded at me in greeting, his nearly black eyes disappearing momentarily behind the short bill of his beanie. His dark brown hair stuck out the bottom of the hat along his neck, curling at the tips. The hair on his face and halfway down his neck was little more than scruff, and the lighter, almost bronze color of it nearly matched the tanned hue of his skin. It was hard to judge his age, but a safe guess seemed to be between the ages of Imogen and Cyrus.

"It's really nice to meet you," Cyrus said happily, extending his hand first to me and then to Echo.

"Yeah," Ty agreed, taking my hand with equal enthusiasm. "We were talking to some of your men about what you're doing here. It's inspiring. Really, amazing."

"Thank you," I told them both with a grin. They were so amicable that I could almost see why Imogen was their leader. She'd at least been just as interested in interrogating Echo and I as we'd been in interrogating her. They were also so polite it made something else seem apparent. "You're the smartass of the group, I see," I said to Imogen, my tone entirely friendly seeing as I didn't want any lingering hostility.

Before Imogen could respond to that Cyrus spoke up. "Oh, I can be a smartass," he told me with a laugh. "Let me show you around base and I can prove it to you."

It appeared sarcasm wasn't the only thing that ran in the family. "Excuse him," Ty interrupted faster than I could reply to the flirtation, and he set his hand on Cyrus' chest indicatively. "The only girl he's been around in years is his sister."

I chuckled, though I couldn't deny it was a little intimidating. It wasn't that I was afraid of him – the comment was harmless. Maybe I was still a little traumatized because of what happened to Kellan. "I'm flattered," I said politely, but I wanted to put the idea completely out of Cyrus' head. Before I could process the consequences I'd added, "But I'm accounted for." Maybe there was another part of me that thought it would change the way Imogen kept looking at Echo.

Out of the corner of my eye as that left my mouth I saw Echo do a double take. I nearly buried my face in my hands with regret, not because of its validity, but because I knew she'd want an explanation.

"Anyway," I continued hastily, hoping by some miracle she'd forget. "I want to put you guys with a couple of my soldiers, just as a cautionary measure at first." I gazed past them to my soldiers, picking out the ones I'd seen talking to Cyrus and Ty before I'd returned. "Hunt, Lee, McMahan, Jarvis," I called, waving them over. "Cyrus, you already met Hunt and Lee?" he nodded, giving them each a friendly shake. "Ty, I'll put you with McMahan and Jarvis." Then I looked at Imogen. "How'd you get

you with McMahan and Jarvis." Then I looked at Imogen. "How'd you get along with Powers and Barns?"

"Fine," she answered with an easy shrug.

"You still willing to share those MREs?" I asked hopefully, to which all three of the newcomers nodded. "Great, I'll send all nine of you with the truck to get them. Meet everyone else at the cafeteria."

Echo and I hadn't made the barracks a stop when we were telling all the soldiers to go back to the armory, so Hatfield and Carlson didn't know yet what was going on. I'd have sent someone else to tell them, but I wanted an update as soon as possible about camp. I started back in the direction of the barracks, Echo surprisingly silent at my side. I'd almost been beginning to think she really did forget, but that would've been too much to ask.

"Genevieve," she prompted a few minutes into our walk. I hummed in acknowledgement. "So?"

"So what?" I asked naively.

"You know." She got a few steps ahead of me, turning backwards so she could look at me while we walked. "What did you mean you're accounted for?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," I answered, trying to dodge the answer she really wanted. "That I didn't want him trying to flirt with me."

She shook her head, already looking like she was growing irritated at my ambiguity. "'No' is one of your favorite words. You could've just told him you weren't interested, but you didn't."

"Echo," I sighed with aggravation, but deep down I was pleading with her to let it go, to be restrained. "This isn't worth talking about."

"For Christ's sake, Genevieve," she huffed angrily, stopping so suddenly that I nearly ran into her. "You always say that, but it's worth it to me." I just stood there, staring at her as blankly as I could. "When do I get what I want?"

I want."

"I don't care what you want." I never got what I wanted either, and having to constantly do this was more painful and exhausting than she'd ever know.

She gave a bitter chuckle. "What happened to always being honest with me? That's bullshit." I shrugged with silent defiance. "Do you want to be with me?"

"No," I answered defensively, but the end tapered off into a higher pitch. It ended with the unintentional sound of uncertainty.

Echo's head tilted. "But…?"

"But," I repeated, struggling with the conflict at the tip of my tongue. I didn't know how to put it. Didn't know how to tell her honestly what I was really thinking without a crippling onslaught of guilt. "I don't want to be with anyone else," I finished in a rushed, frustrated sigh.

Her eyebrows furrowed with confusion. "What does that even mean?"

"I don't know!" I groaned. "Why do you always need an explanation? Why can't you just accept things the way I say them?"

"So, I'm the only one you want to be with?" Echo clarified, ignoring my request to let it go.

"No." I felt a cornered panic rise in my chest.

"You don't want to be with anyone else," she growled in aggravation, "But I'm not the only one you want to be with. Do you hear yourself right now?"

She was reading me too precisely, and through the building frenzy the only way I could think to get her to drop it was to make her mad. "Fine," I spat, already feeling a twinge of heartbreak because I could predict how she'd react to this. "I said it so you wouldn't get jealous, because I don't want him to die like Kellan did."

It got so quiet that I could hear Echo's breath had stopped, but even though her gray eyes moistened with tears, her mouth pursed furiously. "I hated," she began haltingly, having to swallow back the emotion in order to speak again, "Everything about Kellan. I've never been more jealous in my life as when he flirted with you, and the way he looked at you made me sick." She raised one hand to the height of her shoulder, and through the anger her fist clenched, as though she was battling with herself over a physical reaction. "But that is *not* why I killed him," she muttered, "And fuck you for even implying that it is."

As she turned to storm off I opened my mouth, halfway to calling for her. Halfway to begging for forgiveness. All morning I'd been desperate for her to stop being upset with me, and I'd just gone and pissed her off all over again. Worse than that, I hurt her. The guilt on behalf of my dead family whenever I felt something for her was severe, but increasing in severity was the agony I felt every time I did this to her. My sentiment for her was growing, and it was becoming more and more agonizing to hurt her. It was gaining on the obligation I felt toward hate, and lately no matter what I did it was painful.

From Under Our Feet

Between Two Points by The Glitch Mob

From Under Our Feet

Echo

I dropped my empty MRE package into a garbage bin near the entrance of the cafeteria, and then I strode out into the cold dusk. Even though nobody was outdoors, there were tables for eating at. I brushed the snow off the top of one and then plopped down on it, setting my feet on the bench below. Because I was still furious with Genevieve, inside was the last place I wanted to be. My only excuse for being out here in the cold was a cigarette, so I pulled one out of my backpack and lit it up.

The icy air seeped into my bare fingers faster than I'd expected, but I'd left my gloves inside and didn't want to venture back in. Instead, I shoved my hands into the pockets of my dark green coat, letting the cigarette dangle on my lips after every puff. Floodlights that Harvey had managed to attach an extra battery to lit up the inside of the cafeteria, but I turned in order to watch the fading orange of sunset. I'd been sure the contrast of dark out here and light inside was enough that I was invisible. A minute later, however, I heard the door open, and I glanced back over my shoulder to see who it was.

"Hey," Imogen greeted, lingering by the door. "Can I join you?"

I brushed the snow off the spot beside me. "Sure."

She smiled and made her way over. When she hopped up onto the table I offered her my pack of cigarettes, but she waved her hand with grateful dismissal. "No, thank you."

"Does it bother you?" I asked, pulling the lit one from my lips, preparing to toss it into the snow.

"No," she reassured me instantly. "You're fine. It's just not my thing." I

"No," she reassured me instantly. "You're fine. It's just not my thing." I returned it to my mouth while she asked, "What are you doing out here? Brooding?"

I let out an amused laugh. "Do I look like I'm brooding?" Her head nodded side to side with slight confirmation. "We work off the battle buddy system. I don't get much alone time."

"I see," she replied understandingly. "If you want to be alone with your alone time, I can go back inside."

I shook my head at her. "I'm not going to shoo you away. Especially if you came out here for the same reason."

"I mean, it is a little crowded after only being around two other people for so long," she agreed. "But really I just came out here because I saw you."

"So I could suffocate you with second hand smoke?" I asked sarcastically, tossing the nearly finished cigarette away. Trying not to blatantly address what sounded like an attempt at flirtation, I added, "Thanks for the food, by the way."

"Thanks for clearing this place of Ferals and letting us stay," she responded. I shrugged my reply, and a moment later she straightened with a question. "How'd you know I was following you?"

"I don't think you're as sneaky as you think you are," I told her with a chuckle. Realistically, she did a good job of following us, but I'd been in so many dangerous situations as a raider that I'd learned to watch my back. Imogen's question prompted one of my own. "How'd you pick the handcuffs we put on you?"

She gave a proud grin, reaching behind her to take something out of her back pocket. She produced a small metal nail file. I held my hand out curiously, and she gave it to me so I could study it. The tip of it was thin and pointed enough to undo handcuffs, but one entire edge of it had been cut with something sharper to make it serrated.

"Why this?" I asked, running my finger over the serrated edge and then handing it back to her.

handing it back to her.

"Learning to pick cuffs was sort of an afterthought," she answered, putting it back into her pocket. "But experience taught me that rope is used too, and rope has to be cut."

It took a few seconds for me to realize exactly what she was saying. When it sank in that she'd been a victim of people like me, it struck me with guilt. "I'm so sorry," I offered with almost pleading sincerity.

"Why?" she asked unconcernedly. "Just because you used to be a raider doesn't mean you need to feel bad. You weren't there."

My head cocked with involuntary surprise, and I tried to think back to whether or not Genevieve and I had discussed my past during the time Imogen was following close enough to have heard us. "How'd you know I used to be a raider?"

"Did I cross a line?" she asked worriedly. "Crap. I've always been bad with boundaries."

"It's fine," I offered. "I was just curious. Did someone tell you?"

She looked instantly relieved that I wasn't upset. "Nobody said anything. The scars kind of gave you away." She began to reach for my arm, "May I?" When I gave it to her she turned it over to look at the tattoo on my wrist. "And the tattoo. You're a little young for pre-outbreak ink. I haven't seen the rest of you, but I'm assuming it's the only one you have." She traced the circle around the 'A' with her finger before letting me go. "It's crude too. Unprofessional. A gang sign seemed most likely." She shrugged and then added with a playful laugh, "And 'Echo'? I mean, really? If that's not a raider nickname, then I don't know what is."

I laughed too, nodding my approval. "That's impressive."

"Thank you." Her teeth flashed in another proud grin. "Are you going to tell me what your real name is?" I shook my head. "Is it an 'upholding the enigma' sort of thing?"

I shook my head once more, trying not to grow impatient because

Imogen had no idea the iceberg she was chiseling at. "It's kind of a sensitive issue."

"Right, boundaries," she reminded herself. "It's been a long time since I've done the acquaintance thing. Sorry." I smiled to let her know it was okay. "What's this from?" She pointed to the healing wound on my cheek.

She sure did ask a lot of questions, but despite the fact that they seemed to keep taking a personal turn, I didn't mind. She had such an easy personality. "A fight."

"And I should see the other guy," she chuckled. Only, it filled me with a reminiscent shame, and I looked down guiltily. Imogen caught on quick, but even though she understood, her voice lacked judgment when she murmured thoughtfully, "You really are the dangerous one."

"Does that scare you?" She answered in the negative. "You a firm believer that people can change?" I asked jokingly.

She laughed with amusement, but disagreed with a decided look in her eyes. "People don't change. The world changes, experiences change, but deep down we never do." She shrugged as if suddenly growing timid. "I just believe that people should be forgiven. That's how I got over being taken, anyway." I felt kind of speechless. I didn't know what to say – forgiveness was such a fleeting wonder to me – and when I failed to come up with anything Imogen sighed. "And that's pretty heavy talk for acquaintances... I'll get better at this, I swear." I couldn't help but chuckle, and Imogen continued in order to change the subject. "You and Genevieve, is that a sensitive issue?"

"That," I started with an entertained huff, "Is more like a tall glass of fucked and complicated."

"My favorite discussion categories," she teased. "I picked up on fucked and complicated. And I'm not entirely convinced she wouldn't claw my eyes out if she saw me sitting here with you."

I tensed my bottom lip down, not able to disagree. "She's probably not a person you'd want friction with."

person you'd want friction with."

"Nope," Imogen agreed readily, her lips curling with a smirk, "But I wouldn't mind a little with you."

"That," I repeated, copying my sarcastic tone from moments before and trying not to burst into laughter so I could admit, "That was really smooth. And refreshingly straightforward."

"It was cheesy, but thanks," she said with a shy smile. "And life's too short for subtlety."

"I couldn't agree more," I laughed, adding a moment later, "But I'm afraid flirting with me is kind of a hopeless enterprise."

"Because of Genevieve," she said knowingly, to which I nodded. She drew in a thoughtful breath, saying as she let it out, "You guys don't act like any couple I've ever seen."

I'd almost forgotten how long she'd been following us, and that she'd seen sides of my relationship with Genevieve that nobody ever had. In a way it felt comforting, knowing somebody else might understand. "Saying the words 'couple,' 'dating,' or 'relationship' to Genevieve is a good way to get smacked."

Imogen chuckled with amusement. "What are you guys then?" I pursed my lips unsurely. "You're more than friends with benefits."

"What makes you say that?" I asked curiously. I wasn't sure how Genevieve would react if I even called us friends.

"I don't know," she gave a thoughtful shrug. "Watching you guys, in any given second there's a lot more that passes between you than just physical attraction." As she spoke she studied me, as though trying to decipher my relationship with Genevieve in my expression. "I've been following you for about a week, and it seemed like you were hardly ever more than five feet from each other. To be honest I was a little surprised when you came out here by yourself."

"Trust me, we're not attached at the hip," I told her amusedly.

"Pun intended?" Imogen gave a toothy grin.

It took me a second, but then I couldn't help but snort with laughter. I didn't get to laugh like this very often. It felt nice. "Yeah, you know what, pun intended," I chuckled. The end of her first statement felt like an implied question, so after my giggling tapered off I explained more seriously, "She said something really offensive earlier. I'm not exactly ready to let it go yet."

"That she's accounted for," Imogen guessed jokingly.

I smiled but shook my head. "After that. That's how it goes though. She says or does something nice, and follows it up with something vicious."

Imogen nodded with sympathy. "Why do you think she's like that?"

"Unlike you," I sighed, "She's not a big advocate of forgiveness."

"What did you do that needs forgiving?" she asked curiously.

Imogen was so easy to talk with that I opened my mouth to answer honestly, but before I could a figure came sprinting out of the dark. It was Hatfield, who'd been put in charge of monitoring the radio. "Where's LT?" she asked, panting for air.

"Inside," I answered, turning curiously when Hatfield instantly shot past me to run into the cafeteria. "Something's wrong," I mumbled, and heard Imogen shift on the table to turn and look too.

Hatfield ran straight up to Genevieve, and as her lips moved to explain why she looked so panicked I watched all the blood drain from Genevieve's face. Blake was standing next to her, and at the news he threw one hand to his head, instantly looking more panicked than Hatfield. It was like a domino effect, the nearest soldiers were looking at Genevieve. Then they turned, said something to the person next to them, and in seconds they were all talking wildly. I began to stand, about to run indoors to see what was happening, but before I could both Genevieve and Blake began sprinting my direction.

"Echo!" Genevieve called, waving for me to come as she ran right past. She didn't even stop to scowl at Imogen, and with how fast she was going it was as though she wasn't even injured.

I was officially so concerned that I didn't say goodbye to my new friend, and immediately sprinted after the retreating pair. We rushed right to the barracks, bounded up the stairs, and burst through the door to the room the radio was in. Genevieve threw herself into the seat in front of the desk, taking the handheld microphone in her hand faster than I could blink.

"Cap," she breathed worriedly. "Cap, it's me, come in."

There was a momentary silence, and then his voice whispered over the radio. "Gen," he ignored a proper greeting. "We know what's been stealing food. They came as soon as the sun set. Nobody knew they were even here-" he paused, but there was still a lack of crackle over the radio as if he hadn't released the talk button. "Until it was too late."

The crackle started, so Genevieve leaned forward anxiously. "What came, Cap? Raiders?" There was such a long pause that Genevieve prompted through a terrified whimper, "Cap?"

"Ferals," he said, so quietly we could hardly hear it. "We got most of them, but they're smart. They hunt. Be caref-" His voice was cut off by static.

"Cap?" Genevieve said almost pleadingly into the receiver. "Cap?" There was an entire minute of silence. "Somebody?"

When there was no reply Genevieve threw the microphone down and stood. "Shit," she breathed, folding her hands behind her head in a panic. "Fuck." She was breathing so rapid it was a wonder how she was still standing. "We have to go. Now!"

I was nearest the door, and when she made a move to sprint out it I stepped in front of her. "Hold on," I said, putting my hands on her shoulders. I wanted to give Cap more of a chance. We had to hear from

him again. "Calm down for a second."

"We're wasting time!" she shouted instantly, shoving my hands off.

"We don't know who's left." I was trying to stay calm, but I was almost as terrified as she was. Blake had fallen into a chair, and now he was staring blankly at the floor. "Take a second to think. We don't know what we're dealing with."

"I am not leaving one single survivor out there alone!" Her eyes narrowed at me dangerously. "Now get out of the way or follow me or so help me God, Echo, you may not survive the next ten seconds."

It was so scary how completely serious she was that I nodded obediently. "Okay, I'm coming."

The moment she shot out the door Blake stirred into action, instantly going after her. I followed both of them at wind breaking speed back to the cafeteria. "Datsyuk! Morgan!" Genevieve yelled into the group of soldiers. She didn't even wait to give instructions once the two started following, and darted back outside to the truck. When she got there she turned to stop Blake from jumping onto the bed. "I need you to stay here."

"No," he protested pleadingly. "Genevieve, please. Casey's there."

"I'll radio in the second I know she's okay," she told him, reaching up to take his face and make him look at her, because he was staring longingly at the vehicle. "But I can't leave without knowing this base is in the best hands. I need you in charge." His eyes filled with worried tears. "We can't lose this place too, Blake."

Reluctantly, Blake nodded, and without another word Genevieve hurried around to the driver's side of the truck. I jumped into the passenger side, and what seemed like seconds later we were already speeding past the gate of the base. It was a long, tense drive, even though Genevieve was going so fast I was afraid we might not even make it there. I tried to sleep, but between the panic pouring off Genevieve and my own concern about the people at camp, it was impossible.

It was the middle of the night when we arrived, and Genevieve shot straight past the motor pool to park the truck as close to the center of camp as the forest would allow. Before getting out of the cabin she clipped her flashlight to the underside of her rifle and clicked it on. I turned my light on too, gripping it in my left hand while I pulled my pistol out with my right. We met Datsyuk and Morgan at the back of the truck.

"Box formation," Genevieve announced in little more than a whisper. "There could still be Ferals around, stay alert."

I was glad it was too dark to receive the full force of damage all at once. Even as we began our search, it was almost too much. Camp hadn't just been attacked like last time. It had been devastated. The first tent we looked in for survivors was full of blood. Three people lay dead on the floor, bled out from bite wounds on the neck. The next tent was the same thing – two people, bite wounds on the neck. Every Feral I'd ever come in contact with didn't care where it bit. Even the ones smart enough to group during the camp's first attack hadn't been this organized.

We strode through the tents toward the cabins, and the more we walked the shallower I could hear Genevieve's breathing was getting. Camp was everything she lived for, and now it was destroyed. I tried my hardest to keep an eye on her while looking out for any remaining Ferals, because I was worried she might be on the edge of losing it. It was this distraction that caused me to gasp and jump back with frightened terror when my light fell on a posed figure to our right. It was standing upright, pale in the beam because it was completely nude. But it was frozen in place, unmoving because it was impaled on a branch of the tree behind it. The Feral's mouth was still wide with a soundless roar, eyes still half-squinted in animalistic fury.

Unlike every other Feral I'd seen, it wasn't emaciated. After I recovered from shock and we all moved closer to get a better look, I had to do a double take. If it weren't so disgustingly dirty I'd have said the thing looked healthy, and well fed. Its skeleton was veneered in lean muscle. These were the Hunters.

"What the hell?" Morgan murmured, leaning in to get a closer look at the

Feral.

"What?" Genevieve prompted.

"Look." Morgan pointed as close as she dared, unwilling to actually touch the body. She pointed first to the genital area of it, and then to the creature's face. Both were smeared in the remains of a dry black substance. "Is it blood?"

I got within an inch of the Feral, examining the black. "I think it's…" I grabbed a handful of snow off the ground and used it to wipe at the beast's face. "Dirt. Or mud."

I glanced over to see Genevieve's eyebrows were furrowed thoughtfully. "You think it put the mud there for stealth?"

My lips pursed with concentration, but a moment later I shook my head. "If that's what it wanted it would've covered its whole body, but it only did these two places. Like it didn't want them to be seen."

It grew so silent that I heard Datsyuk gulp. Genevieve agreed with him, "Let's keep moving."

We only got to a campsite fifteen feet away before Genevieve gave a heartbreaking whimper. She broke formation to run ahead, and dropped to her knees in front of a dying campfire. In front of a small, lifeless body.

"No," she whispered, ignoring that I'd come up behind her as she turned the body over. What I saw put an agonizing pain in my chest, and my eyes filled with tears. It was Madison. Sweet, young, strawberry loving Madison. "No," Genevieve repeated firmly, rubbing her hands over her eyes and reopening them as if willing it to be untrue. When she saw that nothing had changed she stood, tears streaming down her face. "No, no. NO!" she hollered.

"Genevieve," I said soothingly, taking a step toward her.

She pulled her knife from its sheath, and as she turned to bury the blade into the nearest tree she let out such a tremendous yell that it echoed back at us through the dark night. She wasn't done. She gripped the

back at us through the dark night. She wasn't done. She gripped the handle of the knife in both hands, trying furiously to pull it out so she could stab the trunk again. But she'd buried it so deep the first time that it wouldn't budge.

"Genevieve," I repeated, cautiously setting my hands on her shoulders from behind, prepared to dodge if she turned to take it out on me. "Not yet," I whispered, blinking the tears from my own eyes and saying the only thing I knew that would get her to compose herself for now. "We need to keep looking for survivors."

Her shoulders shook with a silent sob. She sniffled, and then took in a deep breath to calm down. It still took her another minute to face me, but eventually she turned and nodded with resolve. Datsyuk pulled the knife from the tree for her, and she held it together while we continued on to the cabins. It was the same – civilians and soldiers were dead. Except for a few spots, where some of the bloodstains in the snow were altered. There were stains, but no bodies, and crimson trails seemed to lead off into the woods.

Genevieve noticed it too, because the beam of her light followed one of the trails as far as it could. It appeared she was about to say we should track it, but as she opened her mouth a stick cracked from somewhere in the dark.

"Lights," she instructed in a hurried whisper.

We all clicked off our flashlights, ducking behind the nearest tent and relying only on the moonlight to show us what had made the noise. It didn't take long for it to come into view. A Feral like the dead one we'd seen. A Hunter. Only this one was female, and much smaller than the first even though it looked far from starving.

It lumbered to a body near a pit of glowing embers, and grabbed a wrist in one hand. The creature turned and tried to drag the body into the woods where it had just come from, but the dead man was more than twice its size. It wasn't strong enough. From our hiding place I could hear it give a frustrated growl as it gripped the man's wrist in both hands, tugging harder. When that didn't work it bent over the dead man,

wrapped its arms around the torso, and tried to lift it over its shoulder. Still the body wouldn't budge, and in a horrifying display of problem solving the Hunter dropped down, giving it a push to try and roll it in the right direction.

Only, that didn't work either. When all methods failed the Hunter lowered its face menacingly close to the body's. It let out a deafeningly resentful howl, and in an uncontrolled display of embittered aggression it slammed its fists against the dead man's chest. I heard Genevieve take in a deep breath, and when I looked over she had her eyes closed like she couldn't stand watching it anymore. As she let out the air she aimed her rifle, and the moment she pulled the trigger the Hunter collapsed.

I already had so many questions. Where did these Hunters come from? Were they recently bit, and it was a new breed? Or were Ferals truly just getting smarter? But nobody at camp or at the base could answer my questions, and now wasn't the right time to ask.

By the time we reached the tent where the radio was I'd counted six more dead Hunters, for a total of eight. It was bad enough to be attacked by a group of normal Ferals, but thinking about groups of Hunters that were capable of devastation like this chilled me straight to the bone. At the entrance of the radio tent Genevieve set a hand on the flap, and she froze. We had no idea what happened to Cap, but it was obvious she was preparing for the worst.

Then she walked in. I went in right at her side, and while the beam of my light scanned over every inch of the tent to search for threats, Genevieve's light went straight to the floor. Straight to him. And to the Hunter he'd taken out right before he died. I expected Genevieve to react like she had when we found Madison, but it was nothing like that. Every breath she took was shallow and shaky. The focus of the lighted rifle in her hands was unsteady, but she wouldn't look away.

After a few moments she knelt and pulled the bill of Cap's hat down so it would cover his eyes. "Why'd you send them away?" she whispered, only the smallest sniffle betraying her apparent calm. She didn't linger once she stood back up, and I barely caught the glimmer of tears in her eyes

as she hurried out of the tent.

"Genevieve," I called as I burst out after her, worried she'd run off to hide the emotion. I almost knocked her over because she'd stopped outside to wait for us. "Do you think there are survivors?"

"There has to be," she answered confidently. "We didn't see Casey. Or April."

"Okay," I started unsurely. "But where are they?"

She stared into the dark for a few moments before looking at me. "The motor pool." She immediately began heading in that direction, Datsyuk and Morgan following behind us. "Cap always said the Strykers were our best defense against Ferals. He would've put as many people as he could inside them."

Genevieve was leading the way in such a hurry that she was almost jogging, and when we finally made it across camp to the motor pool she ran right up to a Stryker. "Hey!" she called loudly, knocking her palm against the heavy door and then reaching for the lever to open it. "It's Genevieve."

The large door dropped open, and when we shined our lights inside and illuminated a handful of people, a small wave of relief washed over me. They looked disoriented by our lights, and most of them were still terrified and reluctant to get out of the vehicle. With some coaxing they made their way out into the night.

"Stay close," Genevieve told them, moving to the next vehicle.

She called to the people inside again, and then opened it up. There were more people in this one, about twenty of them all crammed together in the safety of the Stryker. A couple were soldiers, most of them were petrified civilians. One of them was April, and when she came out she had a concerned look on her face.

"Cap?" she asked Genevieve. Genevieve heard, but she couldn't even look April in the eyes as she strode to the next vehicle without answering.

"Cap?" she asked again, turning to me. All I could do was shake my head, and in response her chin dropped sadly.

The heavy door of the next Stryker fell open, and I heard a familiar voice practically sigh Genevieve's name. A moment later Casey came rushing out of the vehicle. Even though she wrapped her arms around Genevieve's neck in a relieved hug, Genevieve couldn't find the spirit to return it. Casey's eyes landed on me, and she immediately hurried over to give me a hug too.

"Where's Blake?" she asked, pulling away from the embrace to look me in the eye.

"He's fine," I assured her. "He's watching over the base for us."

She smiled with relief while her gaze wandered past me to April, who I could vaguely hear was asking people about their health. "I should help," Casey mumbled gloomily, her moment of relieved joy now completely gone.

Casey wandered off, so I strode over to Genevieve, who was helping the remaining people out of the last Stryker.

"Ma'am," one of few remaining soldiers prompted as he got out. I recognized him as Home Squad's leader. One who'd always had issues with me being around, and one who'd never needed to refer to Genevieve as 'ma'am' because they shared rank. "What should we do?"

"I don't know." Genevieve glanced around at the people before looking back at him. "Who did Cap leave in charge?"

"Well," the soldier began hesitantly, "You."

Genevieve paled. Every ounce of blood drained from her face, and I could've sworn she stopped breathing. Her face was expressionless and ghostly white, completely blank as to what she was feeling. But it didn't matter that it wasn't obvious. I could see it. She was terrified, and heartbroken. And completely, one hundred percent done. She hadn't blinked or inhaled since receiving the news, until finally she swallowed with difficulty.

with difficulty.

"I, uh," she whispered, taking in an unsteady breath. "I need a minute." Before he or any of the other soldiers who'd gathered around for instruction could say anything, Genevieve sprinted off. I knew she wasn't coming back.

"Shit." I had to go after her, but I couldn't just leave everyone out here without knowing what to do, and I didn't trust any of the other soldiers enough to make the call. So I looked straight at Home Squad's lieutenant. "Have everyone put everything they want to take in the vehicles – personals, medical supplies, any food that's left, and crops. We'll need crops to plant. We're all leaving here first thing in the morning. Nobody goes anywhere alone."

I'd already turned to start heading where Genevieve had disappeared, until the LT grumbled, "I don't take orders from raiders."

I froze with shocked fury, clenching my fists at my sides so I wouldn't turn around and deck him. It didn't matter one damn bit what he thought of me, but the fact that he was pulling this shit right now made me furious. "Are you kidding me?" I asked angrily, turning to face him. "Most of the people at this camp are dead! Killed while you were holed up in a Stryker! We don't even know how many of those Hunters are still out there, and you want to fucking argue about who's giving you orders?" He looked shocked that I'd snapped so easily, and I'd even say he was a little afraid judging how he was leaning away from me. "You don't like me? Fine. But do not pull this petty bullshit when it's *their* lives you're gambling!" I straightened out of my aggressive stance, saying with a little more composure, "Unless you have a better idea, get to work."

It wasn't until I finished, panting for air because in my rant I'd hardly stopped to breathe, that I realized how truly mad I'd been. My eyes involuntarily wandered past the soldier to April, and I was relieved when she gave me an almost surprised nod of approval. The soldier stood there for a few silent moments, and then without saying anything else to me, he turned to begin giving instructions.

I probably should have stuck around to help with the orders I gave, but I

was more worried about Genevieve. She'd gone off alone, and while I had my suspicions about where that was and that it was safe, it felt as though being alone right now was the last thing she needed. Before I could go find her, however, I had to go back to the radio tent, because I was almost positive she hadn't gone there to tell Blake that Casey was fine.

I trudged all the way back to the other side of camp. We'd searched everywhere, and I was fairly certain there were no more Hunters around, but I kept my gun out just in case. When I reached the entrance of the tent, however, I couldn't go in. Death wasn't new to me. I'd been surrounded by it since the start of the outbreak, but this time seemed different.

I don't know when it happened, or how, or why, but I cared. My eyes filled with unexpected tears as I stood there and thought about the fact that Cap was dead. The man who'd had mercy on me, and was the reason I was alive. That most of the civilians, the ones who'd smiled or scowled at me in passing, the ones I never even talked to but that had become part of my home, they were dead too. And little Madison. The kid Genevieve so clearly loved, and who'd never looked at me like I was something to hate or fear. I didn't want to care. It hurt too much.

Sniffling, I pressed the sleeve of my coat to my eyes to soak up the tears, and then I entered the tent. *Don't look*. I kept my eyes on the radio, but I could still see the bodies in my peripherals. So I shut my eyes tight after I'd turned it on, and brought the microphone close to my lips.

"Hello?" I didn't have the heart to try being formal.

It took a few seconds, but then Blake's voice came over the radio. "Echo? Where's Genevieve? Is Casey okay?"

"Casey's fine. She's good." I took in a deep breath to suppress the emotion, but all it did was fill my nose with the scent of death. "But everyone else… it's bad. I'm sorry, Blake, Cap's gone."

There was a minute of silence, and even from hundreds of miles away I could almost see that Blake was biting back tears. "And Genevieve?

could almost see that Blake was biting back tears. "And Genevieve? Where is she?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "She ran off. I have to go find her."

"Echo." Blake's voice was full of concern. "Take care of her. Be strong for her."

His request gave me what I needed to take one more deep breath and compose myself completely. "I will," I told him confidently.

I switched off the radio and made my way outside, heading in the direction of our tent and hoping that's where she'd gone. It was completely dark inside when I got to it, so I kept my flashlight on and stepped in. Genevieve was lying on her cot, facing the door, so motionless and pale that she almost looked like one of the bodies. I'd expected her to be bawling, but there were no tears streaming down her face. She wasn't sniffling or blubbering. She was doing what she always did – donning an iron shield against anything that could hurt her. Shutting herself off so she couldn't feel a thing.

"I talked to Blake," I told her, reaching for matches in my backpack to light the lantern.

Before lighting it I glanced over my shoulder, searching for a nod, or some form of acknowledgement. It didn't even seem like she'd heard me. I was wrong. She hadn't shut herself off from emotion. She was so deep in it she couldn't see or hear anything else. I'd been there before. Catatonic. Outside she was empty, but inside she was losing it.

I lit the lantern, dropped the matches back into my bag, and then strode over to her cot. I began to lower myself onto it without her even appearing to realize I was there. First my knees, then my backside, but the moment I propped myself on my elbow, about to lie down completely, her eyes whipped in my direction. She just stared right through me though, almost like I wasn't even there.

"Genevieve?" I whispered, trying to get her full attention, trying to make sure she at least wasn't in shock.

She never liked being vulnerable around me. I expected her to push me away, to get mad that I was acting too familiar and start yelling, especially because of her emotional state. But her name was like a cue, and at hearing it she finally saw me. Her eyes filled first with recognition, and then with tears. A hand landed on my hip while her bottom lip twitched, and I braced myself for the angry shove.

Just when I expected to feel it the tears spilled from her eyes, and at the same time the corners of her mouth dropped she let out a ground-shaking sob. It was such a surprise that she didn't even try to hide it from me, and even more of one when the hand on my hip moved around to my back, and her other slid beneath me as she scooted forward. Her arms curled around my waist. She gripped me to her while she buried her face against the top of my chest, and she broke down.

"They're gone," she cried, and I could already feel the dampness spreading through my shirt. "Cap's gone."

I recovered from the shock, relaxing into her hold even though the tightness of it was stunting my breathing. "I know," I murmured soothingly, raising a hand to comfortingly set it on the back of her head.

"You don't," she sobbed, "know." Her shoulders rocked, and she took in a series of blubbering breaths in order to speak again. "He's gone, and I lied to him about you and he was so disappointed in me about Kellan." Her fingers clamped around the back of my shirt so she could pull me even closer. "He was so disappointed and I can never make it right. And what if I fail all these people?"

"No," I breathed, running my fingers through her hair while I nuzzled my cheek against the top of her head, trying my hardest to be comforting. This wasn't the Genevieve I knew. The Genevieve who came to my rescue with a confidence I'd always envied. The one who was my constant savior. It was my turn to be the foundation. It was my turn to be strong and impenetrable, even though seeing her like this was breaking my heart. "He wasn't disappointed. He made you commander. He was so proud of you, and you can be amazing."

At that she sobbed once more, breathing in another staccato of breaths

At that she sobbed once more, breathing in another staccato of breaths so fast it sounded painful. "I can't." Against the skin of my chest I felt her eyes shut tight, squeezing out a flow of fresh tears as she whimpered, "Hayden, I can't."

My heart stopped, and through the agonizing reminder I finally couldn't keep my own eyes from getting watery. But I had to hold it back. Strong, even if it meant letting her call me by that name. Impenetrable, even if it meant being something excruciating.

"Okay," I whispered, brushing her hair back from her face, trying to think of what else to do or say. I couldn't tell her it was fine. Nothing was fine. I couldn't even tell her everything would be fine. I had no idea if it would. But her biggest fear was being alone. "It's me," I murmured soothingly, "I'm here." In response her arms squeezed me even tighter, as though she had to assure herself of it. "I'm here."

My hand left her head as my arm fell over her shoulders to hold her, and I rubbed her back to keep reminding her of my presence. Her grip on me was so unrelenting I didn't know how she was keeping it up. Every time I stopped, or if my hand even slowed its motion against her because I was growing tired, she clutched me harder to her, only relaxing just slightly when I resumed.

Gradually her grip weakened, along with her sobbing. But eventually it was just the grip that ceased, so that her arm was only draped across my waist while the other was beneath me. Even in her sleep, she cried. They were soft, heartbreaking whimpers that, every time I heard one, caused me to pick up rubbing her back again, even if I was halfway to sleeping myself. I held her for hours, unsure of if I'd ever completely drift off, until the next thing I knew she was standing beside the cot in the pale gray of dawn, hand gently shaking me by the shoulder.

"Echo," she said softly, "Wake up."

It was such a surprise that I rolled, fully awake in the blink of eye. My mind immediately began looking her over, assessing how she was, if she needed more comfort. She looked exhausted. There were heavy bags under her eyes, and they were still a little red from crying. Her cheeks

were a bit rosy too, irritated by a night's exposure to salty tears. But when I appeared startled at being woken, one corner of her mouth twitched with an amused smirk. She'd regained control of herself, and whether or not she was still breaking down on the inside, she'd managed to bottle it all up again.

"Can I have this?" she asked, reaching for the pillow beneath my head, voice still quiet as though trying not to disturb me. "I'm packing."

I sat up, and she took the pillow to put it in the trunk on the floor. "Do you need help?"

She looked around the tent thoughtfully, and then pointed to the cot. "The blanket."

I pulled it out from under me and gave it to her, standing while she folded it into the trunk. My arms lifted high above my head, stretching to try and work the tiredness from my body. While my hands were still in the air Genevieve strode right up to me, and I froze with shock when she wrapped her arms around my waist and buried her face in my neck.

It almost felt like I was still asleep and dreaming, until I heard her voice say, "Thank you." Assured that this was very real even if I was still surprised, I lowered my arms, curling them around her shoulders to return the embrace. "For what you did last night."

I closed my eyes and set my cheek against her head, savoring this moment while it would last. "I'll always be here for you."

"I'm not just talking about that," she said, pulling back to meet my gaze but not disentangling herself from me. "April told me what you did. You took charge because I wasn't ready." She loosened her arms, bringing them forward to set her hands on my hips. "You stepped up." Her head tilted just enough for her to rest her forehead against mine, and it filled my stomach with a flurry of butterflies. "Thank you." And she kissed me.

This was what I always wanted from her – this gentleness and sincerity. It was so overwhelming that I had to remind myself to breathe. My heart was fluttering wildly. "I guess I care more than I wanted to," I admitted.

She smiled, not looking the least bit surprised, but she didn't say anything. She just stood there, unmoving, looking so admiringly impressed by what I'd done. With a slow timidity I brought my hands to her face, hoping she wouldn't pull away like she usually did. "You don't have to do this, you know." There were rare occasions that she'd been kind to me before, but this was a side of her I'd never seen. She even let my thumb stroke her cheek without so much as blinking. "You can give command to someone else."

"I do have to," she disagreed, reaching up and taking one of my hands in her own to bring it down between us, but not to get me to stop touching her. It was so she could play with my fingers, focusing on them instead of looking at me while she spoke. Probably so I wouldn't notice how watery her eyes got again. "These people trusted Cap, and he trusted me." She sniffled, regaining control a few moments later and looking me in the eyes once more while she blinked away the tears. "If I give it to someone else and they mess up, I'll feel like it was my fault anyway for giving it up." She shrugged, running her fingertips down the length of my palm. "At least this way I know I'm doing everything I can."

"You take on obligations you don't need to," I told her gently. I didn't want her to take command. She had too much to worry about already. But even last night I'd known deep down she would take it, because her sense of duty had always been overwhelming. "But whatever you need from me, whatever will help, it's yours."

Her dark brown eyes met mine and seemed to widen with a new recognition. Clearing her throat, she released my hand, saying in an almost formal tone, "Thank you."

She turned to walk away, to keep packing, but I reached for her wrist, desperate to know this wouldn't be the only time things would be like that between us. "Genevieve-"

"No," she interrupted kindly, turning back and pressing a soft finger to my mouth to stop me. "Please, just this once let the moment be what it was." She adjusted her hand to run her thumb over my bottom lip. "That's what I need from you right now." Almost as if she knew it's what I needed, she

gave me a last, gentle peck before severing all contact.

"Okay." I nodded with a half-hearted smile. "I can do that."

While she turned to continue packing, I glanced around the tent for anything of mine that I wanted to bring. I didn't have much. Everything I'd brought with me from the complex fit into my backpack. All there really was around was the blankets and pillow on my cot, and my eating utensils.

"If you want," Genevieve said, pulling the lantern down to store it in the trunk, "You can put anything of yours in here."

"Thanks," I told her gratefully.

I strode across the tent to my own cot and gathered the blanket off of it. Once it was folded I made my way to Genevieve's trunk, glancing down into it to search for the most strategic spot to place the blanket. I could feel Genevieve's eyes on me as I bent over to set it down, and when I straightened up again I met her unwavering gaze.

"What?" I asked, feeling my cheeks tint at the hint of admiration still present in her glance.

Her dark brown eyes scanned my face, and then moved to the trunk awkwardly. "Nothing," she murmured fumblingly, motioning to the footlocker. "I'm done, that's all."

"Oh." I turned hastily to grab my dishes and toss them in, reluctant to make her impatient if I was taking too long. "Me too."

She closed the lid and secured the latches, we both grabbed our backpacks, and when she reached down for a handle I took the one on the opposite side. We lugged the heavy trunk all the way to the motor pool, shoving it up onto the nearly full bed of one of the cargo trucks. A couple of the vehicles were filled with peoples' belongings; others were carrying crops and medical supplies.

"Um," Genevieve started, dropping her backpack onto the ground, "Some

of the civilians stayed up all night digging graves. I was going to go…" She cleared her throat, breaking eye contact to push back emotion. "Say goodbye."

"Do you want me to come?" I asked gently, worried about her breaking down like she had last night.

She shook her head. "Unless you really wanted to, I kind of wanted to do it alone."

I climbed up to sit on the edge of the truck bed. "I'll wait here."

While she strode away I watched civilians and soldiers continue to load things into the vehicles. You'd think for living in a world like this one that people wouldn't hoard as much as we used to, but everyone had so many things. Blankets, bags of clothes, fold up chairs, and sentimental stuff like photo albums. Sometimes I thought about going back to Rochester, and taking something sentimental from my old house. Aside from the fact that I didn't know if I could stand being back, it was so long ago that I couldn't even think of anything I'd want to gather.

It was taking a bit of time for Genevieve to return, so I pulled my backpack around to grab a cigarette and then threw it back over my shoulders. I'd just lit it up when I saw her trudging back. She made her way to me, and with a sigh turned to lean back against the truck bed. But she did it close to me, so close that even though she was leaning against the truck, she was tilting sideways against a leg I had dangling over the edge.

I watched her for a minute, studying her mood and prepared to offer any comfort she might need, but I couldn't get an accurate read. "You okay?"

Her shoulder rose and fell against my thigh. "I will be."

I threw my arm straight out over her shoulder, sticking the lit cigarette in front of her to offer it. She took it, inhaled a breath of smoke, and then passed it back to me. We lingered in silence for a few minutes, and it wasn't just us. The whole camp was quiet, even though people were moving around. During that short period Genevieve let out a series of

heavy sighs.

"Echo," she prompted eventually, letting out yet another. I hummed that I was listening. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, staring straight ahead instead of looking over her shoulder at me. "I'm sorry about what I said yesterday. About Kellan." I felt a reminiscent pang in my chest, but at the same time it felt good to hear her actually admit feeling bad for something. "I know that's not why you did it, and I didn't mean it at all." I felt her shrug against me again. "I just… I'm sorry."

I didn't know what was prompting the sincerity, but I wasn't about to ignore or deny it. "It's okay. I know you were just saying it to get me off your back… I mean, it still hurt, but it's okay." In response to that she raised one hand to massage her fingers over her eyes. Though, I couldn't tell from where I was sitting if she was getting teary or if it was just the stress. "Do you want to explain?" I asked passively. "Or do you still want me to let it go?"

She gave another of those deep sighs. "If I'm honest with you right now," she began to ask, still refusing to make eye contact with me, "Will you promise not to ask questions?" I murmured an affirmation. "All I can tell you, is that you have a way of getting past the walls I built to keep myself safe. And it's painful. And when you push, it terrifies me."

I'd expected some obscure excuse like she usually gave, but that was so much more than I'd expected her to say. Even though it made me have a million more questions, I promised not to ask any about it, so I kept my mouth shut. When I failed to respond she finally glanced back at me, searching for a reply.

"I don't know what you want me to say if I'm not allowed to ask questions," I told her, and she shrugged once more unsurely. "Actually, can I ask you one thing? It's not about yesterday, but if you don't want to answer, I won't press it." Hesitantly, she nodded. "Does last night scare you?"

She stared at the snowy ground thoughtfully before meeting my gaze, and I could tell that she knew I didn't mean the Hunters, or Cap, but that she'd let me take care of her. She'd let me see her completely vulnerable

she'd let me take care of her? She'd let me see her completely vulnerable? "No." She sounded so confident, and she looked so decided, and she'd been leaning against me since she got back like for once it was so casual to be close. I believed it.

Before I could say anything a soldier strode around the side of the vehicle. "Captain," he addressed Genevieve, and took in a breath to continue speaking.

"Don't," Genevieve interrupted, and she inhaled deep to force back the emotion. "Don't ever call me Captain."

"Sorry, ma'am," he apologized hastily. "Habit." She stayed silent to let him speak. "I think we're ready."

"Good." Genevieve nodded her satisfaction. "Get everyone in the vehicles." While the soldier hurried away to get everyone in a vehicle, she looked at me, giving an almost spiritless smile. "Let's go home."

Pack Your Things

*** *Little nod to The Walking Dead with this chapter song here. I wanted to update this yesterday, but, better late than never.*

BCRebel – you're maybe possibly close with your prediction about Dugan's wife. Gonna flesh that out a bit more.

SweetFangs – I'm glad you like that I put songs! It's good to know it's appreciated… sometimes it takes just as long to pick a song as it does to write the chapter haha.

On that note, if you guys ever have a song that makes you think of any of the characters, let me know! I'll give it a listen :)

Blackbird's Song by Lee Dewyze

Pack Your Things

Dugan

My eyes were closed, but I could still picture the ceiling above me perfectly. Every speck of that popcorn coating was burned into the back of my eyelids. All night, all day long I'd been staring at it. Staring until my eyes stung. Staring until they filled with tears that I thought I didn't have anymore. Staring until I hated every last one of those goddamn popcorn specks. The only relief was opening my eyes again and finding the sun had gone down once more, because in the dark all the specks blurred together. Blurred into one mass of indistinguishable anything. Empty, like my stare. Like every sob from Trish in the hallway, crying and crying until my ears were sore. Empty like the bedroom and the bed my dead daughter was lying on.

I didn't want to be here anymore, and now that it was dark again we could leave this haunted place.

The springs of the small bed beneath me creaked with protest when I sat

up, dropping my feet over the side. It took a tremendous effort to stand, to find the spirit and the will and the strength. The only reason it was possible was because of that intense desire to be anywhere but here.

It had been hours since I'd heard a sound from Trish, but when I opened the door of the second bedroom in this empty house she was sitting in the same spot. Glued to the first step of the stairs at the end of the hall. I stopped at her side, unsure of whether or not she'd look at me. She hadn't looked at me when I moved into that second bedroom. Now her gaze never left the blank spot of the wall across from her. I trudged down the stairs, stopping once more at the bottom.

"*Trish," I croaked, my voice hoarse from a day of silence. I swallowed, hoping that would help because I didn't dare disturb the stillness by clearing my throat. "We have to go."*

Her soggy red eyes fell on me and lingered, hollow, and then moved to the closed door at the opposite end of the hall. When they went again to the wall across from her and she still hadn't acknowledged even hearing me, I walked away. I lumbered to the front door of the house, my focus locked on the handle. I watched it, wondering if I'd even be able to open it. Wondering if this wasn't some nightmare and leaving would only take us right back through that window to a bloodstained bed. I watched it until Trish finally came down, her backpack in place, ready to leave.

I opened the door, and as we stepped out into the dark night I felt a heartbroken pang at what we were leaving behind. And we walked. We walked in silence, Trish staying four paces behind me with every step. The time I had to think I thought maybe she was mad at herself. Replaying what she'd done over and over again in her head, just like I'd have been replaying 'I love you, Daddy' over and over again if my chest and my head weren't so desolately void. Other times I thought maybe she was mad at me, because I should've been the one to do it, but instead of being strong enough, I made her do it.

We walked one foot in front of the other, a motion completed for no other reason than it was the only thing to do. Down street after street, and down the center of each street, all but concerned about being seen. It

wasn't until there was Feral growl from a nearby alley that I finally felt something. A spark of instinctual fear, of terror for the only person I had left. At hearing it I made to duck behind a nearby car, but Trish just kept going. She didn't hear it, or she didn't care. I grabbed her by the shoulder of her jacket, dragging her behind the vehicle to hide.

While I crouched to peak over the hood and watch the alley, Trish dropped down. "Dugan," she whispered, leaning her back against the side of the car. "I'm tired."

I fell back at her side, letting out a deep sigh. I knew what she meant, and what she was feeling. It wasn't fatigue. It was a depressed lack of motivation. "We'll start looking for a place to stop."

We sat there for a minute, waiting to gather the desire to even get up. During our pause I could hear the whisper of voices coming from across the street. "Is it down there?" murmured a deep voice.

"*I see it," another responded. "It's sleeping. Get it."*

They were talking about the Feral I'd heard growl in the alley. "You get it," the first one said.

"*No, you," the second argued.*

"*I'll get it," grumbled a female voice.*

Everything fell quiet, and Trish leaned over to look under the car at the other side of the street. "People," she said, sitting back up. "Maybe they have somewhere to rest."

I shook my head. "They could be dangerous." I pushed up enough to peer over the hood again, and watched a third man come around the corner to meet the other two.

"*Where's Rachel?" he asked them.*

"*Doing the bitch work," the female said, coming back out of the alley wielding a machete.*

The third man, visibly older than all three, smacked one of the others on the back of the head. "Making your sister do it." Then he turned to Rachel, "And watch your mouth."

Before I could even duck back down I saw Trish rise and begin making her way around the car. "Trish," I whispered in protest.

She kept going, so I darted out of my spot to follow her. One of the young men noticed us, and he tapped the other young man and pointed. The small group turned, each of them raising some sort of weapon. I pulled the dive knife out of the sheath around my forearm, even though I knew it'd be useless against the two guns they had.

"*Hold on there," the oldest man said, stopping Trish ten feet from them.*

Trish held her hands out to show them she was unarmed, but I gripped the handle of the knife tighter, stopping at her side. The older man squinted at us through the dark, taking us in. The longer he studied Trish the more his gaze softened.

"*Is this man trying to hurt you?" he asked her, motioning toward me with the barrel of his gun.*

"*He's my," Trish began, choking on some emotion before finishing in a whisper, "Husband."*

He lowered his gun halfway, the other three following his lead. "You folks alright?"

Trish glanced sideways in my direction, her eyes filling with tears. "We just lost our daughter," she murmured, sniffling. "We're looking for somewhere-" Her hands came up to wipe at her face. "To recover."

The group lowered their weapons completely, and the oldest man's mouth sunk with a sympathetic frown. "I'm Buck," he said softly, and then pointed at his companions. "My kids, Riley, Danny, and Rachel."

"*Patricia," my wife replied.*

Since these people weren't threatening, I put the knife back against my forearm. "I'm Dugan."

"*We have others, camped out nearby," Buck told us. "My boys can take you."*

Trish nodded instantly, but I asked, "Is it safe?"

Buck nodded. "Has been so far."

Riley and Danny took a few steps down the road, motioning for us to follow. But I wasn't prepared for this. It seemed rash to follow strangers, no matter how nice they seemed. As Trish began to take her first step I put my hand on her arm, whispering to her, "Shouldn't we talk about this?" Or at least think about it a little more.

She looked at me only briefly before dropping her gaze back to the cement beneath her feet. There wasn't a word of response, and she started after the young men without another form of acknowledgement.

We followed them a couple blocks to a nearby neighborhood with large, spread out houses. They led us into one of those houses, through the dark halls to a big courtyard, set into the hill behind the home. There were people here, four others – two women, a man, and a teenage boy. They were all sitting around a small, open fireplace, hidden from the outside world because of its location at the rear of the home.

"*There's a panic room," Riley said, pointing at a side door into the house. "Just in case."*

He introduced us to the other four people, and Trish and I greeted them with as much forced enthusiasm as we could muster. Then, after he told the others in a polite way not to bother us, he and Danny left us with our new acquaintances to meet back up with their father and sister.

The small group was chattering quietly while Trish and I joined them. I sat down in a spare lounge chair, watching as Patricia wandered to the other side of the fire, taking another. The large seat I was in could've fit the both of us, but she dropped down into a chair opposite me, more distant

now than she'd been the last few weeks combined. I couldn't help studying her with concern. Taking in the way she stared at the fire, her eyes filling with water every couple minutes no matter how often she blinked them away.

Sometimes, between those battles against tears, she'd look only halfway past the fire at me, never quite meeting my gaze. Then she'd look back down. After a while, sitting there, wondering what she was thinking or what she saw in the flames, I started to miss her. I wanted her back so we could get through this together.

The next time I saw her eyes moisten I stood, strode around and sat at her side. "You okay?" I murmured, wrapping one arm around her waist. I knew she wasn't okay, and neither was I, but I was hoping it would get her to open up.

Instead of answering she maneuvered out of my arm and stood, lumbering a few feet away to absentmindedly study a decoration hanging on a pillar in the courtyard. I followed, desperate for some kind of comfort, even if it was just letting me hug her. But when I got to her side she made to walk away again.

"*Baby, please," I begged, moving into her path, "You have to talk to me."*

"*I can't even look at you, Dugan!" she whimpered loudly, and at the volume of her voice the four around the fire turned to look at us. "I'm sorry," she apologized to them, her face contorting with agony. "I'm sorry."*

"*It should've been me," I told her quietly. "I know. I should've done it."*

A large drop slid down her cheek. "It shouldn't have happened at all." She raised her hands to her head, taking a deep breath to keep from yelling with emotion. "You took your eyes off her."

"*For a second," I breathed, feeling the hole in my chest fill with ice. She wasn't mad at me because I couldn't do it. She blamed me for it happening in the first place.*

"*A second too long." Trish sniffled, wiping her hand beneath her nose. "She was more important," she cried, "And you stopped watching her."*

"*I thought she was safe." My eyes blurred with tears. "I thought you'd be killed."*

Her voice cracked halfway through when she muttered, "Better me than her."

"*Please don't say that." This was cruel of her, we both knew it, but it didn't look like she could hold it back any longer.*

"*I had to kill our daughter, Dugan." Trish took in a quivering breath, which she let out again in a tortured mewl. I felt an echo of agony in my own heart when she raised a hand to clutch at her chest, and as she ambled away again she finished with wounding firmness, "Because you weren't watching her."*

…

A distressing sound caused my eyes to crack open in the pure light of dawn. Kara was asleep less than a foot away, and the sound was coming from her. She was having a nightmare, or just a restless sleep. Every couple seconds she'd twitch, and a recognizably terrified cry would escape her lips. She was shivering too. Being curled up into a tight ball wasn't enough to keep her warm since our fire had died down.

I hadn't moved from my spot against the tree, but Kara had been up all night to keep watch, and I didn't want to wake her yet. Using a second spear that she'd crafted for me as a cane, I struggled onto my feet. By the time I was standing I was already out of breath, and that consistent pain in my chest still remained. While I stood there for a minute, recovering from that small exertion, I lifted my shirt up to my chest. Looking down, I took as deep a breath as I could, checking for any signs that a rib was sticking where it shouldn't be. Aside from the dark, massive bruising, however, my chest and sides appeared the proper shape. Everything wrong was beneath the surface – a collapsed lung felt undeniable, internal bleeding seemed like a possibility. There was no way to know for sure, and I had no idea if it was fatal.

to know for sure, and I had no idea if it was fatal.

It didn't seem like I'd ever completely catch my breath, so after a couple minutes I gave up trying. I carried my spear around our site, checking the nearby area for branches to use as firewood. Even if bending down to collect the pieces was excruciating, I was reluctant to kick them toward the fire because the noise would wake Kara. With the spear secured in the dirt, I gripped it tight and used it to lower myself to the ground, kneeling instead of bending.

Once I'd grabbed the branch I pushed myself back up, stumbled over to drop it near the fire, and then went to get another. I repeated the process at least a dozen times, and by my last trip back to the pit my heart was racing. I paused again to catch my breath, taking in fast and shallow gulps of air because every mouthful felt lost along the way.

"Dugan?" Kara mumbled, sitting up and rubbing her tired eyes. When they found me they widened with worry, and she hurried to her feet. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "You should be resting."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't grateful that she came over to help me down, because I'd begun to feel lightheaded. "The fire's out," I told her, dropping onto the forest floor. "I didn't want you to be cold."

"I'll be fine." She broke the thick branches into smaller lengths, and after gathering a handful of tinder she restarted the fire with the still glowing embers. "You need to worry more about yourself." She sounded a little grumpy, and she looked so exhausted it was like she didn't get a wink of sleep all night.

"You're more important," I said softly, trying to get her into a calmer mood. It wasn't just the lack of sleep. It was the emotions, so overwhelming she likely didn't know what to do with them.

"Then do it for me," she pleaded, meeting my eyes for only a second before busying herself with throwing more twigs and leaves into the growing flame. "I need you." Guilt caused my gaze to wander away, and after a few moments I gave her an understanding nod.

We sat in silence for a while, both of us staring at the fire. Kara was tired

We sat in silence for a while, both of us staring at the fire. Kara was tired, I was already fatigued from moving around even that little bit. And when I heard her stomach rumble loudly it called attention to my own empty gut. Kara had managed to spot a small pond, which she harvested water from with an old tin can she'd found in the woods. But it had been more than two days since we'd eaten. The only reason I could see that I hadn't been thinking too much about it was because the pain in my chest trumped the burning in my stomach.

"We can't stay here," I mused. Though I'd spoken quietly, I knew Kara heard me because her glance flickered my direction. "We have to move on."

Her tongue ran over the split in her bottom lip, causing her to wince at the tenderness of it. "You need to get better first." Upon finishing her statement she raised her hand to feel around the bruises of her face. It wasn't just me who she thought needed to get better. She was in pain too – beaten, exhausted, heartbroken, and no doubt sore from sleeping on the frosty ground.

"It's still cold out," I argued, "Almost freezing at night. We need shelter, and neither of us is going to get better unless we find something to eat."

"Okay," she said flatly. "How are we going to get anywhere? You can barely breathe." She held up the pointed stick in her hands. "All we have is these stupid spears. Probably couldn't stab Jell-O. What if we see Ferals?"

"We'll take it slow, try to keep out of sight," I offered with an unsure shrug. "All I really know is that if we stay here we'll starve. If it rains, we'll freeze. Out here, we're dead no matter what."

She let out a deep breath and pulled her knees up to wrap her arms around them. For the next few minutes she stared into the fire, thinking. "What if we could find a car or something?" she asked, looking up at me with a spark of life. "We could stay on back roads. You wouldn't have to walk. It would get us to Pittsburgh faster."

I nodded side to side while I let the idea sink in. It was a better option

than waiting around here until I was feeling better enough to walk. Part of that was because I didn't know if I'd be getting better anyway, though I wouldn't tell Kara that. Vehicles weren't easy to hide – we couldn't just get off the road if someone was coming like we could if we were on foot. But it *was* better than walking, and maybe getting to the base near Pittsburgh as fast as possible was the only way to guarantee that we'd both be okay.

"We could try to make that work," I agreed. My head tilted upward, squinting into the beams of sunlight filtering through the trees. It was still early morning, but even though Ferals were active during the day I was fairly certain Jed and his crew had killed any that were near enough to hear the gunfire. "We should go now."

"Now?" Kara repeated, eyes widening with surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Yep." I eased myself onto my feet, and once I was standing I kicked some debris onto the fire to put it out.

Kara stood, for the first time in two days looking like she had something to be happy about. "Can I drive?"

I chuckled, following behind her at my own slow pace. "Do you know how?"

"Yeah," she said hesitantly. "Maybe…" She looked back at me, slowing down to walk at my side while she admitted with a sheepish smile, "No. I've seen how, but I've never practiced."

Already I was feeling out of breath, so I panted a brief, "Sure," and then focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Eventually we got to the edge of the woods, and a few more steps put us on the road where everything had spiraled out of control. Feral bodies littered the street. Jed hadn't bothered to burn these ones, and they already smelled toxic and decaying. Then there was one body that stood out. The only one with any clothing on, bloodstained and face down.

The moment I caught sight of it I put an arm around Kara's shoulders,

holding up my hand to block her line of vision. "Don't look, okay?" She nodded her ambitious consent, and let me guide her down the street to where we couldn't see any evidence of death anymore.

There were still a couple vehicles parked around the mobile homes. Most of them were trucks, others vans, a few cars. All of them were faded from years of exposure to the sun, and almost every tire was severely cracked or flat from the elements. The only ones that looked even remotely drivable were the couple trucks and SUVs with massive mud tires, too thick to be worn down yet.

I plopped myself down on the edge of an elevated porch, and motioned toward the community. "Take your pick."

Kara's lips thinned with concentration, and she strode away from me to look down an adjacent street. She lumbered around for a couple minutes before she gasped so loud I could hear it even from my spot fifty yards away. "Dugan, come look!" she called.

It took me a minute to reach her, but when I did she pointed to a massive vehicle parked beside one of the mobile homes. It was an elegant camper, easily thirty feet and no doubt with comfortable beds on the inside. I laughed, and it was with reluctance that I told her, "It's way too big." She let out an exaggeratedly disappointed sigh. "Sorry."

She clicked her tongue at me as she continued looking, heading behind this row of homes to the one behind it. "What about this?" I heard her ask.

This time when I got to her, I nodded instantly. It was still large, but the dark blue Hummer would be worlds more maneuverable than an RV. "Much better… if we can find the keys."

We made our way to the front door of the mobile home it was parked in front of, makeshift spears held at the ready. I rapped my knuckles against the door, listening closely in case Jed had missed any Ferals. There were no sounds from the inside, but when I twisted the handle I found it was locked.

"Window," I told Kara, motioning toward the window near the door. Kara used the blunt end of her spear to smash the glass, and as she set her hands on the pane to climb through I glanced inside. "Be careful."

Kara dropped down on the other side of the house while I went back to the front door. She got there at the same time I did, and unlocked it from the inside so I could come in. Before even checking around for the keys to the car, Kara walked straight into the kitchen.

"Please have food," she murmured, opening one of the cupboards.

Finding it empty, she blew a raspberry with her tongue and moved on to the next one. This time she jumped with joy when she opened it, and pulled out the only two cans of beef raviolis. She threw them down on the counter and rushed through the various drawers until she found a can opener and a couple spoons.

"Breakfast," she groaned happily, patting the kitchen table for me to come and sit down.

I did, and watched with anticipation when the steel teeth of the can opener gripped the top of the first can. Every twist caused my stomach to cramp just a little more, for a while distracting me from the enduring pain in my chest. When it was finally open, Kara bent the lid back, and I smiled gratefully when she put the first open can down in front of me. Despite the eager impatience to fill my empty stomach, I waited until Kara opened the second can and sat down with her spoon, and then we both began to devour it. The food was gone in a matter of minutes. So fast I couldn't even be sure what it tasted like, and I wished there was more, especially because we didn't know yet where our next meal was coming from.

"Maybe we should search some of these other houses," I suggested, longingly spinning the empty tin with my fingertips.

Kara scraped the insides with her spoon to gather every last bit of sauce while shrugging nonchalantly, "Okay. But maybe you should wait here or something."

"I can't let you go alone," I said, watching her stick the utensil into her mouth. "We're a team, remember?"

She pushed herself to lean over the table, getting a better view into my empty can. Knowing she wanted the sauce in mine too, I pushed it over to her. "Yeah, we're a team," she agreed. Her spoon clicked against the inside of the tin. "And I can take one for the team and do it myself, so you can rest." She licked the spoon clean, and then used it to motion to her bruised face. "I've taken worse."

After losing Namiko and Wolf, I was reluctant to let Kara out of my sight. Still, I sighed with defeat, knowing that with how slow my progress was it would take us all day to search the homes. But sitting here bored would drive me crazy while Kara was out there alone. "Alright, I'll do the mobile homes in this row while you do the rest."

"Deal," she agreed with a nod.

I pushed myself out of my seat. "Let's see if we can find those keys."

We began our search in the main living space, opening drawers and checking the walls for key racks. We looked in a closet in the living room, and while the keys weren't there, there were two backpacks that we could use to gather supplies. Eventually, while I went to check the bathroom, Kara wandered into the bedroom. I opened the mirror cabinet in the bathroom, and even though it wasn't what I was looking for, I instantly reached for the bottle of painkillers on one of the shelves. I popped two into my mouth, swallowing dryly, and then dropped the bottle into my backpack.

"Think I found them!" Kara called, a moment later jumping into the entranceway of the bathroom, excitedly holding up a pair of keys.

I held out my hand for them, praising, "Nice work." As I put them into my pocket we wandered back out and to the front door to begin our search for supplies. "If you get into any trouble, you come running back yelling for me, understand?"

"Got it," she said.

When we left the house we went different directions, and I trudged to the mobile home next door with my wooden spear in hand. The door of this one was locked too, so I winced against the ache when I rammed the end of my spear into the window, shattering the glass out of it. Then I grabbed the welcome mat in front of the door, setting it over the windowpane so I wouldn't get poked by any remaining shards when I sat down on it to climb over.

The place was a mess. Trash littered the floor – piled up nearest the garbage can in the kitchen and then gradually spreading out, as though people had been here for weeks or months without leaving or taking out the trash. It smelled of must, and dust, and death. The curtains were drawn, and the only light was the gleam from the window I'd just broken in through.

I searched the kitchen, but I wasn't surprised when there wasn't a single bit of food. Next I moved to the bathroom, searching the drawers and cabinet for anything useful. There was a bar of soap, and an unopened orange toothbrush, which for some reason seemed like the perfect color for Kara. I put the items into my backpack, deciding to hold the bag in my hand for now because every time I stretched to put it back on my shoulders it caused a nagging pain in my ribs.

When I opened the door to the bedroom I figure out why the house was in the shape that it was, and why there was still the stench of death. There were two bodies on the bed, dead so long now they were little more than skeletons, but the smell lingered. They must've lived off the supplies they had here for as long as they could, but when they ran out they chose to end things instead of going out to look for more.

That's when I noticed the pistol, dropped from a hand onto the floor beside the bed. I hurried over, lowering myself onto my knees to grab it. It was a long barreled revolver, and when I had it in my hands I ejected the cylinder to check the ammunition. One single, lonely bullet remained in the chambers. I searched the nearby drawers and closet for additional ammunition, but this was it. While it wasn't enough to make me feel a whole lot better, it was something, and we'd have to use it wisely.

All the supplies at this home had been used up, so I moved on to the next. My progress was slow. A simple walk between mobile homes sent my heart racing, and every step had me struggling for air. It took me so long just to maneuver between places that I was sure Kara had done at least a handful by the time I reached the second one. There were a couple cans of chicken broth in the cupboards of this place, along with a few bottles of water and an unopened bag of minute rice. A day ago I'd thought just maybe Kara and I were done for, but every item gave me hope that we might make it to Pittsburgh before we starved.

When I got back out of this home I noticed a shed on the side, and when I trudged over I found it was for the large garden out back. It was unlocked, so I opened it with caution just in case there were any surprises on the inside. There were no Ferals, but there was a multitude of gardening tools, and one in particular caught my eye. A digging fork, with a long wooden shaft and three sharp, sturdy prongs at the end of it. It was certainly more durable than my spear, so I traded out my weapons, grabbing a medium sized shovel that I thought Kara might like better than her spear too.

I was just about to head back out when I thought I heard my name. I left the shed, hearing Kara's voice louder this time, "Dugan!"

I scurried around the house as fast as I could to where it sounded like her voice had come from. She was sprinting toward me down the street, three Ferals hot on her tail. My backpack and the spare shovel dropped to the ground, and I gripped the fork firm in both hands. Kara was getting closer, but I knew I wouldn't have the core strength to make a deadly stab at any of the Ferals if I went to them. So I leaned back against the house, setting the end of the shaft against the wall to wait, prepared to use a Feral's momentum as my stabbing power.

"Grab the shovel!" I shouted to Kara, pointing with my free hand.

She ran, and the moment she reached the tool she dropped her spear, grabbed the shovel, and came up with a twist, smashing the spade against the side of the first Feral's head. The other two had focused on me when I shouted, and when the first one continued past Kara to come

at me I adjusted the angle on the digging fork. The Feral did all the work for me, impaling itself on the prongs when it lunged at me. But I hadn't thought far enough ahead.

The second one was about to make a grab at me, and I didn't have the strength to pull the fork out of the first Feral fast enough to stab the second one. At the last second I dodged to the side, the creature smashing into the wall of the home with a massive thud. I ignored the stabbing in my ribs while I tried to yank my weapon out of the dead Feral. I pulled and pulled as my eyes searched for Kara, who was bringing her shovel down on her opponent a second time.

Finally, right as the Feral turned with a furious snarl, my weapon came free. I lunged forward at the same time it did, driving the prongs straight through its chest. But the force of my strike took muscles in my sides and back, causing a searing ripple through my chest. The exertion and the struggle to control the pain had me gasping for air, but I was only getting a fraction of the amount I needed. It was only a matter of seconds before I felt weak, and I fell to my knees, dropping forward on my hands and holding my head down to keep from passing out.

"Dugan," Kara muttered, kneeling down at my side. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

I nodded, motioning one hand toward her to let her know I just needed a minute to recover. "Are you," I wheezed, taking in another shallow breath, "Alright?"

"Yeah." She set her shovel on the ground and sat back, kicking her feet out. She was panting for air too, but it was because she'd been running so hard. "Those shits came out of nowhere."

I laughed, wincing at the pain it caused. The lightheadedness soon subsided enough for me to straighten up, and a minute later I was able to stand. "I think it's time we get the hell out of here."

"No kidding," she said sarcastically. For the first time since we reunited her eyes fell to the weapon half sticking out of the waistband of my jeans. "Is that a gun?"

"Found it in a house." I pulled it out and handed it to her so she could look at it. "Only got one bullet though." It was a .44 too, the first time I'd seen a gun of this caliber in the whole span since the outbreak. I doubted after all these years if we'd be likely to find much more ammunition for it.

She handed it back with a somewhat pleased look on her face, and we traveled back to the Hummer. When we got to it I gave Kara the keys, letting her jump into the driver's seat to fire it up. She gave the ignition a turn, but to our disappointment there wasn't a peep from the engine. She turned it again, and this time it sounded like there was one small click before it went quiet again.

"Run over to the other side and undo the latch," I told her, pointing to the clip keeping the hood closed on the driver's side of the vehicle.

After we'd undone them, I lifted open the hood and leaned over to peak in. Kara was too short to see over it, so she climbed up on a front tire and then sat on the edge of the frame. I took in the condition of the Hummer's inside. It was in pretty good shape upon first glance, but when I scanned the battery I could see the terminals were corroded, and no doubt it had lost all charge long ago.

"We have to find a way to jumpstart this," I mused, and I was going to have to find a way to get that corrosion off so we could charge it right in the first place. "You see a steel pad in the kitchen anywhere?"

"Um," Kara hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe." She jumped down to hurry away. "Let me check."

While she jogged into the home I considered how we could jumpstart the battery. If it was dead I doubted we'd find a live one in any of the other vehicles around here. There was no electricity to any of the houses, and even though I knew a little something about cars, I wouldn't have the slightest clue how to circuit normal batteries into a charge.

Kara came back out shaking her head, but continued past me to check in the next house.

If only one of these places had a gas generator. I could definitely get a decent charge that way. At that thought my head perked up, and my gaze swiveled toward the home with the RV on the side. Campers had gas run generators.

"Found one!" Kara exclaimed when she came out of the second home, holding a steel dish scrubber over her head.

When she delivered it to me, I began to scrub all the corrosion off the battery terminals. "Here's what we're going to have to do," I explained while I worked. "We got to push this baby over to that camper, and by us, I mean mostly you…" Kara laughed, shaking her head amusedly. "Hopefully the generator in the camper still has gas in it. If it fires up, I think we could use it to jumpstart this battery."

"Okay," Kara said enthusiastically.

"You ever syphon fuel before?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "What's that?"

"I'll show you if this battery still works." I finished cleaning the battery terminals, and motioned for Kara to go back into the car. "Shift the gear to 'N'."

After she'd put the Hummer in neutral she followed me to the front of it. She put her hands against the grill while I leaned my back on it. Together, we pushed. Every step caused shooting pain, but I just kept reminding myself that it wouldn't last. Before long we'd gotten it out of the small driveway. Kara moved around to the back of the vehicle, and I went to the driver's side, pushing against the door as much as I could while guiding the steering wheel.

Kara was so small, and I was so useless in my injured state that it felt like it took forever to get to the camper. By the time we did I desperately needed a break, so I moved around to the front again to sit down on the bumper.

"What can I do?" Kara asked.

I panted, tossing a thumb toward the back of the car. "Check the trunk for jumper cables?"

She hurried off, coming back a minute later with a small black box in her hands. "This it?" She opened it up to show me the contents, and I nodded. "What now?"

"You're going to have to start this generator with the hand crank," I told her, pushing myself off the bumper and leading her to the generator mounted in the exterior of the RV. "It's tough, you got to pull as hard and fast as you can."

Kara nodded, and eager to get the car working she immediately reached for the crank handle. Gripping tight, she pulled, laughing with disbelief when it didn't even sound like anything happened. The second time she pulled she turned her torso, getting more distance and speed and managing a small choke from the generator.

"You got it," I said encouragingly. She repeated the motion, getting a small rumble before it sputtered out. "You can do it."

Kara pulled again, and again, exerting more energy every time as her frustration grew. Finally, the sixth time she yanked harder than ever, and the generator gurgled to life. We both let out happy laughs.

"Good job, kid," I grinned, giving her a congratulatory pat on the back. I took the jumper cables from the box and connected them between the generator and the car battery. After waiting a few minutes to let the charge build I motioned for Kara to jump in. "Give the key a twist."

She turned the key in the ignition, and I felt a small wave of relief when the engine at least started to click. I motioned for her to wait, and a minute later gave her the go ahead. She turned the key again, and the engine groaned with protest while she held it there. After a few seconds I motioned for her to stop, and we waited once more.

"Give it another go," I called eventually.

Kara twisted the key. At first it just seemed like the engine would put out that electric whir without starting, but after a couple seconds of the laboring sound the Hummer revved to life. My mouth widened with a massive grin while Kara jumped out.

"Woo!" she screamed ecstatically, throwing a triumphant fist into the air.

I held out my hand, and she slapped her own against it for a high five. Once I'd pulled the jumper cables off I shut the hood, and before Kara and I both got into the cab I grabbed a small, empty gas can that was sitting near the RV. From the passenger's seat I leaned over to check how much fuel was in the tank. The meter only read a quarter full.

"You know which pedal's gas and which one's the brake?" I asked Kara, to which she nodded. I pointed to a car parked in the driveway of a nearby home. "Take us to that car there, pull up right next to it. Slowly." Kara adjusted the seat so she could reach the pedals, and when she backed away from the RV and started forward again toward the other car, I couldn't help but chuckle. "You're a natural."

She smiled thankfully, and stopped the Hummer beside the car. We both got out, and she followed me to the yard of the home where there was a garden hose sitting on the small front lawn.

"I need to shorten this," I mumbled, picking up the hose.

"Here," Kara said, reaching into her pocket and producing a foldable knife. "Found it in one of the houses."

I smiled gratefully and used the knife to cut a length of hose, and then carried it back to the vehicles. After I'd opened the tank door of the car, I shoved one end of the hose into the tank, and then I grabbed the gas can and set it down close by.

"This is syphoning gas," I told her.

She watched as I stuck the free end of the hose into my mouth. I sucked until the fuel started flowing, and then put the end into the can so it would catch the steady stream. When I spit some of the fluid out of my mouth

Kara's face twisted with disgust.

"That's nasty," she mumbled.

"It works," I chuckled. We waited for the can to fill, and then I motioned to it and asked Kara, "Can you lift it?"

She grabbed the handle, grunting as she pulled it off the ground, "Barely."

I hurried to open the tank door of the Hummer and removed the cap so she could dump the gasoline into the tank. After we filled our vehicle we went to another car to top off the spare can. Kara was excited to drive, and once we were ready I settled into the passenger seat, reclining it comfortably to let her take us away from this place. With our new backpacks, the little food we'd found, and our makeshift weapons, we were almost as well prepared as we had been before being attacked. And now that we had our vehicle, we were on the road again.

Now She is Gone

Lying to You by Keaton Henson

Now She is Gone

Genevieve

After a long, tensely silent drive in one of the Strykers in our caravan, we were finally nearing the gates of the base. Even though we were the only two passengers in the vehicle and there was an empty bench across from us, Echo was asleep at my side, legs stretched out comfortably over the seat. Her backpack was on the spot beside me, her head resting comfortably on top of that. While it was dark inside the vehicle, she'd laid her black beanie across her eyes to block out the remaining light, and her arms were folded across her chest to keep herself warm. I'd kept her up most the night, and the last few hours she'd been catching some well-earned shuteye. Even now I was reluctant to wake her, but I glanced ahead near the driver, at the screen to see where we were. The road was familiar, the gates were coming up, and I couldn't wait much longer.

My eyes wandered down to Echo. She'd scrunched up the beanie so it only covered from her eyebrows to her nose, and I could see her lips and laugh line perfectly. But those weren't what caught my eye. In the dim light of the vehicle all I focused on was the scar on the side of her forehead. The scar I put there. My hand stretched forward out of curiosity. I wondered if it still hurt when she thought about it, or if she even thought about it at all, and while I wondered my index finger grazed over the mark.

I'd barely traced the length of it when one of Echo's hands shot up. It was a swipe, like she was trying to brush off a bug or an annoying strand of hair, but when her fingers felt something larger they closed around my hand. She froze thoughtfully, and still holding on she pulled the beanie from her eyes with her other hand.

"Thought you were asleep," I offered when her eyes locked on me,

feeling my cheeks tint.

She let go of me to massage her fingers over her tired eyes. "I'm a light sleeper." Then they moved to the scar, and she scratched at it with a chuckle. "That felt weird. Kind of tickled."

"Sorry," I told her, glad it was too dark for her to see that I was blushing. "There was um…. a mosquito."

Her upper lip curled with dislike as she dropped her arm back down. "Did you get it?"

I nodded, nearly rolling my eyes at myself because it was still too cold out for mosquitoes. At least Echo didn't appear to think about that. A quiet chatter came through the radio at the front of the vehicle, but it was too far away for me to make out every word. I heard one though. Ferals.

The copilot, one of the surviving half from Second Platoon, turned around to look at me. "Ma'am, we got Ferals at the gate."

Echo sat up while I squinted at the screen in front of the copilot, but a second Stryker ahead of us was blocking our view of the gate. We couldn't open them until we were sure no Ferals would go running through, but I had civilians in the beds of three cargo trucks with nothing more than a canvas cover keeping them safe.

"How many?" I asked.

Nielson mumbled into the radio and waited for a response before telling me, "Four."

It took me a second to remember the name of the lieutenant from Home Squad, who was commanding the vehicle ahead of us. I'd never associated much with a lot of the soldiers outside my platoon, but that was going to have to change now.

"Have the guys in Mackey's vehicle take care of it and then open the gate," I told him, knowing that in addition to the driver and Mackey, there were four other soldiers up there. He nodded and began speaking once

more into the radio while I leaned my head back with a sigh. Not even back on base yet, and already the gate was presenting a problem to deal with.

We sat there patiently, waiting for the way in to be cleared. A few minutes later the vehicle lurched forward, and we headed through the gate. We pulled to a stop on the inside, and after the driver turned off the engine, Nielson stood from his seat.

"Ma'am?" he prompted, looking at me like he was waiting for instruction.

I was no stranger to delegating, but I had no idea where to start, or what my responsibilities were supposed to be now. Cap had taught me to be a leader, but he hadn't taught me what it took to run a camp. All I knew was supply and mission.

First things first, give the citizens something to do. "Gather the civilians, I'll be right there."

Nielson and the driver, Kenyon, dropped open the Stryker door and hopped down to carry out my instructions. Echo was sitting there, waiting to follow my lead, but I couldn't bring myself to leave the seat. Once we got out, once I left the dark safety of the vehicle, it became real. The base, the civilians, the soldiers, they were all my responsibility. Making sure we had everything we needed, taking care of them, supplying for the more than seventy people that were left landed on me as a blaring realization. Before now I'd been terrified of doing it without Cap holding my hand, and of people wondering if I was capable. Now I was terrified of what it would mean if I truly wasn't capable, and getting out of this vehicle was the first step to finding out.

"Genevieve?" Echo said softly, when after a couple minutes I still hadn't moved. She stood, pulled her backpack over her shoulders, and then offered a hand to help me up. "Ma'am." Her laugh line was deep with a smirk. She'd never called me that before. It sounded so awkward that one corner of my mouth curled. I took her hand and let her pull me out of my seat, and once I was on my feet she gave me a comforting smile. "You're not alone in this."

She'd never know how truly appreciative I was for that. For what she'd done last night. I nodded gratefully, and after grabbing my backpack and rifle, and taking an energizing breath of the fresh air that was flowing through the open door, I stepped out.

It was so much warmer here, at midday, than it was this morning at camp under the shade of the forest. The sun was bright and blazing, and when my boots touched down on the street they met with asphalt, shiny and wet from melted snow. It wasn't just the street. Snow was melting everywhere, dripping off the eaves of roofs in cold droplets, and at some spots sliding off the slanted roofs in chunks.

When I got out of the Stryker, Blake was hugging Casey in cheerful reunion. As he let go of her his eyes landed on me, and his face fell almost instantly. He said something to her, and after she nodded he started in my direction.

"Hey, pipsqueak," he greeted, barely managing to sound even a little upbeat through the melancholy.

I twitched the side of my mouth in response, and he only watched me for one sad second before pulling me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist to return it, and even though I thought I'd cried everything out last night, just knowing that Blake was suffering too caused my eyes to well with tears. Cap had taken care of us both as more than just a commander, but there were people around, people who'd be looking at me for direction from now on. The last thing I needed was to let them see me cry, or give them reason to think I wasn't strong enough to lead. So I sniffled, blinking it away before I pulled back from the hug.

Imogen, Cyrus, and Ty had found their way to us, and I was surprised when Imogen bypassed Echo with little more than a smile and strode straight to me, her lips pursed sympathetically. "I heard what he meant to you," she told me, and I felt a pang when I realized she was talking about Cap. "I'm sorry for your loss." Beyond her I could see Cyrus and Ty nod in agreement.

"Thanks," I said sincerely, and then I turned to study the collecting group of civilians and soldiers.

of civilians and soldiers.

The people just arriving from camp had to get settled, and the vehicles needed to be unloaded which meant finding places for cargo, like seed crops. We needed to find a way to get vehicles safely through the gates if there were Ferals around, and at some point I had to rearrange the platoons to account for casualties. I had to figure out patrol schedules and working tasks for civilians, and surely if I had even a minute more I could think of additional tasks that needed to get done. Already there was so much to do, and all I wanted to do was take a bath. That added another thing – I wouldn't mind figuring out how to get running water to the buildings, instead of relying solely on the small river that ran through the opposite end of the base.

I turned to the Stryker, climbing up onto the top of it, wincing the whole time at the soreness it caused in my injured hip. I'd also have to get that wound properly taken care of when April was set up in the medical complex, just to make sure it wouldn't get infected. From standing at the top of the vehicle I tucked in my bottom lip, forcing air past my tongue to let out a loud whistle.

"Listen up!" I called loudly, and all at once seventy eyes landed on me with a crushing weight. For a moment I forgot what I was going to say. I cleared my throat to keep my voice strong. "Those buildings over there are barracks," I announced, pointing.

There were plenty of houses on base, but the way I saw it, part of the problem with the attacks on camp was that everyone was scattered. It took so long to respond to the Ferals because it took so long to even realize there was a problem. We'd done a thorough job of clearing the base, but I wasn't comfortable enough to have civilians too far from protection in case of an emergency.

"There're plenty of rooms for everyone, make yourselves at home." I paused to think about what would come next. Food was important, I certainly hadn't eaten all day, and I knew the same had to be true for most of the others. "I need a few volunteers to prepare dinner after you get settled in."

Imogen had offered to share their supply of MREs with everyone, but even though the Hunters had stolen all the meat, we'd had a lot of vegetables left from winter storage to bring with us. Now that things were starting to warm up, they'd begin deteriorating, and I figured it was best to save the MREs for when they were truly needed. After a few men and women raised their hands, I glanced down to search for two of my soldiers.

"Datsyuk, Morgan." I waved them over and up onto the vehicle. "Volunteers, this is Datsyuk and Morgan," I said, for those who weren't acquainted with the soldiers. "They're going to wait right at this spot for you, and then take you to the new DFAC." Then I nodded gratefully at my two troops and motioned that they could get down.

Now that there were significantly less people, even if there were fewer mouths to feed and fewer heads to protect, I'd still have to figure out a new division of labor. Sign-up sheets for the various jobs I could think of seemed like a good way to figure that out, but these people had just been through trauma. Many of them had lost loved ones. The last thing I wanted to do was give them zero time to mourn and put them straight to work. A couple days could be spared.

"Last but not least," I finished, "The outer fences are electrified, watch your fingers. We've made this place as safe as we knew how, but that doesn't mean things can't happen. Just… try not to go exploring alone."

Not knowing what else to say, I nodded awkwardly and climbed down the vehicle with more difficultly than I'd gotten up. It didn't help that now that I was finished and no longer under peoples' watch the nerves caught up with me. Reaching the ground where Echo was waiting for me, I held out my hand, staring as my fingers shook nervously.

The only thing that tore my attention from it was when Echo sandwiched my fingers between both her palms to stop them from shaking. "You made it look easy," she said reassuringly.

I let her hands stay where they were for a few moments after meeting her gaze, finding comfort in their warmth. Before last night I would've then pulled away and said something abrasive, but I couldn't do it. Not now. I

pulled away and said something abrasive, but I couldn't do it. Not now. I couldn't gather the strength anymore, even if I still couldn't give her all I had, because after last night the only thing I wanted was to be close to her. Everything could've been spiraling out of control, last night I thought my world was falling apart all over again, and then she was there. In contact with her I felt safe, whatever chaos clouded my thoughts was contained.

With Echo, I was grounded. She deserved kindness, and love, and even though I could only give her one of those, I'd do it now as often as I could. Before last night I thought I wouldn't hurt her more than I needed to. Now I didn't want to hurt her at all. Wouldn't take my pain out on her any more when I could bear it all on my own. When I could make it so I was the only one that needed to feel pain. But because of that, with her I was also burdened.

I slid my fingers from her grasp while saying with a smirk, "You're biased." Even though I pulled away, that gorgeous laugh line deepened with a genuine smile.

Blake strode over with Casey, and both of them leaned back against the side of the vehicles while Imogen came over with Cyrus and Ty. We all sort of watched everyone disperse for a few minutes in silence, taking in their chatter. The excitement of a new home seemed to put some life back into a lot of the civilians as they unloaded their belongings from the beds of the trucks.

"What now?" Blake asked.

I took in a thoughtful breath, blowing it out through my pursed lips while I glanced back toward the entrance of base. "We need to do something about that gate." I also took in the dead Ferals. It wouldn't do to have decaying bodies around base, especially if they started building up from ones that were killed by the electric fence. The smell would attract more of them, not to mention create a disgusting atmosphere to live by. Eventually I'd have to send a vehicle around the perimeter every couple days to clear the dead.

"What's wrong with the gate?" April asked, reaching us and dropping a

large bag of medical supplies onto the ground. She tilted her chin down to look over her glasses at the three newcomers, recognizing that she didn't know them.

"April," I told her, motioning to the three, "Imogen, Cyrus, and Ty." She'd been under the canvas cover of a truck when we arrived, so she hadn't seen that there were Ferals outside the gate. As she shook hands with them I explained about it. "We need a way to let vehicles in and out without doing it for Ferals at the same time."

Another thoughtful silence fell over our small group, until a minute later April spoke again. "What about a containment level." I raised my eyebrows at her for explanation. "Like laboratories have an airlock before coming and going. Build another fenced area on the inside, so you can close one gate and kill the Ferals before opening the second one."

"We'll have to find the supplies for it, but that's good," I acknowledged with an approving nod.

"How many drums of fuel do we have left?" Blake shifted to kick his foot back against the tire behind him. "We checked the base's gas station. Fuel's crap."

I sighed. A big move like this with all the vehicles used up a lot of good gasoline. "Two." Just enough to fill the tanks of two vehicles one last time, with a little to spare.

He chuckled in disbelief. "Shit."

"You guys are having fuel problems?" Ty piped in.

"Every year it gets harder and harder to find good diesel," I confirmed.

"What if we could make some?" he asked, and at that every head turned toward him. He smiled amusedly. "We were able to explore the houses around here a little bit over the years. I remember one of the garages had a biodiesel kit."

"And you know how to make it?" I asked, genuinely but pleasantly

surprised.

"I mean, it's been a long time," he said with a shrug, "But if you get me the supplies, I could figure it out."

"I need to make a list," I murmured, hearing Blake huff with amusement as I pulled my backpack around to search for something to write with. There was already so much to accomplish, and the list just kept growing. "Anybody have a pen or something?" I managed to find a small pad of paper at the bottom of my bag, but didn't have anything else. Everyone began to dig through their own packs, and eventually Imogen materialized a pencil. "Thanks." I turned to support the paper against the side of the vehicle. "What do you need for it?"

"Well," Ty started, "We'll need the oil of course."

I hesitated to write, and turned to face him while my eyebrows furrowed. "Won't it all be rotten by now?"

"Maybe, but we could still use it." I shrugged and turned to write it down. "There's this chemical… to test acidity… crap." Ty's eyebrows furrowed, and he glanced up thoughtfully.

Each of us stayed quiet so he could concentrate, but April offered, "Phenolphthalein?"

"Yeah!" he agreed excitedly. "Thank you. We'll need methanol. You could probably get big barrels of it. And that soap stuff," he snapped his fingers, prompting the thought to come to him. "Lye."

"Sodium hydroxide," April added.

I scribbled it all down, not even wanting to think about where I could send a scavenging party to find this stuff. After those items I added: unloading the vehicles, the gate, the platoons, patrol schedule, civilian jobs, running water, drinking water – because I wasn't sure if the river was clean enough – ask Harvey about giving the barracks and hopefully even the medical complex solar power, move the ham radio to an actual office so it wasn't taking up a room, and inventory the armory. When I'd written it all

down I stuffed the notepad into my back pocket and held the pencil out for Imogen.

"Keep it," she said good-naturedly, waving her hand as if to say 'no big deal' when I smiled gratefully.

When things fell quiet April saw it as her chance to say what she'd come over for in the first place. "Where's the hospital? I want to put my personal belongings there."

"Oh," Casey chimed in, "I'd like to see it too."

"I'll take them," Blake volunteered, but then his face lit up. "Wait here though, there's something I wanted to show Genevieve."

He jogged off before anyone could say anything, disappearing around the corner of a building. It took a minute, but then I heard the soft chug of an engine, and he came whipping around the corner in a vehicle. It was a small military vehicle that looked much like an open-topped Jeep, and most of it was little more than frame. He came to a screeching halt in front of us, jumping out of it with a grin.

"Found this beauty at the motor pool. Powers called it a Growler," he announced. Then he glanced between Casey, Echo, and I, "Our fuel situation is probably the only thing keeping me from taking you off-roading in the woods out there."

"Not the Ferals, huh?" I asked through a laugh, striding forward to look at it more closely.

Blake guffawed, pointing upwards at the machine gun mounted to the top of the frame, causing me to laugh even harder. "And guess what?" he asked expectantly.

"What?"

"Well, this one's mine," he patted the roll bar indicatively, chuckling when I rolled my eyes. "But there were two more, so I figured I'd be nice and let you have one."

I gave his arm a playful push, asking sarcastically, "Oh, is that what you figured?"

"You might be the boss now," he said, turning and roughly wrapping an arm around my neck, "But I'm still bigger than you." I wrestled with him for a minute before poking him in the ribs to get him to release me. "Hey!" he protested, laughing as he shuffled away. "That's cheating." He turned and grabbed the large bag April had been carrying, loading it onto the Growler for her while she and Casey got in. "I got one seat left," he said proudly. "Any takers? Going once."

"I'm in!" Cyrus hollered before Blake could continue, hopping onto a rear facing back seat.

"Don't run anyone over!" I called after the already retreating vehicle. I was glad Blake had found something to be excited about, and he seemed so happy that Casey was here and healthy.

"Anything you want us to do?" Ty asked as they disappeared.

I shook my head, though it had just occurred to me that the three newcomers were supposed to be under supervision. Not even Blake had remembered, as in the panic and then the excitement of everyone from camp getting here they must have forgotten. I'd forgotten too, but I'd seen no red flags in their behavior. I was more worried about Blake crashing the Growler than about Imogen, Cyrus, or Ty causing trouble. "We'll eat in a little while, you can relax until then if you want."

When Ty and Imogen nodded, I motioned for Echo to follow me. I led the way to the truck that we'd loaded my trunk on to. It had been pushed to the very back, so I set my foot on the small ladder attached to the bed to climb up.

Since my hip was still sore, Echo stopped me before I could. "Let me," she volunteered, not even waiting for me to move and use the ladder, and instead propelling herself up over the side.

When she got to the trunk she threw her weight against it, something I knew would've hurt my hip if I'd had to do it, and pushed it to the edge,

She jumped down, pulling on it enough for me to grip the second handle, and then we lifted it off the bed. Carrying all the extra weight caused me to limp a little on the way to the barracks, and it was even worse going up the stairs to my second floor room. At least the door was unlocked, and we trudged in and dropped it near the small desk in one corner.

For some reason, finally being out of public eye and having a little bit of time allowed me to slow down, and a wave of exhaustion caught up with me. I dropped face first onto the bed, not even bothering to pull my legs up as I let them half dangle over the foot. Sleep had been restless last night, and right now a nap sounded amazing.

"All that responsibility kill you already?" Echo asked with a laugh, and I felt her tap my boot before sitting at the edge near my legs.

"No," I huffed amusedly, rolling onto my back so I could see her. "But it probably took at least ten years off my life."

"Good thing you're still young," she chuckled, dropping back and turning onto her side so she could prop her head up in her hand. I hummed in agreement, the only response I could manage because my eyes had fluttered closed tiredly. There was a movement on the bed, and when I shifted my gaze to the side I saw that Echo had flopped onto her back too. "You think that doctor's going to be here soon?"

Now I turned onto my side, folding my hands under my face like a pillow. "I hope so. I'll feel better when the rest of our soldiers get back."

"What about the cure?" she asked, dropping her head to the side to look at me.

I hummed again in agreement, my eyes drooping closed. "You believe in it now?"

"I guess anything's possible," she answered, and her laugh line deepened with a smirk. "Maybe if he can find the miracle cure he could find a way to get you those ten years back." I laughed, opening my eyes just enough so she could see me roll them. "Seriously," she continued amusedly, "I think I see a gray hair."

amusedly, "I think I see a gray hair."

"Shut up," I giggled sleepily, reaching over to throw a hand over her mouth.

I felt her huff against my skin, and she reached up to pull my hand away. "You shut up," she teased, still holding my hand between hers as she dropped them over her torso.

In my exhausted state all I could think about at first was how good it felt to be close to her again. To be touching her again. My thumb even ran over her stomach without so much as thinking about what I was doing. It wasn't until I felt her fingers caress my knuckles that it sank in, and like always, it hurt. I pulled my hand away, returning it under my face to support my head.

I refused to open my eyes. I didn't want to see if she looked disappointed, or like she was about to ask what it meant that I hesitated, that I showed a moment of blatant affection. Instead, I requested through a mumble, "Wake me up in an hour."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked softly, as though trying not to disturb me from half sleeping. I just gave an easy shrug. "What if I'm tired too?"

I pressed a finger to my lips to shush her, whispering, "Then sleep."

I don't know if she didn't respond, or if I nodded off before hearing it, but when I woke some time later she was asleep at my side, curled up into a ball so her legs weren't dangling off the end of the bed. I took in a deep breath and sat up, knowing by my internal clock that I'd slept longer than I'd meant to.

My movement had woken Echo, who had something of a smirk when she said groggily, "I think it's been an hour."

"Thanks, smartass," I told her, my lips curling into an amused smile. She stretched her arms high above her head while I stood and picked up my backpack. "I want to see if April's still at the medical complex."

She nodded consentingly while getting up, and after grabbing her own pack we trudged the distance to the medical complex. With the various small offices that made up the community, it took us a good amount of time to find the doctor. Eventually we located her in the urgent care – a building that opened up to a reception area and waiting room, with a single hallway of rooms for various purposes. It wasn't quite a hospital, but for the size of the base, it was the closest thing.

"Settling in?" I asked, poking my head through a door where I could hear April and Casey talking.

It looked like I'd interrupted a serious conversation, but April smiled both with greeting and acknowledgment. "I'll keep my personals in the office behind the front desk, so I can be here round the clock."

"I appreciate it," I told her gratefully, though I wasn't surprised. It was the same thing she'd done back at camp. "I'll have a bed brought in for you."

She nodded, glancing back and forth between Casey, Echo, and I like she was looking for something else to say. It was a stuffy silence, thick and heavy, and mournful. April lost Cap too, and I could tell she felt the absence of his presence as much as I did.

"I have an injury," I started in order to detract from the stillness. "I was hoping you could look at it." I had no doubt Echo had done a good job with the supplies she'd had available, but it couldn't hurt to have a professional double check.

"Sure." April nodded, patting the exam table at the center of the room.

While I pushed myself up onto it she searched through the sterile steel cabinets, pulling out a box of exam gloves. As I lay on my stomach and hiked the bottom of my shirt up to expose my hip, I noticed Casey silently drop something into a nearby trashcan. It was subtle, and immediately after she took a pair of gloves out of the box and slipped them over her hands too.

"Where'd Blake go?" I asked, my eyes following Echo as she lifted herself to sit on the edge of the counter.

"To take Cyrus back to the barracks," Casey answered, holding the edge of my jeans down so April could look at my wound.

April's fingers pressed gently around the tender flesh. "How'd this happen?"

"Got stabbed by a broken flower pot," I told her.

"How'd you clean it?"

"Vodka," I responded honestly, hearing Echo huff with amusement.

April chuckled too, saying to Casey, "Could you put some iodine on gauze?" Then to me, "Who stitched it?" When I tossed a thumb toward Echo, April's bottom lip jutted out admiringly. "You did good." She glanced up at Echo to praise. "The knots are all wrong," she laughed, "But you did good."

Before Echo could respond, Casey made a gagging noise, and rushed to redo the cap she'd just taken off a bottle. "Wrong one," she eked, retching again. This time she reached for the trash can, and we all watched her hurl into it.

Echo had pulled a water bottle out of her backpack while Casey threw up, and when she finished Echo handed it to her. "You okay?"

Casey nodded, taking the water gratefully while tossing the bottle of medicine into the trash. "That's expired."

April had taken over getting iodine from the cabinets, and I didn't get much time to ponder whether the smell was that bad or if Casey was just sensitive to it as April rubbed the cold orange fluid over my wound.

"It's a little red," April told me, tossing away the stained gauze and taping a fresh piece over my hip. "If it gets any worse I'll start you on antibiotics."

"Thank you," I replied and sat up, about to push myself off the table.

April glanced at Echo and Casey, saying before I jumped down, "Could

April glanced at Echo and Casey, saying before I jumped down, "Could you give us a minute?"

My eyes went back and forth between the three of them as Casey and Echo filtered out, ending on April after Casey closed the door behind them. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she assured me instantly. "It might not be in my job description, but as a doctor, mental and emotional health are just as important to me as physical." She gave a nervous smile and shrugged. "You've been through a lot. Taken on a lot… I just… wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Oh," I mumbled sullenly. I felt a heat start behind my eyes, but I pursed my lips, using everything I had not to let it turn to tears. "I knew he'd put me in charge," I told her, gaze locked on the floor. "Someday. But, part of me thought he'd live forever."

"He made sure everyone was safe," April said, pausing to chew the inside of her lip, biting back her own emotion. "Before going to the radio."

"Always the hero," I mused with a cheerless huff. "That's the kind of comman-"

"He was sick, Genevieve," she interrupted. My eyes darted up to meet her gaze, and her lip quivered sadly. She looked like she felt guilty. Like she'd wanted to tell me this for so much longer than just today. "It was terminal. He wouldn't-" Whatever the end of that sentence was, she couldn't finish it. Her eyes filled with tears.

I cleared my throat, letting it sink in that it wasn't just the Hunters. I would've lost Cap no matter what. "Why are you telling me now?"

She took in a thoughtful breath before answering. "I didn't want you to think that he chose you because he was out of time." April slid her fingertips beneath her glasses to wipe away the moisture.

"There's so much he didn't teach me," I whispered through the emotion.

"If he was here," she started with a sad, fond smile, "I think he'd tell you

"If he was here," she started with a sad, fond smile, "I think he'd tell you that you learn more as you go, and asking for help doesn't make a leader weak."

"That sounds like him," I agreed with a dewy chuckle.

April smiled, giving a soft huff of amusement before sniffling. "I don't know if you realize how much he confided in me, but he came to talk to me after you radioed in about clearing the base." When she paused I nodded for her to continue. "He said that you never knew how close he was with your father, after your mother died. But through him, Cap knew you, long before the outbreak. Your dad would've been so impressed by the woman you've become, by the leader you've been, and that's why he chose you."

"Cap said that?" I choked, feeling a tear slide down my cheek.

When she nodded, my eyes flooded, and I sniffled to keep any more tears from falling. I thought Cap had died being disappointed in me, being upset about Echo and my relationship with her. In some ways, it seemed like April knew that. Like she knew how much I needed to hear what she'd just told me. I slid off the table, hesitantly, seeing as I'd never really hugged April before. Thankfully she made it easy, even if it was a little awkward.

"Don't hesitate to ask me if you ever need anything," she told me.

I nodded gratefully, wiping the water off my cheeks while I strode to the door. Echo was sitting at the end of the hall in the reception area, perched on the countertop with her legs dangling over the side. I don't know what she had against normal chairs, which were plentiful around the edges of the room. When she saw me coming she jumped down.

"I'm fine," I said in response to the concerned look on her face, knowing she'd noticed my eyes were still a little moist and would ask about it.

She still watched me for a few seconds like she was deciding for herself, and then took a step in the direction of the door. I followed after her and began to lead the way, thinking of what to do since we still had some time before dinner. While we walked she pulled a long strand of knotted up

before dinner. While we walked she pulled a long strand of knotted up thread out of her pocket.

"Casey taught me a surgeon's knot while I was waiting for you," she said, holding up the string indicatively. "Next time you need stitches I can do it right."

"Next time I need stitches," I repeated with a chuckle. "That's optimistic."

"More like realistic," she mumbled teasingly.

"Hey, you're the clumsy one, remember?"

Echo rolled her eyes. "Says the girl who fell into a flower pot."

I gave her shoulder a playful push, laughing defensively, "I was tackled by a Feral!"

"Whatever you say, boss," she said sarcastically.

I couldn't help staring at her laugh line while I giggled my amusement. She looked so happy that I was messing around with her, and it felt good to be able to do that. It felt even better that she wasn't trying to flirt, because when she refrained I could laugh too, and it didn't have to hurt. At least, not until she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, accentuating that line in a way more stirring than amusement. I would never be able to *just* laugh with her. And the one thing that hurt was the one thing that made it better. It made it so that I felt bad for wanting to be near her, but I felt bad for not being near her. The only remedy I found was when as our laughter tapered off I scooted closer to her side, so that our arms bumped while we walked and so I'd only have to shoulder one kind of hurt.

"I'm not the boss of you," I told her. With the next step our hands brushed, and I instantly shoved mine into my pockets so she wouldn't get the idea of reaching for it just because we were close.

I must've been the only one who thought about it though, because Echo didn't seem to notice as she cupped a hand around her ear in teasing disbelief. "Whoa, say that again? You're not what?"

disbelief. "Whoa, say that again? You're not what?

My lips curled. "I'm not the boss of you," I repeated. I'd never been the boss of her, but more than that she was my battle buddy. Now that I had to be commander, I wanted her to be more my partner than ever. Just to mess with her, however, I added, "It's not like you ever listen to me anyway."

"No," she agreed with a chuckle, "But you love telling me what to do."

"Just like you love being a pain in the ass," I quipped playfully. She laughed, shaking her head amusedly. "Whatever, just consider yourself promoted."

"From lowly thug slash bootie call?" she asked as we strode up the sidewalk of a housing tract. I shrugged my casual agreement. "To what?"

"I don't know," I answered, turning as we reached the door of a house to lean my back against it. Cap had a right hand man, even though I didn't know the proper title, I'd always assumed it was normal. "Assistant… co-commander… partner… person-" I sighed, feeling my cheeks tint before I asked in a rushed breath, "Do you want to be my right hand or not?"

She hummed thoughtfully, her laugh line deepening with a smirk. "That's a lot of responsibility… Do I get to give orders to Home Squad's jackass LT?" I rolled my eyes at her, but the entertainment was clear on my face as I nodded. "I'll do it."

I couldn't help grinning, most of it grateful, but it turned into a snicker as I said, "And you did not just refer to yourself as a bootie call."

Echo snorted, asking through a laugh, "What would you call it?"

"I'm not even-" I shook my head, still chuckling even though I refused to answer as I turned to grab the door handle. "No."

I twisted the knob, but it wasn't until I found the door was locked that either of us stopped to look at where we were. It was the house I got hurt at. The house with the Giants flag, and the grand piano. We'd been walking aimlessly, and somehow come here. I took a step back to look at

the door. To let it sink in where we'd ended up.

Then I turned to Echo. "Can I have your bobby pins?"

When she gave them to me I eased myself onto my knees, careful to avoid too much pain in my hip. She propped herself against the side of the door while I stuck them into the lock, feeling around for the familiar pins. I found the pins easily enough, but a minute of fumbling around reminded me just how bad at this I was. It only took another few minutes before I stood, blowing air through my pursed lips.

"Giving up already?" Echo asked, taking back the bobby pins and squatting down to undo the lock herself.

"I'm not in the mood to get frustrated," I answered, watching admiringly as she picked the lock with ease, straightening back up and holding the door open for me. "How do you do that?" As we strode through the door I turned to the side, pressing my forehead against the flag just past the entrance. It happened so fast and instinctively it was like the revival of an old habit, and when I finished I motioned for Echo to do the same.

"Practice," she said, touching her own forehead against the flag. As she turned away from the wall she fell quiet, and I watched her eyes scan the house. My focus followed, taking in the flag, and the kitchen, and the couches, and the piano. "What are we doing here, Genevieve?" she whispered.

There was a hint of suspicion behind those pearly gray eyes, and I couldn't blame her for it. Last time we were here I made her cry. "I don't know. I like this place." I shrugged, trying to find the words to tell her the emotions this house instilled in me. "It feels like… home."

As I said that my gaze wandered to the piano. I'd liked the music Echo made when she played it. I'd liked the way it felt when I kissed her. I'd liked how the feeling of it hit me so hard there was no time to process what it meant and to feel bad. These walls were sacred. They held something special.

When I looked back at Echo she was watching me thoughtfully. "Why

When I looked back at Echo she was watching me thoughtfully. "Why don't you sleep here?"

At the suggestion I took everything in again. It was a tempting notion, but I shook my head. "I need to stay close to everyone else." I pursed my lips in a hesitant smile. "But… we could come here sometimes."

Echo studied me for another minute, silent with careful reflection. If I could read her at all, then she'd noticed the change in me. The change she'd influenced by being there for me. And she was afraid of undoing it. "Yeah," she agreed eventually. "Yeah, we could."

We both went quiet, at a loss for anything else to say. She still looked apprehensive, and I could only give so much. The stillness was broken a moment later when her stomach growled loudly. She looked down in shock, and both of us laughed when mine reacted to the sound with a rumble of its own.

"Come on," I chuckled, opening the door again and motioning for her to go first. "Let's see where dinner's at."

You Made That Bed

Bones by Little Big Town

You Made That Bed

Echo

"Who are we missing?" Genevieve asked, pacing a few feet away from the table I was sitting on.

Blake was sitting in a chair on the opposite side, and at her question he pulled the piece of paper to him to look at the list of soldiers' names. She was rearranging the platoons because of all the people we'd lost, but both of them were swearing there was one person they'd forgotten.

"Just call one of the guys over here and ask," I suggested.

Genevieve paced back to the table until she was standing right at my side, shoulder attached to mine like it'd been so often lately even though we were facing opposite directions, and she put her hands on the surface to lean forward. "No, no." She either didn't want to ask for help for something so simple, or she didn't want to admit to anyone else that she'd forgotten a soldier's name. "We'll figure it out."

I shifted to lean sideways, pulling the paper back so it was in front of Genevieve and I. I read it over one more time, a spark of recognition starting at the back of my mind. "That Hispanic guy."

Blake's eyebrows furrowed. "Garcia?"

"No," I sighed, pointing to a name on the list. "We got Garcia. This guy's taller. Older. Keeps to himself a lot, I've only seen him a handful of times." I squinted, trying to think of anything else I could recognize about him. "Oh, Cuban flag tattooed on his forearm."

We were all silent for a few moments, thinking. Then Genevieve slapped her hand down on the table. "Soto." She picked up the pencil to scribble

down his name in one of the two compiled platoons. After she wrote it down she straightened up a bit, glancing at me. "Thank you."

The shrug I gave was nonchalant, but not so relaxed was when my eyes dropped to her lips. Her proximity to me was far from casual, but even more encouraging was that she noticed the turn of my gaze, and she didn't seem fazed. She'd been acting so different the last few days. Most the time I was worried her temper hadn't changed enough for me to be too bold, or that a single slip would send her back to being mean. But during moments like this, when her brown eyes locked on mine and she didn't shy away, it was almost tempting enough to act on.

It felt like only a moment, but we stared at each other long enough for Blake to clear his throat. Genevieve flinched, and passed the paper back to him while he snickered at her reaction. "You'll make sure everyone gets their new assignments?" she asked, to which he nodded. She took a blank piece of paper from her small notepad. "Next, patrol schedules."

I sighed instantly – that first list only had thirty names without the three of us on there, and it took us more than an hour to put it together. If this is what being a commander was, it sucked. I raised my hand in the air. "I volunteer we all run amok." Blake chuckled, and Genevieve looked up, giving me a half-hearted glare through her eyelashes.

"Should we do it weekly?" she said, ignoring my bored remark.

"First platoon on duty one week, second platoon the next?" Blake clarified. Genevieve nodded. "That's good. We should have four men at the gates at all times."

"Two manning the radio," I put in, knowing Genevieve still had people scanning the frequencies for other survivors.

"Are we going to have towers and ground patrols, like at camp?" Blake asked.

Genevieve shook her head. "I want to try something different. Four groups of two running ground-" she paused, and then dropped her head with a sigh. "Never mind. We can't have a whole platoon on duty round

with a sigh. "Never mind. We can't have a whole platoon on duty round the clock. They need rest."

Blake tapped his fingers against the surface of the table thoughtfully. "We're going to be stretched thin." Genevieve nodded in agreement. "Three at the gates, two at the radio, five on ground patrol, and the other five on recovery. They'll survive eight hour shifts."

"They're going to have to." Genevieve wrote it all down. "And every other day I want a drive around the perimeter to pick up dead Ferals."

I'd told Genevieve I'd help her out as much as I could, but I didn't know as much as they did about community, and I certainly didn't know anything about being a leader. Even though Genevieve poked fun at me for not listening to her, I was better at either taking instruction or doing things on my own.

"I found some hand-held radios in the armory," Genevieve continued, reaching up to touch the armory key that she'd hung on a chain around her neck. "One for each of us, one for the gate, the hospital, the radio room, and patrols."

"You know Imogen's going to want one," I chimed in. It was the first time in days that Genevieve looked at me with a genuinely hard glance. "I'm just saying," I said defensively, worried Imogen was the backsliding factor to Genevieve's mood. "That was the deal you made with her. Full disclosure, and that's what the walkie-talkies are for."

"And one for Imogen," Genevieve breathed. She wrote that list down too, and was about to say something else when there was a loud honk from near the gate. All three of our heads shot up, and at seeing the two vehicles Genevieve grinned. "They're here!"

It was the half of Second platoon that Cap sent away, come home, hopefully with that doctor. I jumped off the table while Genevieve rushed over as fast as her limp would allow. The truck and the Stryker rolled through the gates, but the sound of the horn had attracted everyone who was nearby enough to hear it. Civilians and soldiers were crowding near the street.

"Blake, get in the passenger's side," Genevieve instructed, continuing past toward the driver's side. I knew the last thing she wanted was to overwhelm the passengers with people the moment they got out, so when she got to the driver's side she patted on the window. "Blake's going to take you to the medical center, I'll meet you there."

In order for Blake to get into the truck, the passenger had to get out, and when the man jumped down I laughed joyfully. "You had your lucky cricket," I told Garcia, motioning to the bug he'd painted on the Stryker.

"Yeah," he agreed, chuckling as he gave me a friendly reunion hug. "Jiminy's been a real pal."

The vehicles pulled away, and after greeting Garcia happily, Genevieve motioned for us to follow her to the hospital. On the way there he introduced himself to Imogen, who was following along, curious about the new arrival. When we reached the medical center Blake was dismissing some of the soldiers, and by the time we got to the truck there were only three people and Blake remaining.

One of them, because of his camouflage pants and a rifle similar to Genevieve's, looked like the soldier I'd been hearing about, Tripton. He was a massive African American man, easily six feet tall and bulkier even than Blake. He was in his mid-thirties by my best guess. His black hair was smooth and curly, falling in ringlets over his forehead and adding a soft attractiveness to his rugged five o'clock shadow.

Another guy looked old enough to be the doctor, easily in his early fifties. He looked like a tenderfoot, kind of like April did, though his was a scrawnier sort. Though his skin was fair, his complexion was dark. Dark eyebrows, dark brown eyes, and what I imagined had once been dark hair, though it was a peppered color now. He was balding too, with the dome-shaped part of the top of his head being covered in a thin, short layer of that pepper-colored hair.

The third was sitting on the edge of the truck bed – a young man, still a teenager by the looks of it. He had a shotgun slung over his back, and the hood of his maroon jacket was pulled up over his ear length, straight black hair. He didn't have much facial hair yet, but what he did have

black hair. He didn't have much facial hair yet, but what he did have made a perfect, shady patch on his chin. There was something almost familiar about his face, and his lips. Even from the distance I was standing at I could see his eyes were a beautiful, muddy green.

"Tripton," Genevieve greeted, walking over to shake his hand. "It's been a long time."

Tripton nodded in agreement. "This is Dr. Issa," he said, stepping aside so she could meet the older man. The kid was staring at Genevieve, but I stopped paying attention when Tripton's eyes then landed on me, and he started in my direction to introduce himself.

"Micah," the doctor waved for the teen to jump down, speaking with the tone a parent would, "Get down here and-"

"Genevieve?" the kid interrupted, hopping off the truck bed. I'd just begun to wonder how he knew her name when it hit me. That straight black hair, his familiarity, and his green eyes – I knew him from a photograph. He was supposed to be dead, but he was so much older now. Grown. The teenager laughed, repeating in disbelief, "Genevieve."

"Oh my God," Genevieve breathed in a shocked whisper. "Micah?" The young man's face lit up, and he rushed forward, throwing his arms around her waist. "What are you- you're not-" she choked through a mixture of laughter and tears, squeezing him tight around the neck. "You're alive." He spun her around, and as he set her back down she reached up to take his face in her hands. "Look at you. You're bigger than me."

His mouth was wide with a grin, and as she let his face go his gaze flickered past her to everyone else who was watching on: Imogen, Garcia, Blake, and I. But once he saw me he couldn't look away. His head cocked, and his eyebrows furrowed with a moment of confusion. It only took a split second for me to see the change.

"You?" he mumbled, so quietly the only reason I even caught the word was because I read his lips.

The kid had all of Genevieve's speed and then some, because before I could even prepare to react he'd shot past her. His shoulder caught me in the chest, plowing me hard back into the side of the Stryker. Speed or not, the kid didn't know the first thing about fighting. I could've pinned him easy, but even as I saw him wind up to hit me I was going to let it happen, because he was Genevieve's brother. Before he landed his punch, Garcia caught his wrist. Blake grabbed Micah's other arm, and after stripping him of the shotgun they hauled him away from me.

"Let me go!" he shouted, fighting their grasp. I coughed, the shock wearing off enough that I could feel he'd knocked the wind out of me. "Genevieve! That's her!"

"Are you okay?" Imogen asked, setting a concerned hand on my shoulder.

She was the only one aside from Blake and Garcia who'd reacted so far. Dr. Issa and Tripton looked confused. Genevieve looked petrified. I waved Imogen off, feeling a panic sink in past the pain in my stomach. I couldn't catch a break. I'd never escape it.

"I'll never forget your face!" Micah hollered, struggling against Blake and Garcia. "Any of your faces!" He broke one arm free and pushed Garcia away, but Blake seemed fed up. He shoved the kid backward against the back of the truck, pushing again when Micah tried to lunge forward. "Genevieve!" he yelled, angry and pleading. "The elementary school!"

"Hey!" Blake bellowed, so harsh and loud that the teen flinched. "You need to calm down."

"Genevieve," Micah panted, tired and out of breath from yelling and fighting. "The raiders."

Every one of us looked at Genevieve and froze. She wouldn't look anyone in the eye, she'd shut her eyes completely and as tight as she could. After a few moments she squatted and covered her face with her hands, and soon her shoulders started shaking. I'd never seen this kind of reaction from her before, and she wasn't the type to break down in front of everyone. I would've gone forward to say something or offer

comfort if I didn't think it would get Micah riled up again.

When she finally removed her hands I expected to see tears, but she looked so unbelievably unsure of how to process it all that she was laughing. On top of the way she'd been acting toward me lately and the remaining grief of losing camp and Cap, she couldn't take in the joy of Micah being alive, and that he remembered me, and that he hated me, all at the same time. It was an overwhelmed and frustrated laughter. A silent laughter like she couldn't believe this was really happening. She stood as it faded, and desperate for some other release as she got to her feet she turned, swinging hard and slamming her fist into the side of the truck. The thud rang through the air while she hung her arms over it, facing away from everyone, and she dropped her head against the metal.

I was confused, and when I glanced over I could see that I wasn't the only one. Everyone stared, tense in the thick silence, waiting for something else to happen. Eventually Genevieve took a deep breath and turned, looking like she'd regained some semblance of composure.

"Blake," she said, wiping her hand over her forehead. "Take everyone inside. Introduce them to April."

Micah looked like he was about to protest, but Blake gave him a hard scowl, and the kid started forward obediently with the rest of them. Genevieve didn't even look at me, and she followed behind the group into the urgent care. However, when Blake went straight to gather them around the reception desk where April was, Genevieve veered right to head down the hall. She took another right into an exam room, and when I trailed her in she was at the opposite end, bent over to rest her head on the counter.

"Genevieve?" I prompted cautiously, extending a hand to barely touch her back. She straightened up, and when she turned she looked almost as pale as she had the night we lost Cap. "You're shaking," I said worriedly, taking her quivering hands in mine.

I was going to bring them to my chest to try and warm them, but then I noticed that she was sweating. I put the back on my hand to her forehead, but she didn't a fever. She was cold, and wet, and she was

forehead, but she didn't a fever. She was cold, and wet, and she was breathing in fast, shallow gulps.

"It's too much," she murmured, wiping a trembling hand across her forehead. "He knows you. It's all too much." After swiping at the sweat her fingers clutched at her hairline. "My chest hurts, and my head's going to explode."

"Hey, hey, hey," I cupped her face, trying to get her to look at me. She'd cracked. She was losing it. "Relax. It's okay."

"I can't breathe." She took in a wheezing breath, dropping her hand to take the sleeve of my jacket in her shaky fingers, steadying herself. "I can't breathe. You have to do something. Kiss me."

"What?"

"It's too much. I need to stop thinking." She blinked hard like she was trying to will away an onset of dizziness, and her free hand gripped at the fabric over her chest. "Echo, plea-"

I tilted my head forward, catching her lips before she could finish. Her skin was ice cold. I could feel every shallow, rapid breath forced out through her nose, and for the first few seconds the kiss was weak, and frigid. Then she inhaled deep, and when she exhaled again I felt some of her anxiety melt away with it. The grip on my coat sleeve loosened, her lips softened, and her arms moved around to my back so she could pull me closer while she pushed into me.

Because of her state I didn't let the kiss deepen too much, now wasn't the time to push her, and as soon as I felt like she'd calmed down some I pulled away just enough to rest my forehead against hers. "Relax," I repeated soothingly. "It's okay." I could still feel her hands trembling against my back, but her breathing had slowed, and some of the heat was returning to her face. "You can talk to him. I'll just…" My thumb ran over her cheek. "I'll avoid him."

"What if-" Her eyes squeezed shut once more, and she inhaled shakily. "I've seen how you deal with threats."

I lifted my face away from hers, trying to ignore how much that felt like a crippling blow to everything I'd been working for. "Genevieve, look at me," I said seriously. She had enough stress without worrying how I'd deal with Micah. It took a few moments for her to open her eyes. "I would never hurt him," I told her. "I'd die before taking him from you again."

Her chin dropped with the smallest of nods, but her expression deadened as she disappeared in thought. I wished I knew what was going through her mind. Wished I knew how it would affect us, and how things would change. What if by avoiding him, I had to start avoiding her too? The idea was terrifying. But sacrifice was the only valuable thing I had left to give.

"He's alive," I emphasized, using my hands to direct her blank stare toward me. "You should be happy." That put a clear spark of life back into those dark brown eyes. "Your brother." I dropped my hands to her shoulders, giving her a forced but joyful shake.

She let out a huff of laughter. "He is alive."

"You should go talk to him," I suggested, but even as the color returned to her cheeks, I could feel my own hope fading. If Micah never forgave me, I doubted I'd ever have a real chance with Genevieve. "Show him around. Ask him what he's done all these years. Where he's been."

"The doctor needs to be debriefed."

"Me and Blake can do that." It wasn't just that I thought she'd want to catch up with him. I wasn't sure if I could calm another panic attack if he came at me again. "You need a break."

Genevieve raised one hand to set against the side of my neck. "Thank you," she said, and when I shrugged with feigned coolness her lips met my cheek before she gave me a long, grateful hug.

She sighed as she pulled away, but it was cut short halfway through, and she froze as her eyes darted past me. I turned to follow her gaze, and my heart dropped when I saw Micah. He must've snuck away from the group to find us. It had just been a hug, I don't know if he'd caught the kiss on the cheek, but it was obvious he knew there was more to it. He looked

furious, and I tensed to prepare myself for another fight.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he growled, and the next second he took off running, disappearing back down the hall.

"Micah!" Genevieve called, instantly sprinting after him and leaving me in the stillness of the exam room.

Now that Genevieve was gone I felt my eyes fill with involuntary tears. But I immediately sniffled and cleared my throat, forcing it away because now wasn't the time to break down or worry. After taking a deep, composing breath, I strode out of the room and headed toward the reception area.

Blake had been on his way to come get me, and he reached me as I got to the end of the hall. "Are you okay?" he asked, quietly enough that nobody else could hear.

"If he can't let it go," I started, stressfully pressing my fingers over my eyes. "If he forces her to choose… Blake, he's family." And I had to sniffle again to keep from getting teary-eyed. "I'm not okay."

His lips pursed with pained sympathy, and he wrapped his arms around my shoulders to give me a hug. I let it linger for a moment before it threatened to make me break down, and then I shrugged him off.

"I can't think about it yet," I mumbled, trying to push back the emotion. "We have to debrief the doctor."

"I can do it alone if-"

"No," I interrupted. "The last thing I want to do right now is stew in it." He nodded, and we both strode back to the front desk where everyone else was waiting. When we reached it, I held my hand out to the doctor. "I'm Echo."

The older man looked hesitant, whether Micah had ever told him about that night at the elementary school I wasn't sure, but eventually he took my hand. "Samuel Issa."

I extended my reach to the new soldier and repeated, "Echo."

"Marcus Tripton," he introduced himself, shaking with me in a noticeably firm grip.

Things fell awkwardly quiet after that. It was clear everyone was curious about what had happened, but I wasn't up for explaining to strangers. Thankfully, Blake spoke up.

"How was your journey?" he asked the doctor.

"Good." Dr. Issa nodded enthusiastically. "Your soldiers handle themselves excellently. I felt very safe." There was still tension, so he turned to April before it got awkward again. "Marcus tells me you've been working on a cure?"

"Yes." April adjusted the glasses over her blue eyes. "I've tried everything I could think of, but I've had no luck." Dr. Issa nodded with understanding. "Have you made any breakthroughs?"

"No," he answered immediately. "So far I've been unable to find a cure, but my research has brought me a better understanding of what we're dealing with."

"What kind of research?" April asked.

"All kinds," he answered, shrugging his backpack off his shoulders to pull something out. "But most revealing have been my autopsies of infected brains."

He produced a small, sealed vial, only an inch long and less than that in diameter, and set it down on the counter. I had to get closer to even see what was in it, and everyone else did the same, leaning forward until our faces were crowded together.

"What. The. Hell," Blake muttered.

The vial was filled with a clear fluid, but that wasn't what we were staring at. It was the organism suspended in it – little more than a spot amongst

at. It was the organism suspended in it – little more than a spot amongst the liquid, and only the size of the tip of a pen. But even the spot wasn't what as eye catching as what looked like thousands of strands protruding from the organism, so thin that they were only visible because of their length and quantity. There were so many of them that now that I looked more closely, I could see they clouded the clear liquid.

"How did you spot this?" April managed in an almost speechless breath.

"Trial and error." The doctor leaned over to copy our gazes. "It took me many a dissection to finally find it."

I shivered, resisting the urge to take a terrified step back. "This is the parasite?"

Dr. Issa nodded. "These strands, flagella they're called, they were coiled and weaved throughout the brain."

April leaned in even more, squinting through her glasses. "How did you remove it with the flagella still in tact?"

"Fascinating, isn't it?" he asked knowingly, and then shrugged. "I didn't do anything. I even tried slicing them under a microscope. They're fibrous, but unbreakable."

"Is it alien?" Garcia mused, looking up at the doctor. "It looks alien."

Dr. Issa chuckled. "I assure you, everything about it is entirely terrestrial."

"What's the purpose of the flagella?" Imogen asked, straightening up and folding her arms across her chest.

"As best I can tell," the doctor answered, "Multiple." He picked up the vial and held it between his index finger and thumb, extending it for us to see. "Watch how some of the strands gravitate toward me." It was like a magnet, and half of the long, tiny strings moved up or down toward his fingers.

"Is it still alive?" April gasped.

"I don't know, but it's stimulated by electricity. That's how it takes over the human body." Dr. Issa looked at the rest of us to explain. "The human brain functions off electrical signals. With these strands weaved through the brain, the parasite can monitor the input and output of those signals."

"Monitor?" April repeated. "As opposed to…?"

"Creating," the doctor answered. "Or altering. I've seen cognitive developments among the infected. Some even being capable of strategy."

"The Hunters," I supplied, to which he nodded in consent.

"It's my theory that the parasite, through these flagella, can only absorb what the brain fires off, can only stop certain signals. It can't create new ones, or alter the ones produced."

"So the Hunters?" April prompted. "They're adapting?"

Dr. Issa nodded. "But it's the parasite that's evolving, not the host."

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"Because of the increasing scarcity of food," the doctor began to explain, "Some of the parasites are evolving greater skill. They're honing the ability to decipher more complicated electrical signals, and allowing the right pulses through in order for the host to be capable of some pre-infection intelligence." He paused to make sure we were following, and took in the horrified looks on all of our faces. "It's only theory, of course," he said, as if to be reassuring. It was anything but reassuring.

"The other night," I said as he set the vial back down, "I saw a Hunter that had mud on its face and groin. Is that part of the intelligence?"

The doctor's eyebrows furrowed thoughtfully. "*Only* the face and genitals?" I nodded.

It was quiet for a minute while he thought, and then Imogen spoke, "That sounds like… shame."

Dr. Issa's dark eyes darted up, and he huffed with what looked like amused disbelief. "The human brain is an intricate machine," he mused. "I suppose it's entirely possible that the parasite's more likely to let stray signals slip through when its connection with the brain becomes more complex."

"You mean emotion," I muttered, feeling my heart sink. "It let's the host feel emotion." This was my worst nightmare come to life. My greatest fear was being trapped in a Feral, still feeling it. Now it seemed like that wasn't only possible, but likely. I folded my hands behind my head nervously. "That's so fucked up."

"Not purposefully," Dr. Issa said.

"Do you think," April chimed in, "That the parasite might allow enough impulses through for the brain to fight back? So the host can reclaim control?"

The doctor's lips pursed unsurely. "I honestly don't know. I've never seen it happen. Never heard of anyone who's come out of it." After another moment of thought he shook his head. "I don't see how the brain could immunize itself. Not like the body does against a bacteria or a virus."

"What does the parasite get out of this?" Imogen asked. "What's it feeding off of?"

"That's another thing I'm not entirely sure of." Dr. Issa picked up the vial again, watching the strands separate. "But especially given a Feral's appetite, I think it feeds off of pleasure chemicals in the brain, among others perhaps." He pointed with his free hand to the vial. "I believe the remaining flagella attach to chemical receptors, intercepting their transmission for sustenance."

April held out a hand, silently asking to look at the vial. "What about reproduction?"

Dr. Issa gave it to her while he answered, "I don't know that either. Somehow it releases offspring into the host's saliva and bloodstream."

"But it's self-reproducing?" April asked, holding it mere inches from her face.

The doctor gave a simple nod. "It appears so."

I blew air out the side of my lips. "I think that's all I can handle right now." Blake and Garcia nodded in agreement. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

Dr. Issa nodded with some enthusiasm. "I wanted to discuss setting up a place in a facility here, where I could continue research on subjects. Maybe healthy ones."

I glanced at Blake to see his approval when I shook my head. We'd talked about it with Genevieve when we were speculating the doctor's arrival. She was decided against ever bringing a Feral on base. "No, not inside the gates."

Despite the doctor's obvious disappointment, he smiled amicably. "I'll try to make do."

"April, do you think you could get him set up somewhere?" I asked, to which April happily agreed.

After that the rest of us, including Tripton, started back toward the front of base.

"Echo," Imogen said, hurrying up to walk on the opposite side of me as Blake. "Why can't the doctor test Ferals?"

"Genevieve doesn't want them on base," I answered. "It's too risky."

"Yeah, but, look at how much he knows already." Her brown eyes went from me to Blake. "How else is he supposed to find a cure?"

"I get it, Imogen, I do," I said, "But it's not my decision. You have to take it up with Genevieve."

She sighed, nodding with defeat as we neared the entrance of the base. Some of the soldiers who'd been building a containment fence at the gate

Some of the soldiers who'd been building a containment fence at the gate when we'd left were still working on it when we got back. Genevieve was sitting alone at the table we'd been planning at earlier, silently watching the soldiers work. Blake noticed her there, and directed our other companions away so I could go to her by myself.

"Hey," I said timidly. She looked at me as I sat at the edge of the table, and I guess it was a relief that one corner of her mouth turned up in a small greeting smile. "Where's Micah?"

She tossed a thumb toward the barracks. "Picking out a room," she said, and then added gloomily, "In the opposite building that we're in."

"He doesn't want to be near me," I shrugged, "I get it."

"He's pissed at me too." Genevieve sighed, propping her chin on her closed fist. "He didn't want to hear a thing I had to say after I admitted to knowing you were there that night." I didn't know how to respond. I was terrified of the moment she'd tell me to stay away from her because her brother was more important than me. "He's got more of an attitude than I do," she said, giving a dry chuckle.

"He blames me," I said knowingly, "For your dad."

Genevieve pinched the bridge of her nose. This was hard for her, I knew it, because even if she didn't hate me as much, she still blamed me too. "I think… mostly for separating us." She looked up at me for only a moment before glancing away again. "The last six years I thought he was dead, it was easier to accept. But he had no idea where I was, or if I was still alive." The fingers of one hand were shaking again, and she gripped them in her other to stop it. "You didn't just take his family, Echo. You took his certainty. His closure. You took years that we could've been together… I don't know what's worse." I could tell her eyes were watery, and she added through a teary laugh, "And I'm pretty sure he thinks you brainwashed me."

Through the fresh guilt and the remaining fear in what Genevieve would do about this, all I managed was an amused twitch of my mouth. I couldn't blame Micah for thinking the way he did, or being upset. He had

no idea what Genevieve and I had been through since I'd left the raiders, from his perspective our relationship had to look wrong. But his wasn't the perspective I cared about.

"How um," I began hesitantly, "How are you feeling about it?" She stared beyond me toward the gate, and I couldn't tell if she hadn't understood what I was asking or if she was thinking about an answer. "I mean, I didn't get Micah killed… and that's something… right?" Her gaze never wavered, and still she didn't respond. "It can make it easier for me to fix things," I continued almost pleadingly. "Maybe, you and me-"

"I don't know, Echo," she interrupted impatiently. "I don't know what I'm thinking. Don't know what I'm feeling. And I have a million other things to worry over right now." She stood, squeezing her eyes shut as she took in a stressed breath. "I need time to figure this out." She turned, grumbling as she walked away, "Stop pressuring me."

"Thanks for putting me out of my misery," I mumbled after her sarcastically, even though she couldn't hear me.

In desperate need of a distraction, for the next couple hours I helped the soldiers finish the fence. They were all happy and excited about the doctor and the rest of our troops being back, joking and roughhousing while we put the gate together. Blake and Imogen helped too, even managing to squeeze a few smiles out of me. It was enough that I'd almost forgotten about all the trouble. Until the fence was done, and then it was time for dinner.

Micah was nowhere to be found when I walked into the cafeteria, so I dropped myself down at Genevieve's side. She tensed up a little when I did, and refused to look at me like she thought I was going to bring up redemption again. But I knew better, so I gave her a playful nudge with my elbow as some attempt at reconciliation, and she pursed her lips to hold back a smile as she bumped me in return. It helped to lessen the tension between us that everyone was celebrating Tripton's return with the doctor. There were salvaged bottles of alcohol being passed around, and for the first half of my meal it was peaceful.

Then a silence fell over a far part of the cafeteria. Like a wave it spread

Then a silence fell over a far part of the cafeteria. Like a wave it spread, until everyone watched Micah sit down across from Genevieve and I, right at Garcia's side. I couldn't say I was surprised everyone knew, it was bound to happen eventually, but word got around faster than I'd thought. Now they were all watching, like they were waiting for something dramatic to happen. I refused to make eye contact with the kid, but I could feel him glaring at me. For the first time in my life, I scooted an inch away from Genevieve.

Blake cleared his throat, and in order to divert attention he got up to stand on the bench. "I want to make a toast," he announced, holding up his cup of watered down whiskey. Slowly, everyone around shifted focus onto Blake, raising their own glasses for the toast. "To Tripton, welcome home, buddy. And Doc," Blake shrugged, glancing down at me and giving a subtle roll of his eyes, "Here's hoping."

Everyone said some form of 'cheers', and as Blake sat back down conversation flooded the room again. I wanted to hug him, but the kid was still watching me, and in some ways I was afraid to even move. I didn't know him at all. Didn't know if he'd try to attack me again, or if he was content for now just staring me down. What made it worse was that if he decided to come at me, I couldn't let myself fight back. I felt tense, and after only a few minutes I couldn't take it anymore.

I threw back the rest of my drink and stood. "I'm going outside," I mumbled grumpily, feeling his eyes on my back until I disappeared out the door.

When I got outside I strode to a metal trashcan, and I didn't care if anyone inside could see me. I kicked it, sending it clattering to the ground where I smashed my boot into it again.

"Temper, temper," said Imogen's voice from near the doors.

I was too upset and frustrated with the situation to keep myself from growling, "If you're out here to judge me you can go away." And I kicked the garbage can one last time.

Imogen gave a surprised chuckle. "When have I ever given the

impression of judging you?"

She was right. I'd never felt judged by her. I took in a deep breath, calming myself so it would be completely sincere when I gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

She hopped up to sit on the surface of a table, patting the spot beside her. "I'm out here," she explained, seeming unconcerned with how rude I'd been, "Because I thought it'd be easier to convince you to convince Genevieve to let the doctor test Ferals."

"You ask her?" I asked, taking the empty bit of table next to her.

"Barely got two words out before she shut me down," she answered.

"I can't convince her, she's the most stubborn person I know." I couldn't help but chuckle when she pouted at me in protest. "And you're barking up the wrong tree. Even if she'd listen to me, to be honest, I don't really believe in a cure. Safety's more important." She sighed in defeat, so I told her with a guilty shrug, "Sorry. Try asking her again when things aren't so damn tense around here."

"What's the deal with that anyway?" Imogen asked. "The kid's her long lost brother or something. Why's he mad at you?"

"The ability to hold a grudge runs in the family," I answered, leaning back on my hands.

Imogen's eyebrows furrowed with intense curiosity. "Okay, seriously, what did you do?"

"She got their father killed," replied a deep voice from behind us. It was Tripton, and he strode forward as he added, "Almost got Micah killed too."

"What do you know about it?" I asked defensively.

"It's all anyone's wanted to talk about all day," Tripton laughed, and then to Imogen, "I'm surprised you hadn't heard about it yet." Imogen simply shook her head, so Tripton returned his gaze to me. "Tell you what

shook her head, so Tripton returned his gaze to me. "Tell you what though, I think how you worked your way into Genevieve's bed is what that kid's going to wonder for years. I'm mighty curious myself." He took a sip from the cup he was holding in his hand. "She a short fuse, like her brother? I bet that makes for a firecracker when things heat up. How many of those scars you get from her?"

I clenched my fist while my eyes narrowed at him. The only reason I hadn't decked him yet for sticking his nose where it didn't belong is because there was something playful behind his expression. He was being annoyingly blunt and abrasive, but there was a friendliness behind his dark eyes.

When I didn't say anything in response he held out his hand, demanding, "Let me see it."

"See what?" I asked shortly.

"The tat I caught a glimpse of on your wrist." He motioned again. "Let me see it." I held out my arm for him willingly, but he grabbed it anyway, roughly pulling it closer. "For a raider you don't look like much," he mused with a quiet chuckle. All I did was scowl at him. "I've seen this one before. Some asshole in Colorado."

When he let go of my wrist with a teasing spark in his eyes, I figured him out. I'd seen the guys I lived with for years act this way with each other. Though none of them ever did it to the girls, Tripton must have recognized it in me. Where I'd come from. The attitude I'd have. He was sizing me up, getting a feel for how well we'd mesh by being something of an instigator. Everything about him, from his ruggedness straight to his being a prick, it was endearingly familiar. He was rough, and I understood it because I'd spent the last six years with people who knew it as the only way to survive. The difference with Tripton was that he'd ended up on the good guys' team.

Understanding him so easily was a comfort, though I didn't know how far he'd take this, or if he even wanted me to see it through. But in my experience this exchange peaked at a physical confrontation, and ended with friendly slaps on the back. After how stressful today had been, a

scuffle actually sounded like a nice release of frustration. It almost seemed as if Tripton knew that. He'd been there when Micah attacked me, he'd seen that I'd resigned before it even started. Maybe he could tell already that wasn't who I was, and if I wouldn't fight Micah, he was giving me an outlet.

"Evan," I supplied the guy's name. He was the only raider in six years aside from me who I'd known to leave our group alive. "Guess he made it somewhere."

"Not for long," Tripton countered. "I killed him." He watched me, and when I didn't react he added encouragingly, "Tell you what, I put a *couple* bullets in him." The blankness of my expression was unwavering. "Nothing, huh?" he asked, clearly disappointed that I didn't react.

"Imogen," I said, nodding toward the opposite end of the cafeteria patio, "Go sit over there for a minute, and don't move." Tripton grinned, and at sensing what was happening Imogen looked like she was about to protest. "I'll be okay," I assured her.

"Not going to shed a tear for your old pal?" Tripton asked while she hesitantly moved a few feet away. "You got a heart in there, Echo?"

"I never liked him." I used my thumb to pick under my fingernails with exaggerated boredom. "I never liked any of them. But what about you?" He raised his eyebrows at me, a pleased glint in his eye that I was talking back. "Was more than one bullet necessary? Your aim that bad, or did you actually enjoy it?"

He huffed with laughter, licking his lips through a smile. "Probably about as necessary as the elementary school."

I gave a humorless, sarcastic chuckle, and we both fell silent to see who was going to make the first move. Even though this was his way of familiarizing himself with me, his last statement resulted a small spark of genuine offense. So I pushed off the table, lunging forward to try and get my arms around his neck. He used my own momentum to spin me completely around, slamming my back down on the surface of the table. Whenever I'd seen the guys do this in the past, it seemed like there was

an implicit rule against throwing punches. While it was tempting not to, I was going to have to rely on fair play to get out of this one.

All in one swift movement I wrapped my legs around his torso, knocked off the grip of the arm pinning me down, and shot up to wrap my own arms around his neck. When I had a grip on him I fell back down, pulling him forward and off balance enough that I could roll sideways. It knocked us both to the ground, but he didn't look like he was expecting me to retaliate so skillfully. By the time we landed with a thud on the damp cement I grabbed his arm, twisting it behind his back as I pushed him onto his stomach, locking him in place.

Tripton let out a strained chuckle and tapped his free palm against the ground. "I underestimated you."

"Don't let it happen again," I told him teasingly, and after I stood I offered a hand to help him up. I heard Imogen laugh too, and when I glanced over she was clapping with amusement. "Thank you." I took a bow, straightening up right as Genevieve burst out the doors. She must've been watching from inside the cafeteria, because she looked both scared and mad.

"Angry commander," Tripton muttered under his breath, "That's my cue to split." Before striding off he leaned in so only I could hear him and whispered, "Don't let Micah get to you. He doesn't know what it's like not to be taken care of."

"Echo," Genevieve whined as Tripton retreated back into the building. "Please tell me you didn't just make another enemy." She seemed so desperate for me to reassure her. I doubted she could handle another conflict right now.

"Am I bleeding?" I asked rhetorically. "Is he dead?" She hesitantly shook her head. "We were just messing around." Since she'd been having a rough day… or week, I added sincerely, "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Are you sure?" She glanced behind her into the cafeteria, searching for Tripton.

There was a protective nature in the turn of her gaze, and when she looked back at me I smiled gratefully for the fact that she'd been so ready to come to my rescue. But Tripton wasn't so bad. "Promise." In fact, I actually kind of liked him.

The Ones I Hold Dear

**** I know it has been for-freaking-ever since I've updated. I'm so so sorry. There's only a week or two left of the semester and then I'll finally be on summer break and can start writing regularly like I used to. Again, so sorry. Have I told you all how much I love you for being so patient? :)*

The Fear by Ben Howard

The Ones I Hold Dear

Dugan

In the open courtyard of this home there was no hiding from the sun. The rocky hill at the back of the house absorbed heat, so that even sitting under the shade of a large potted plant, like I was now, I could still feel warm waves radiating from the stone. It was a wonder how Trish was still sleeping on the ground at my side – the scorching morning had woken me nearly an hour ago. But that was all she'd been doing the last few days since we'd been here. Sleeping. Eating just enough so I couldn't complain about her stomach growling. Staring. Sleeping some more.

She was still barely talking, and the fact that she was sharing a sleeping bag with me felt like habit more than a desire to be close. But I refused to think beyond the stab of pain her distance caused, a stab I forced down as deep as I could. I refused to try cheering her up anymore, because she was angry, and it did nothing for either of us. I refused to think that I hadn't just lost Chrissie that night.

Some of the others were up, either having woken recently or been up all night because they were already used to it. There was a small fire going in that open pit, so even though it was too hot to seek warmth, I grabbed a can of beans and carried it over to heat it up. Nobody said anything to me. Not Danny, or Rachel, or one of the other women, Lucy. Buck nodded at me once and went back to sipping from a metal coffee cup. The others glanced at me every so often, awkwardly and only for a moment. None of them knew what to say.

It only took a couple minutes for the food to heat up, but by the time I wandered back to the sleeping bag Patricia was sitting up, leaning back against that large garden pot. I put the hot tin down in front of her, and then handed her a spoon from my backpack. She stared at the beans before touching them, with a lack of appetite so severe that it translated to revulsion in her dark brown eyes and in the downward curve of her mouth. But she'd given up arguing with me about eating, and eventually picked up the can to force down a few bites.

She stomached all she could, leaving the other three-quarters of the can for me to finish. I consumed it in silence. When it was gone I licked the spoon clean and put it back in my bag, and we sat there in continued sullenness. I saw Buck look at us a handful of times, appearing like he wanted to come over. If I'd had the spirit to be encouraging I would've given him a smile, but my spirit was wounded. Trish's was broken.

Even without it, the next time Buck looked at us he gathered the courage to walk our way. "Morning," he greeted with a sympathetic lack of enthusiasm. Now I managed to purse my lips with reception. Patricia didn't so much as look at him. "We've been talking," Buck began, "About heading north." He squatted so he was eye level with us, and reached down uncomfortably to busy himself with fingering the zipper of the sleeping bag. "Lucy has some family up there she wants to look for. Figured we'd leave tonight." He took a sip from his coffee cup and looked at me. "I know you've suffered a loss. And it hasn't exactly been long enough to recover." His focus wandered over to Trish, who finally acknowledged him with her eyes. "But you're more than welcome to come. It's probably not good to stick around one place too long."

I looked at Patricia, trying to read her expression. She was peering beyond Buck at those around the fire, looking like she wasn't going to offer a response any time soon.

"*I appreciate it, Buck," I began to decline, "But-"*

"*We'll talk about it," Trish interjected, meeting his gaze again with unexpected finality. He stood, and as he made to walk away she added, "Thank you."*

He looked from her to me, a mixture of discomfort and pity marring every line of his weathered face. After giving a short nod he strode away, leaving us alone. I watched Trish closely, but not even twelve years of marriage could've helped me know what going on in her mind. Couldn't have helped prepare me for what we were going through. I waited minutes for her to tell me what she was thinking, to talk about Buck's proposal. She said nothing.

Not until I took in a deep breath, preparing to start the conversation on my own, did she say, "I want to go."

"*I don't think it's a good idea," I told her gently. I could see the displeasure when for the first time in days she looked me in the eyes. "Traveling in a group like that," I mused, shaking my head.*

"*It's safer," she argued weakly, and her gaze was gone, locked onto her hands in her lap. "The more of us there are the better. And they have weapons."*

"*We could find weapons," I said. Riley woke from somewhere nearby, and I paused while he passed us for the fire, reluctant to let anyone hear our conversation. "A group is more obvious. There're more people to worry about. To watch out for. They're distractions." I leaned forward, trying to catch her focus to tell her urgently, "You're the only one that matters to me."*

Her eyes flooded with tears, but she blinked them away. Then she was gone again. Retreated back into her mind, unwilling to try and convince me any more that we should go along with Buck.

The whole day passed, quiet and desolate, until the sun started going down. We watched Buck's group eat a final meal in the courtyard. We watched them pack their things. We watched them file out one by one, until only Buck remained. He squatted down in that same spot he had earlier, and with how long it took him to say anything it was almost like he was worried we weren't coming.

"*If you folks change your minds, we're heading for Idaho." He was*

holding a hunting rifle in his hands, which he laid out on the ground in front of us. "Rachel convinced me to leave this with you. Only ammo is what's in the magazine, it's half full, but it's something. Didn't feel right leaving you without a gun."

It was so generous that whatever sense of humility I had left almost tempted me to decline the gift. But that would've been a mistake, so instead I extended my hand. "Thank you, Buck. For everything."

He took my hand in his own, giving it a firm shake. "Take care."

For the gun, Trish managed to give him a small smile, and then he left us in the courtyard, the only light the dying flames of the fire. Once he was gone Trish slid under the sleeping bag, turning her back to me and pulling the covers up to her neck. It wasn't any different than any other night, but now I had the vague sense that she was upset we weren't going with the group.

"*Trish?" I prompted, leaning the rifle against the large planter to get it out of the way.*

I waited a minute for her to say something, but when the only response I got was a teary sniffle, I let out a somber sigh and let it go. Twelve years of marriage and it was with timidity that I slid into the sleeping bag next to her. Twelve years and I was too afraid to wrap my arm around her. I fell asleep second guessing my decision not to go. I didn't think it would be safer, but maybe being around people would've helped both of us recover more easily. Maybe the distraction would've been a good thing. And I might've given in if Trish had been her usual stubborn self and fought a little harder.

When I woke the next morning my wife wasn't at my side. I lifted my head, hopeful that she'd finally decided to eat on her own, and was at the fire heating up a can of food. But she wasn't there. I sat up.

"*Trish?" I called, scanning the edges of the courtyard while I pushed myself to my feet.*

There was no answer, but even though the house was large and somewhat secluded, I was too anxious to call louder. Thinking she'd gone to explore the rest of the home, I wandered inside.

"*Patricia," I implored, my voice echoing through the empty hall.*

It was eerily still, and as a knot began to form in my gut I took the knife from the sheath around my forearm. I called her name again as I searched a bedroom, and then again on the second floor. She wasn't there, and I went back down to check the panic room. But there was already an icy sickness at the pit of my stomach. Something happened to her. My pace picked up as I reached the courtyard again, crossing it toward the panic room.

"*Trish?" I said once more, surveying the empty panic room. Then it sank in, and my heart dropped straight out of my chest. "Trish," I whispered. She was gone. "Patricia!"*

I darted for the front of the house, and didn't stop until I'd sprinted out the door and into the bright, deserted street. I squinted through the light of the sun, struggling to search the distance as tears flooded my eyes.

"*TRISH!"*

My holler caused a single Feral to round the corner of the nearest home, and when it caught sight of me it took off my direction. I brushed the water from my eyes and continued searching, but by the time the Feral was getting too close there wasn't a human to be seen. Now I had to run.

As the Feral neared me I bolted back into the house, ducking behind the door with my knife gripped tight in my hand. The moment it came sprinting through the entrance I plunged the blade into its midsection, only to pull it out so I could deliver one more deadly blow. I didn't stop to think once it collapsed. I rushed to the courtyard.

The rifle was still leaned up where I'd put it last night, but her backpack was gone. My frantic hands pushed aside layers of blankets, and then ran over the ground, leading me toward the fire where I searched the

chairs, and the plants, looking for some kind of note. Hoping she'd left some sign to tell me she'd just gone out for supplies.

There was nothing. She'd gone after the group and left me here. I knew it in the deeply shattered pieces of my heart. What made it worse was that I didn't understand. I couldn't comprehend when she'd left, or how, or why. It didn't make sense that she could just walk away without a word. After twelve years. I couldn't even think anymore, and I couldn't make it back to the sleeping bag. I collapsed on the hot stone ground beside the cold fire.

And I cried. I knew they were going to Idaho, but I didn't know where in Idaho. Or if they were stopping somewhere else first. Or how long they'd stay. Or if Trish had even caught up with them and if she was safe. I was completely alone. No friends. No family. No closure, or hope, or purpose.

I sat there for two days. Unmoving even after the tears stopped coming. I sat there while my misery traveled through fits of depression, anger, confusion, and back again. I sat there until I couldn't hold myself up anymore, until I dropped to lay my cheek against the hard ground. And I slept.

…

"Keep it slow," I whispered to Kara from the passenger seat, even though the window of the Hummer was rolled up.

We were driving through a small town in the dead of night, doing a quick scan to see whether or not it was worth searching for supplies. We'd taken back roads all the way here, to Irvine, Kentucky, hoping to avoid popular interstates where we were more likely to run into raiders.

Kara eased off the gas, keeping the engine from running too high so it wouldn't make too much noise. "None of the shops even have signs," she observed, squinting out the window and trying to see without the headlights on. "How do we know what's in them?"

"I don't know."

My stomach grumbled loudly, and I adjusted in the seat thinking it might help the empty burning in my gut. Shifting put a pang in my chest, but I kept from reacting, worried Kara would finally notice what I'd been trying to hide. My condition was getting worse. Before I was out of breath easily, but the pain only came when I did something to bring it on. Now it was incessant, and it was spreading to the right side. There was endless pressure on my good lung, hindering breathing that was already stunted, and I could feel my heart working strenuously to circulate what little oxygen it was getting. I was tired. Always tired, and it didn't help that we were barely eating.

"Go back to the bridge," I told Kara, and she immediately began to turn around. "We'll park across the water and walk in."

She steered us back to the edge of town and the bridge, and once across the water she pulled the Hummer off a dirt shoulder. "Are we going to be in Pennsylvania soon?" she asked, shutting off the engine and opening her door.

"Kara," I breathed, and even though what I felt was worry, the pain and exhaustion I felt caused it to come out as frustration.

She'd hardly slept since we left Oklahoma, insisting on getting to Pittsburgh as fast as we could. When we did stop she was still too restless to drift off, and the two scarce meals we'd eaten she'd consumed like it was an inconvenience, an unnecessary halt to our progress. I was worried about her, about how desperate she was for revenge, but I'd been too tired and too out of breath to do more than give her concerned looks.

"I'm just asking," she replied defensively, closing the door as hard as she dared to emphasize her offense.

I dropped my head back against the seat and kneaded my fingers over my eyes, reminding myself that I wasn't the only one who was tired, and restless, and impatient, and hungry. After pushing open the door I eased myself out of the passenger seat, and worked my way around to the back of the vehicle where Kara had opened the rear hatch. She was pulling out our backpacks and weapons, leaning our gardening tools against the

our backpacks and weapons, leaning our gardening tools against the bumper, and when she grabbed that gun with the single bullet she hesitated. She held the grip in one hand while the other was rested under the barrel, her thumb running over the polished ridges of the cylinder. For a minute she just stared at it, her jaw working side to side with recognizable fury. Then she handed it easily to me, like she hadn't just hesitated and like she hadn't so clearly been considering the enemy she'd use that single bullet for.

I took the weapon, reluctant to acknowledge what I'd just seen so it wouldn't upset her. "We've got one state between us and Pennsylvania," I told her, sticking the revolver into the back of my pants.

She swung her backpack over her shoulders, and then leaned with both hands resting on the butt end of her shovel. "That's better than I thought."

"You know," I began, lifting my own bag to put it on my back, "If Jed and them are there, we're going to have to come up with a plan."

The pack was only over my shoulders for a few seconds before I was positive that I wouldn't be able to carry it. With how little supplies we had it couldn't have weighed more than ten pounds, but because I was so exhausted it felt like fifty. Plus, trying to hold myself straight with the added weight increased the pain in my chest, never mind that I still had to hold my gardening spear.

"If Wolf is alive we have to get him first," Kara said, watching as I took off my backpack. I simply nodded, lacking the heart to tell her that people with so little regard for human life probably didn't think much of dogs. I doubted Wolf was alive. "You're not taking your backpack?"

"If we run into trouble I want to be able to maneuver," I offered, reluctant to lie completely, "The bag makes it harder."

After I set it back in the vehicle she closed the hatch, shutting it as quietly as she could. "You'd think your ribs would at least be getting a little better by now," she mused, following at my side as we started back across the bridge.

I gave a small shrug. ¨Bones take longer to heal.¨

She nodded unsurely in response, and we both fell silent to trudge into town. There were plenty of buildings along this main street, but Kara had been right about them not having any signs. Most of them had the names of the business posted on awnings over the front door, but they were so old and faded it was impossible to make out the words. Others might've had names painted in the windows at one point, but now the windows were too dusty and it was too dark to see through. They appeared to be small doctor's offices and salons anyway, not the kind of places we'd be likely to find food.

"There's a hospital somewhere," Kara whispered, pointing to a blue sign with a white 'H' on it, "Maybe it'll have some medicine for you."

I wasn't sure what medicine could do for me, but I looked at the sign and nodded in agreement. "Hey, wait," I said, glimpsing four faint letters in the window beyond the hospital sign. 'SHER'. I strode over, ignoring the aching in my chest when I raised an arm to wipe the dust from the window. "Sheriff," I read aloud, and when Kara met my gaze with a smile I wiggled my eyebrows at her happily.

Taking the doorknob in my hand, I gave it a twist, pleased to find it was unlocked. I pushed it open, and when I heard the beginning chime of the bell above the door my arm shot up, grabbing the tongue to stop the noise. Reaching up so rapidly sent pain shooting through my torso, but all I could do was purse my lips and clench my teeth, because I couldn't grunt it out and I didn't want Kara to see how much it hurt. I motioned her into the office, relieved when she passed through and I could go in, lowering my arm to let the door close behind us.

There were no Ferals in this one room, one story office, but there had been at some point. One of the desks was overturned, and old papers and office supplies littered the floor. I was hoping we might find a weapon in the sheriff's station, or some ammunition. There was neither, nor any other sorts of weapons or food, so we made our way back out to the street.

Upon exiting the office I felt a chill go up my spine, until it spread through

my limbs, raising every hair on my arms and neck. There was no breeze to account for it, but the feeling in my gut was explanation enough. It was instinct. "You feel that?"

"What?" Kara asked.

I squinted through the dark, scanning every shadow and corner. "Like we're being watched."

Kara's head swiveled around as she took in our surroundings. "You think it's another one of those stalker Ferals?"

"I don't know, maybe," I murmured suspiciously, "Stay close, okay?"

She gave a ready nod, and we started forward once more. The first cross street we passed didn't look like it had much down it, so we continued on. The next one appeared a little more promising, and I figured we could head through and circle back around to this main street. There were more offices and small shops along this road, pointless for scavenging, and I was already panting for air from walking. Here a florist, there a lawyer, next a bank. The shops were so casual that it caught me off guard when the next building we passed had the words 'Estill County Jail' posted on the outside. It seemed like an awkward place for a jail, but it might have better supplies than the empty sheriff's office.

At the entrance to the jail I leaned back against the wall, catching my breath so I wouldn't be gasping too loudly when we went inside. "I'm ready to call it a night as soon as we find some food," I said with a soft chuckle.

Kara's hazel eyes took me in, and she glanced back in the direction of the bridge. "We could get on the road again."

"We're staying here tonight," I told her firmly. I couldn't let her keep going without sleeping, there had to be a point when I drew a line.

She let out a heavy breath, clearly displeased, but she appeared to know that it wasn't open for discussion. "Ready?" she asked, glancing at the double doors of the jail.

I peered around, checking once more to see if something was following us, and then nodded. We entered the building with our weapons raised, me ready to stab, Kara ready to hit. With all the shades of the windows drawn none of the moonlight from outside could filter in, and it was pitch black. I'd left everything I had in the Hummer, but a moment later there was a click, and Kara's flashlight illuminated the interior ahead of us.

It was small, like everything else we'd seen or passed so far in this town. There were a few open office desks behind the large reception desk directly in front of us, and a couple more enclosed offices along the left. As Kara shifted her beam to do a brief scan for Ferals I caught a glimpse of two more doors at the back. One of them had something written on it, a word I couldn't make out from this distance. The other had a small window set in the center, and appeared to lead into the second section of the building where the cells were.

Taking our first steps forward, we started for the offices along the perimeter. The initial one didn't have a single thing we could've used, and after searching the second one it was the same thing. The third one, however, judging by the important plaques on the walls and the fancy nameplate on the desk, was a little more promising. I wasn't sure what kind of fate Captain Banks had suffered, but I was grateful to him for being somewhat organized, because the key to the jail cells was hanging neatly by the door.

There were no weapons in the captain's office, or in any of the desks at the center of the building, and when we reached the doors at the back I figured out why. That one with the indistinct letters was perfectly legible now – the armory. It couldn't have had very much in it. Surely most of the weapons were removed to fight Ferals at the outbreak, and it didn't look much larger than a closet to begin with. But it didn't appear we were going to find out, because when Kara reached for the handle, it wouldn't budge.

She shoved the tip of her shovel into the crack between the door and the frame, pushing hard to see if she could pry it open. But she wasn't strong enough, and I was in no shape to exert myself like that, no matter how

bad I wanted to see what was inside.

"Damn," Kara mumbled in disappointment, removing her shovel. "This place is a bust."

I huffed with laughter, holding up the key to the cells. "If this works then maybe we could sleep here."

"I got a clean record," Kara said with a smirk, shaking her head, "I can't be spending nights in prison."

I chuckled, turning to head for the final door. "It would be safe though, in a cell. With beds. We could both catch some shut eye."

Kara hummed with what sounded like reluctant agreement, and peered through the window with her flashlight to check for Ferals before opening the door. She held it ajar for me, and then let it close behind us. There were only a handful of jail cells in the dark hall, each separated by a thick concrete wall. While I strode to the door of the first one with the key in hand, Kara went down the line, checking each cell to make sure they were empty. She returned to my side as I got the barred opening unlocked, and followed me in to check things out.

"A toilet and a bed," Kara mused, dropping down on the mattress and bouncing a little to test its firmness, "Life's essentials."

"If only there was someone to feed us," I smiled wistfully, and bent over enough to press my hand into the bed. I would've sat down if I thought I'd have the energy to get back up.

"Dugan?" Kara prompted, setting her flashlight aside to scoot back and lean against the wall. I hummed curiously. "Do you think we're going to get there in time?"

One corner of my mouth tensed unsurely, and to emphasize it, I shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

"We have to stop them," she muttered under her breath, and even in the dark I could see the determination in the tired lines around her eyes.

She was so focused on getting to Pittsburgh, but I wasn't so sure it was the best idea anymore. Maybe we'd get there before Jed, and we'd be able to warn the people at that camp. But maybe the people weren't even there. Or maybe it was too late, and if Jed was already there I was in no shape to be fighting anyone. Though I wouldn't tell Kara, rushing to Pittsburgh felt like rushing to a faster fate.

Things were quiet for a minute, and for some reason being stationary was taking its toll on me. I got lightheaded, as though walking had been keeping my blood flowing, and now that we'd stopped so had my circulation. I stretched my neck side to side, hoping to ease the flow to my head, and motioned for Kara to stand.

"Come on, let's find food."

She got off the bed, but once she was on her feet she shined her light at me, squinting suspiciously. "You okay? You don't look too good."

"I just need to keep moving," I answered, turning for the exit.

But she grabbed my arm. "You've been sleeping a lot, in the car." She studied my reaction, and I was too blinded by the light she was shining at me to see if she could read the truth in my expression. "You couldn't carry your backpack, could you?" I sighed with defeat and shook my head, and when she spoke again I could hear teary concern in her voice. "Why? What's wrong with you?"

I didn't want to worry her. She'd been through so much trauma already, and the last thing she needed was to think I wouldn't make it. So I gave the most convincing smile I could, "I'm just really sore, I'll be alright," and motioned for her to go out the door, "Come on."

Her light lingered on me for a few seconds before she finally decided I was okay. She led the way back out to the street, but when we got there I had that feeling again. Like someone or something was watching us. It caused me to pull the revolver from my waistband, holding the grip tight in one hand. If a stalker came at us because Kara was small, and I was so clearly injured, then I wanted to be ready to aim our single bullet perfectly

perfectly.

We headed back toward the main street, sure that if there was going to be some kind of grocery store or food mart then it would be on this road. There were a few houses along the way, though none of them held anything of value. We went half a mile, into buildings and houses, up and down stairs, searching, and that was as far as I could go. I couldn't catch my breath anymore, and the lightheadedness was now a constant whirling in behind my eyes. If we were even going to make it back to the jail to sleep then I needed to take a break.

The severe worry was obvious on Kara's face when I told her we needed to stop, and she helped lower me down onto the sidewalk, so I could lean back against the side of a building. I handed her the revolver so she could stand watch while I rested, and once she had it in her hand she dropped it to her side.

"So hungry," she groaned, blowing air through her lips and dejectedly leaning one shoulder against the wall. "I'd kill for a grilled cheese."

I sucked in a hard, shallow breath so I could ask, "Is that what your favorite food was?"

"I mean it sounds really good right now," she chuckled. Her tongue ran over the cut in her lip, but I couldn't tell if it was pain or hunger. "My favorite was macaroni."

"You like the cartoon shapes?" I guessed, knowing my own daughter had loved it too.

"It *had* to be cartoon pasta," she agreed with a grin, and while it was nice to see her smile again, it didn't do much to lighten the tired shadows under her eyes. Or the black and blue bruise on her cheek. "What was your favorite?"

"Shrimp cocktails," I told her promptly. The immediately disgusted look on her face caused me to laugh, which put a sharp pain in my chest.

"Ugh." She stuck her tongue out teasingly. "Anything fish is nasty."

I was about to ask her how long it had been since she'd even tried fish, because maybe her taste had changed with age. But there was a scuff against the ground from an alley nearby, like a sneaker against the sidewalk. Ferals didn't wear shoes, which meant it had to be a person who'd been following us. Kara cocked the revolver at her side while I scrambled up, ignoring the pain the rapid movement caused to prepare for an attack. We both watched the alley where it'd sounded like the noise came from, but a whole minute passed by without anyone materializing. I'd almost started to relax again when the upper half of a body stuck out from behind the building.

Kara raised the revolver instantly, and in response the person rushed out, raising a bow and pulling back on the string. "Whoa," said the female voice hastily, in a mixed accent that was hard to classify, "Easy there."

Out of instinct I moved in front of Kara to protect her if the woman fired, and Kara adjusted enough to aim around me. "There's one bullet in this gun," Kara muttered, so threateningly that it even startled me, "And it isn't meant for you."

"Put it down then," the woman suggested calmly, "And I'll relax the bow." It was too dark out for me to see the color of her eyes or hair, but her hair was dark, brown probably, and only a few inches long. The wispy tips of it were stuck down under a rolled bandana, which looked tied around the back of her head. She had on a baggy black jean jacket with a gray hood, and the legs her tight denim jeans were tucked into boots that reached up to her calves. "Okay," she said, when neither Kara or I responded, "I'll start relaxing the bow if you won't shoot me." She was fairly young, mid to late twenties by my best guess, and the more she talked the more I thought I could place her accent – undeniably southern, but with an unmistakably European influence. Scottish, maybe, or Irish, I never could tell the difference. Unique might've been one word for the mix, but awkward felt a little more accurate.

"I won't shoot you if you start," Kara countered, still peering out from behind me.

The woman's eyes shifted from Kara to me, and then back to Kara, and

she let out an amused huff. "You're a tough little shit, aren't you?" Her string arm relaxed just slightly, and her bow arm lowered enough for her to check whether or not we'd shoot her. When she was comfortable enough that we hadn't yet, she relaxed the bow completely, but kept it ready in her hands. "Your turn."

Kara released the tension in the hammer of the revolver, and lowered it to her side as she moved out from behind me. "I'm Kara," she told the woman, sounding totally at ease now that she wasn't an immediate threat.

"Mal," the woman replied with a smile.

But I wasn't so confident. "Why were you following us?" I asked gruffly.

"Straight to the point, okay," she mumbled to herself, still holding the arrow to the bowstring like she wasn't so confident either. "Looking for company?"

I was so caught off guard by the question that my eyebrows furrowed, and I felt Kara glance up at me. It only took a few moments to recover, and I answered definitely, "No."

"Dugan," Kara whispered in protest, and I shot her a glance.

"That's it?" Mal asked in shock. "Just, no?" I simply stared at her, already having stated my position. "You're obviously injured. Is that single bullet your only weapon? I'm good with a bow. We can help each other. I know where to find food."

At that last part Kara looked at me again, and I didn't have to meet her gaze to know she was silently pleading with me. "I said no."

"Come on, man," Mal entreated, taking a pleading step forward. I put my arm across Kara's chest and took us one step back. "Look, there's Ferals around. The smart ones. You've seen them, right?" She sighed, finally returning the arrow to the quiver at her back as if it would help. "They get you if you're alone. I haven't slept in days."

"I can't protect you," I growled impatiently. I was already in no shape to

"I can't protect you," I growled impatiently. I was already in no shape to even protect Kara, there was no way I could put any focus on another person. Kara was my priority. That was if we could trust Mal in the first place. We didn't even know her, and she knew I was injured. She could've just spotted us as easy targets, and was looking to take anything we had as soon as we let our guard down.

"I'm not asking you to," Mal quipped, clearly growing offended by my attitude. "Just let me tag along."

I didn't have the energy to keep arguing about it, so I grabbed the revolver out of Kara's hands and aimed it at the newcomer. "Ask me again," I challenged.

"Whoa," she threw her hands up and took a step back. "Shit, okay." She continued to retreat, unwilling to take her eyes off me while I was pointing the gun at her.

"Don't follow us anymore," I told her.

She nodded, withdrawing until she disappeared around a corner. The moment she was gone Kara turned toward me, her eyebrows furrowed angrily. "Why'd you do that?"

"We're on a mission," I grumbled, struggling to bend over and reach for my gardening fork. "I know you haven't forgotten."

"She could've come," Kara argued, "Maybe she would've wanted to help."

"We're not discussing it, Kara," I grunted as I straightened back up.

"But you heard her," she insisted, "She's just scared."

"I won't be responsible for another person's life," I snapped, clutching at my chest as the tension of my frustration ripped through my lungs. "You understand? It's not happening."

"Dugan," Kara whispered, and her face fell sadly. "None of it was your fault."

Reluctant to let her see the tears that flooded my eyes I turned my face away, and through the stress and the emotion and the fatigue, I began to feel lightheaded again. "It's done, okay? Let's go."

Kara sighed, and brushed past me to start heading back to the jail. To let me know she was upset with my decision she kept a pace with which I was barely able to keep up. By the time we got back I was gasping for air, and after locking the cell after us so no Ferals could get in, I collapsed onto one of the two beds in the first cell. I don't know if I passed out, or if I was just so tired that I drifted off in seconds, but the next thing I knew it was daylight.

Kara was sitting cross-legged on the bed across the cell, with her pocketknife in her hands. She was digging the tip of the blade into something else she was holding, so focused on it that she didn't even acknowledge me when I sat up. I rubbed my sleep-heavy eyes, working the blur from them so I could see better what she was doing. The revolver was sitting on the bed next to her, but whatever she was holding was too small for me to make out.

"What are you doing?" I asked as pleasantly as I could, afraid she was still upset with me.

She stopped and for a brief moment held up something small and shiny. The bullet. "Carving Jed's name into the bullet." Her eyes met mine, and I could tell that she hadn't slept much, if at all. Her stare was dark and angry.

I eased myself onto my feet when she went back to working, to digging the tip of her knife into the side of the bullet. After making my way across the cell I sat down at her side, looking at the item in her hand. She wasn't joking, and she wasn't being metaphorical. She'd already finished scratching a 'J' into the metal, and was working on the 'E'.

"Kara," I said softly, "I know you're upset-"

"Upset?" she repeated hotly, dropping her hands as if I'd been frustrating her all morning. "Dugan, I'm pissed off." She stood, tossing the items into

her all morning." "Dugan, I'm pissed off." She stood, tossing the items into her seat. "And stop looking at me like that. Like I'm not supposed to be. You can barely breathe." She pointed to the wounds in her cheek and lip. "Look at my face. They killed Namiko. And Wolf…" Her gaze dropped gloomily, but a moment later she glared at me again. "Stop looking at me like I have no right to be pissed off. Like it's not rational. Just stop."

I grabbed the bullet off the mattress, running my thumb over the letter she'd scrawled while I told her dolefully, "Revenge won't make you feel better."

"Revenge," she huffed with dry laughter while her eyes squeezed shut, and she took in a deep breath. "We have no food." Her bottom lip quivered, and when she opened her eyes again they were filled with tears. "Our weapons are shit. You're getting worse and you think I can't tell. And I've never been so exhausted, but I can barely sleep because every time I close my eyes I see it and feel it over and over again. I don't want revenge, Dugan." She wiped at a tear that slid down her cheek, and sniffled to try and keep any more from falling. "I want peace."

"Kara," I stammered, at a loss for what to say. "I'm sorry, I-" I'd read her all wrong.

"It's fine," she shrugged, dragging the heels of her hands across her eyes to remove the last of the tears.

"What will help?" I asked, extending the knife and bullet to her. "You want to keep carving?" The corner of her mouth twitched with the smallest of grateful smiles, but she didn't reach for either item. "Want to take your knife to one of the mattresses? Just tear it up. Should be fun."

This time she let out a stuffy-nosed laugh, but shook her head. "I want to eat."

"Trust me, kid," I said in eager agreement, "I do too."

She puffed her cheeks with air, and looked around searchingly like she was ready for a distraction. When her gaze wandered toward the door to the offices her eyes widened, and she paced over. "There's a note in the window."

window.

"What?" I pushed myself off the bed and strode over.

Sure enough, there was a piece of paper taped to the other side of the window that hadn't been there last night. Penciled in big, bubbly handwriting was, 'For Kara and the asshole, eat up. – Mal (the girl with the bow)' and an arrow pointing downward.

"The asshole," Kara laughed, eagerly reaching for the handle to see what was on the other side of the door.

"Hey," I stopped her, still not completely trusting in our acquaintance. "Careful."

I eased the door open myself, and then poked my head out to make sure there were no traps on the other side. But Kara was too hungry to be cautious, and she pulled the door open before I was finished searching. Both of our eyes locked onto the two large cans, one of diced pineapple and the other a mild chili. Kara scooped them up and squeezed them to her chest, inhaling deep as though she could smell it through the tin.

"Bet you feel like an asshole now," she teased, carrying them to the bed and digging her can opener out of her backpack.

I chuckled, shaking my head as I lowered myself onto the mattress and waited for Kara to open the cans. "If we see her again you can say thanks," I said seriously, "But I don't know about letting her come."

Kara handed me an open can, setting to work on the second one. "I'm way too hungry to complain."

I truly wasn't ready to let Mal come along, but the chili and pineapple were so damn delicious that if she were here right now I probably would've hugged her.

Sinking In

Slowly Freaking Out by Skylar Grey

Sinking In

Genevieve

The light filtering through the window of my room caused my eyes to crack open. Groggy from a restless sleep, I massaged my hand over my face and rolled over. In my tired state I half expected to see Echo a few feet away – on missions and back at camp she was always there. I was still getting used to the fact that there was a wall between us now.

With a sigh I pushed myself off the bed. I'd started keeping my knife on the nightstand while I slept, and when I was on my feet I strapped it around my thigh. After my backpack and rifle were strewn over my shoulders I started toward the door, stopping when I caught sight of myself in the full length mirror mounted on the back of it. My hair was getting long, and it was messy from sleeping. I ran my fingers through it to work out as many of the knots as I could, and then I rubbed my hands over my face again to force away the visible fatigue.

Striding out the door, I walked a few feet to the one right next to mine and knocked on it. From the other side came a muffled, "It's open."

The inside of the room was darker than mine because Echo had pulled her blinds closed. She was sprawled out on the bed at the far end, face buried in a pillow. The blankets were pulled up so high that only her head and the ends of her arms were visible out the top, but she had one enticingly bare leg sticking out the side. She'd never slept in her underwear in the tent.

"You awake?" I plopped down onto the couch across from the foot of the bed, a cloud of dust going up around me. I didn't have a couch in my room, just a desk with a useless flat screen television on it.

Without lifting her head, Echo mumbled, "No."

Without lifting her head, Echo mumbled, "No."

I chuckled, but sat there for a quiet minute, giving her a chance to wake up while I glanced around the room. It was pretty empty, the bed and the couch being the only furniture in the room. There was no nightstand, and no dresser either unless it was hiding in the closet beside the door. I bounced on the cushion I was sitting on, and then ran my hand over the soft suede fabric. Without the dust, the couch was comfortable enough to be worthy of sleeping on…

It was taking too long, so I got up and opened the blinds to let in the morning light. Echo rolled onto her back, bringing the pillow with her to shield her face from it. Eventually she sat up, dropping the pillow and squinting at me tiredly. Her hair was getting long too, reaching well below her shoulders now, but unlike mine it was so wavy that it looked cute when it was a mess.

"Up and at 'em," I said with teasing liveliness. "You agreed to be co-commander. That means your day starts when mine does."

She kicked her legs over the side of the bed, and even though I'd known it, I tried not to react to the fact that she didn't have any pants on. "You still want me to be your partner?"

My eyebrows furrowed at the shock on her face. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Well," she started hesitantly, reaching to the floor to grab her cargo pants, "Because Micah."

My gaze fell, and I felt the anxiety that had plagued me all night resurface. Micah was my brother, and I loved him like he was. But he embodied the conflict about Echo that I'd been feeling for months, and just when I was learning how to forgive her. After he found out that I knew who Echo was, he didn't say a word to me the rest of the day, and I'd hardly gotten to talk to Echo or Blake like I usually did. I should be happy he was alive. Relieved. And I was, but Micah had only just arrived, and already I'd never felt so isolated.

"Get dressed," I murmured, starting for the door to wait for her outside.

¨I'm nungry.¨

A couple minutes later she came out into the hall with her cargo pants on, a jacket, and her backpack hanging off her shoulders. "I didn't mean to upset you," she said, and even though I looked away I could feel her watching me.

I shrugged. "You didn't."

All of yesterday I could see the concern in her eyes. It was visible still, and accounted for some of my intense anxiety. "Are we ever going to talk about it?"

My fingers pressed into the stressed creases of my forehead, and I took a deep breath before answering so it wouldn't come out too harsh. "There's nothing to talk about."

Her lips pursed with silent acceptance, but her gaze dropped as she asked, "Can I just request one thing?" I stayed quiet to listen, and after looking up to make sure I was, she glanced away again. "If it comes to it, and he makes you choose… Will you please make it a clean break?"

For some reason that put a sickening pressure on my chest. "I'm not choosing anything," I said defensively. I should've reminded her that we weren't together, that we weren't a couple and I couldn't choose because there was nothing to choose between. But all I could think was that it couldn't come to that, not after everything we'd been through together. Not after what she'd started to mean to me. "You're my battle buddy."

"You say that now," she whispered, "But he's your brother." I opened my mouth to protest, but she cut me off before anything came out. "Just promise me you won't drag it out. Please. That's all I ask."

It wouldn't come to that, but for the sake of making her feel better, I nodded. "I promise." I didn't want to talk about it anymore, so I pointed to the handheld radio mounted on the shoulder strap of my backpack. "You have yours?"

"It's in my bag."

Until Micah eased up around Echo, I had a feeling we might be spending more time apart. "If we aren't together, keep it on. I need to be able to reach you."

"How come we don't have call signs?" she asked, following at my side when I started toward the stairs.

I shrugged. "We don't need them."

"Forget needing them," she said sarcastically, "I think it'd be fun."

"Oh yeah?" I pushed open the door to the barracks while she nodded. "What would mine be?"

Echo squinted, though I couldn't tell if it was in thought or because of the sun now that we were outdoors. "Boss Lady?" She chuckled, and then deepened her voice like she was speaking into her radio. "Pipsqueak Boss Lady, come in, this is…" But she stopped to think of her own call sign.

"Bootie Call," I supplied, poorly concealing my smirk.

She'd called herself that the other day, but now that I brought it up on my own, her cheeks visibly flushed. "No way."

"Bootie Call," I pretended to prompt into my radio. "This is Pipsqueak Boss Lady-"

"Stop!" she shrieked through a giggle, reaching over to try and cover my mouth with her palm.

I pulled away. "I'm reading you loud and clear, Bootie Call," I teased, unable to hold back my own amusement. "Over."

She buried her face in her hands, cackling through her fingers. "No! They sound like kinky bedroom nicknames."

I snorted, feeling my own cheeks tint while I buckled over with laughter. "This conversation never happened."

She nodded with eager agreement, still chuckling. "I've never had such a bad idea."

We reached the cafeteria a minute later, and even though everyone around camp ate at different hours of the morning, I tensed as my eyes immediately scanned for Micah. Just knowing he'd see me come in with Echo, just knowing the scowl he'd give me for it, it was enough to tear me between wanting to slink away from Echo and hoping he wasn't around. My search told me that Micah wasn't here, but I did spot Blake and Casey. After grabbing some food in the Styrofoam dishes we'd found, Echo and I plopped down across from the couple.

"Morning," Blake greeted with a smile.

I'd just shoved a bite into my mouth, so I gave him and Casey a cheeky grin. Echo put down her cup of coffee to say, "Morning, love birds." Directly after that she slurped a spoonful of stew, immediately giving a contented hum. "So much flavor!"

"Aminah said they found some spices and seasonings back there in the kitchen," Casey told her.

"I could die right now," Echo groaned after swallowing another bite, "And I'd die happy." We all chuckled, and her statement made me hold my next bite in my mouth for a few extra seconds to appreciate it more.

Blake pushed aside his empty bowl, leaning forward on his elbows to talk. "Delta Squad is prepping for the run tonight."

"Good," I replied with a satisfied nod. "The sooner Ty can get to work on making fuel the sooner we can stop stressing about any other runs we need to make."

"What else is happening today?"

I washed down my bite with some coffee before answering, "Farmers are going to start clearing the parks of grass." Now that all the snow was melted they could prepare the land, and as soon as it got warm enough they'd start planting. I'd wanted to get running water to the buildings, but

from the brief explanation one of the engineering civilians had given me, we didn't have the man power to devote to getting a water plant up and running. "Harvey's going to see what he can do to put a water pump at the river. Maybe we can build some showers over there."

"Oh, that reminds me," Blake said, "We found these big containers at the motor pool. I didn't know what they were the first time we saw them, but they're for potable water. They have a trailer hitch too so we can haul them back and forth between the river and here."

"That's great," I told him sincerely.

As I swallowed my next bite of food there was a loud grumble, and it was so powerful that it took me a moment to realize it was Casey's stomach.

"Sorry," she giggled, her cheeks tinting to match her dark red hair, "That stew was really good, I couldn't get enough."

Before Blake or I could respond, Echo pushed her half-empty bowl across the table. "Here, I'm full."

"I couldn't," Casey protested.

My eyebrows furrowed with shock when Echo told her, "I insist." Echo always ate every meal like it would be her last, and only minutes before she'd been talking about how tasty this one was. There was no way she was full, but it was clear Blake knew as little about what to make of the exchange as I did.

"What are you doing after you're done eating?" Blake asked, watching as Casey began working on the remainders of Echo's food.

I passed a careful glance over at Echo while I answered, "I was actually going to see if Micah's calmed down enough to talk to me." If he'd listen then I could explain, and he'd stop being upset, and things wouldn't be so tense with him and Echo around.

Echo took a gulp of coffee, deliberately staring at the surface of the table. Curious about where Micah was, I clicked on the talk button of my

handheld radio. "April, you there? It's Genevieve. Over."

It took a minute before I caught the end of, "-m here," like she'd forgotten to press the talk button until after she'd started responding.

"Has Micah come to the hospital at all? Over." I took a final bite of my soup, leaving a portion at the bottom of my dish.

"He's here with Dr. Issa and I," she replied.

After I responded with 'roger', Blake looked into Casey's second empty bowl. "I'm going to walk Casey to the hospital right now, you want to come?"

I waved them ahead. "I'll catch up." They stood and left, and after they were out of sight I inched my bowl in front of Echo. "You have something to do while I'm gone?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll help clear the fields." She glanced into the dish, giving it a gentle push back my direction. "You finish it, I'm fine."

Even though she declined, I could tell she was just being modest by the way her tongue ran hungrily over her bottom lip. I wanted to ask why she'd given up half her meal anyway, but instead I stood. "I'm going to leave it here, eat it if you want. I'll come find you later." As I started toward the exit I called back at her, "Make sure your radio is on."

She gave an unconcerned flick of her wrist, and when I reached the doors I glanced back just long enough to see her tilting my bowl to her lips. I caught up with Casey and Blake, and a couple minutes later we reached the urgent care. Micah was slouched in the cushioned seat behind the reception desk, looking bored while Dr. Issa and April talked over him. I smiled at all of them in greeting when we walked in, and I couldn't deny I was a little disappointed when all I got from my brother was a nod.

"What are you guys up to?" I asked, leaning my elbows on the counter.

"Discussing theories," April answered.

I nodded understandingly, and trying to make amends, I asked Micah, "And what are you doing?" He shrugged, and to my relief he had an almost playful smirk as he stretched the rubber band he had in his hands and sent it flying over the counter at me. "Did you eat yet?" I picked the band up off the floor and shot it back at him. He nodded. "Want to come with me?"

"Where?" he asked, already standing and making his way around the desk.

While he followed me back outside I answered, "To the motor pool." I hadn't yet gone to check out the other Growler that Blake had promised would be mine. "How'd you sleep last night?"

"I'm not used to sleeping at night." He shrugged again, though I couldn't tell if it was on account of the standard apathy that came with his age, if he was still upset with me, or if he was just a little shy seeing as we hadn't seen each other in years.

Trying to come up with anything to break the ice, I asked, "Do you like your room?"

That seemed to light up his face a bit. "It's got a PlayStation in it," he huffed amusedly and added, "If only it worked."

"We're working on getting electricity to the barracks," I told him, glad he seemed ready to talk to me. "I'm sure there'd be enough power for you to play every once in a while."

"Yeah?" he asked in pleased disbelief. I nodded. "Cool."

I pursed my lips with awkward agreement, glancing around for something else to say. "Want to race?" I still had those stitches in my hip, but I barely felt it anymore.

"Where to?" he asked, lifting the strap of his shotgun to remove it from his shoulders.

"Ah ah," I scolded teasingly, pointing to the gun and his backpack, "Keep

those on, you cheater." I couldn't leave my own rifle and bag behind, and if he had his on it would make things more even. He laughed, replacing the shotgun. "To that building," I answered his question, pointing into the distance. I tightened the straps of my backpack so it wouldn't flop around while I ran. "Let's see what you got." We both got into position, leaning forward with anticipation. To tease him even more, I took off running, calling back over my shoulder, "Go!"

I could hear him chuckle behind me, but it only took him a few seconds to catch up, and before I knew it he'd passed me. I ran harder, trying with everything in me to keep up, but he was faster than I ever would've predicted. By the time I reached our destination he'd already been there for a couple seconds.

I was panting for air, and at seeing how winded I was he laughed. At least he was breathing heavily too. "I knew you'd be faster than me one day," I told him.

He flashed a proud grin. "Your old age is making you slow."

"Hey!" I protested, giving him a playful shove. "I'm injured." It was hardly a viable excuse, but I pulled up the edge of my shirt to show him the stitches in my hip.

"Whoa," he breathed, leaning over to look at it. "What happened?"

I shrugged nonchalantly, "Typical day dealing with Ferals."

"You almost got bit?" he asked, straightening up in shock.

"Wouldn't be the first time," I told him, wondering how his survival methods all these years differed from mine. "But Echo saved me." At hearing her name, his lips pursed angrily. To be honest, I was a little unprepared for it, forgetting in the moment how he felt. If I was going to talk to him about her, I was going to have to do it tactfully. And I was going to have to build up the nerve. "How tall are you now, anyway?" I asked, changing the subject and starting once again in the direction of the motor pool.

"Samuel measured me at five foot ten," he answered, adjusting the items on his back. "He said I'll probably grow another inch or two."

It took me a few seconds to remember the doctor's first name. "How long have you been with him?"

"I don't know, a few years." I felt him glance over at me as we walked, but I stayed quiet, hoping he'd continue. "I was with a group before that. We traveled a lot, but it was getting hard to find food." He flicked his head to get his long hair out of his eyes. "We found Samuel on the west coast, and they ditched me with him while I was sleeping."

The corner of my mouth tensed with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

He gave a characteristic shrug. "It's better anyway. He knows more, and now we found you, so…"

"Micah," I began cautiously, seeing my window for tact, "How'd you make it that night? At the school."

He let out a loud breath through his nose, almost reluctant, and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it forward. "I was on my way back to the classroom we were staying at, from the bathroom, when I heard the gunshot." He looked over, and I nodded him on. "It sounded so close that I got scared, and I hid in the cabinet of that fish tank in the hall. I could see through the doors when the raiders came in. Some of them went into our classroom," he swallowed hard, "Killed everyone they found. Other ones, and her, they kept going to look through other rooms." His lips pursed angrily again, and his jaw clenched. "When they heard the Ferals coming they ran. Some of the other kids were hiding too, but they were crying. I could hear them from the hall. The Ferals found them, and I stayed quiet."

"They went back," I protested in disbelief, "Some of the men searched the school two nights later."

"I was gone," he replied. "The second I got a chance I bolted. I just couldn't find anyone."

"You should've stayed put," I told him sternly.

"I was eleven and terrified," he retorted. He took in a deep breath before muttering through his teeth, "I saw Dad, you know. What was left of him."

I could hear the rage in his voice. I could see the turn of his thoughts... so much for trying to be tactful. "Micah," I said softly.

"How could you, Genevieve?" he asked, stopping to face me, muddy green eyes squinted angrily. "What's wrong with you?"

"Let me explain," I pleaded.

"Explain what?" he growled. "How you've known this whole time who she is?" His eyes narrowed. "Or better yet, you want to explain how you could hug her? Or how you looked pretty comfortable doing it?"

He'd gotten so angry so fast that I was thrown, unsure of how to keep him calm or what to say or how to defend myself. All I could think of was, "It's not what it looks like."

"No?" He gave a disbelieving huff. "Because it looks like you're good friends." I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but he wouldn't let me get a word out. "No, you know what, I'm going to say it. It looks like you're more than friends." He leaned forward furiously. "With the girl got Dad killed!"

I blinked at him in shock. I had no idea he'd deciphered our relationship that thoroughly, but at least I could account for more of his rage. "It's not-"

"Don't feed me that bullshit again," he interrupted. "I might be young, but I'm not stupid." I shook my head, at a loss for how to respond. He took it as a denial. "Not what it looks like," he repeated bitterly. "How about this – I saw you kiss her cheek, and the soldiers love to gossip about how you're sleeping together. And you want to stand there and tell me it's not what it looks like?"

"We're not together," I groaned, and as the shock began to fade I felt myself start to grow defensive.

"What are you then?" he asked flatly.

I massaged my fingers over my forehead, and then back through my hair. "It's complicated."

In response to that his upper lip curled menacingly, and when he spoke he sounded disgusted. "Are you in love with her?"

I swallowed hard, the weight of that question, that word, was like a blow to the stomach, and I barely managed to breathe, "It's not that serious."

"How serious is it?" He folded his arms across his chest like that was such an easy question to answer.

But I didn't know how to answer it. All I had was, "Not that serious."

He shrugged. "Then stop."

"What?"

"If it's not that serious then stop," he spat impatiently. "Whatever you're doing with her. Make it. Fucking. Stop."

"Micah," I whispered, shaking my head pleadingly. It wasn't that simple, but he wouldn't even let me explain, and I felt so cornered.

"Promise me," he demanded.

"She's my partner," I protested. "I can't just-"

His eyes flooded, stopping my statement short as he shut them tight like he didn't want me to see. "Are you even glad I'm here? Are you even happy that I'm alive?"

"How could you ask me that?" I said in disbelief.

He blinked away his furious tears to glare at me. "Because you're with her, like it doesn't even matter that she's the reason Dad's dead. Like you don't care that we could've been together the last six years."

"You have no idea what it's been like for me. Micah, I care." That he could think I didn't caused my own eyes to fill with tears. "I hated her just as much as you do. I almost killed her."

"Yeah, you should've," he grumbled.

"She doesn't deserve it," I sniffled, and my eyebrows furrowed entreatingly when that caused his glare to harden.

"I don't care." He pursed his lips, taking a deep breath like he was trying not to yell again. "Just promise me," he repeated sternly, like he had all the right.

I didn't know what else to do. He was my brother. My flesh and blood. The only family I had left in the world. I was terrified that he was so furious with me he'd leave. That he'd go back to being dead to me. Or even worse, I'd start being dead to him. My hands were trembling. "Okay."

His rage-filled eyes scanned my face. He took me in for nearly a minute before his gaze filled with hurt. It was like I'd wounded him, and he shook his head. "We grew up together, Genevieve. You honestly think I can't tell when you're lying?" He brushed past me, murmuring as he walked away, "Dad would be so disappointed in you."

That was like a stab in the heart, and I couldn't even turn to watch him leave. Micah had just said the words that I never wanted to hear coming from anywhere but my own conscience. I used the sleeve of my long-sleeve shirt to wipe at the tear that cascaded down my cheek. He was going to make me choose. I promised him I'd choose, just like I promised Echo I wouldn't drag it out if I did. But I couldn't do either one. I couldn't choose between Micah and Echo any more than I could if it'd been between Micah and Blake. Micah was blood, but Blake was just as much family. And Echo…

"Break-break," a voice yelled over the radio at my shoulder. "This is First Patrol. We got Ferals inside the northwestern perimeter!"

At those words my breath caught, and I glanced around the motor pool

frantically. I was on the opposite side of base, and by the time I ran to the location things would've been taken care of or turned catastrophic. I had to get the Growler. That was my fastest way across.

"Repeat, northwestern perimeter breach!" said the voice again, and this time I heard a gunshot through the radio that echoed in the distance.

I sprinted to the vehicles, slamming down on the start button, but the engine turned over without firing up. It had been too long, and it probably needed gas. Jumping out of the driver seat I shot to one of the trucks we'd brought from camp. I climbed onto the bed and then jumped back down with a small gas can in my hands. Rushing back to the Growler, I was in such a frantic hurry that I dumped in just enough to get it running, and then I threw myself back into the driver's seat. This time, when my hand smashed against the start button, the engine revved to life.

Tires peeled against the asphalt as I tore down the street. "Echo!" I shouted into my handheld over the roar of the engine, "Get to the site now. Blake, get the civilians inside!" Blake's voice responded with 'roger,' but there was no sound from Echo, and if it was because she didn't turn her radio on then I'd be furious later.

I veered down a side street to drive along the northern fence toward the western one. It didn't take long for me to come up on the action. I couldn't see any Ferals aside from the few dead in the street, but five of my soldiers, along with Imogen and Cyrus, were crouched behind an old car in the gutter, firing shots into the woods beyond the fence. I pulled the Growler to a screeching halt at the bumper of their car, and dropped out the driver's side to crouch behind the large wheels.

"What's going on!" I shouted across the gap to everyone ducking behind the car. I stuck my head out past the front fender just enough to try and catch a glimpse, but when a bullet pinged against the hood I pulled back.

"Raiders!" Powers called back. "They cut the fence!"

Through the deafening collection of gunfire my peripherals caught movement on my opposite side, and I turned my head to see Echo run into the street. "Get down!" I yelled at her.

into the street. "Get down!" I yelled at her.

She started toward me, jumping reactively when a bullet whizzed into the pavement in front of her feet. A moment later she dropped down at my side, pulling her pistol from the holster at her thigh. "What's happening?"

"Raiders cut the fence," I told her, firing a couple shots over the hood of the Growler. "Probably shoved those Ferals in here too."

Her mouth pursed with frustration, and she straightened enough to blast a series of shots into the woods. She dropped back down, and as she did the noise died. My soldiers continued to fire, but as it went unmet by any returning shots they slowed, and then stopped altogether.

"They're running!" Imogen hollered as we all cautiously left cover, firing a final shot from the weapon we'd given her from the armory. I squinted past the fence, watching the backs of retreating raiders disappear in the trees. "Let's go! We have to chase them!"

"We're not chasing them," I answered, catching my breath through the adrenaline rush, and then motioned to four of my soldiers, "Get those dead Ferals onto the Growler."

"Genevieve," Imogen prompted impatiently, "What are you doing?" I shot her a hard look, like she'd know it meant to stand down. She ignored it. "They'll come back!"

I let out a frustrated breath. "Echo, keep your eyes on the woods." She nodded, and I paced over, passing Imogen while I gave her an angry wave to follow me out of earshot.

"Hello?" she called loudly, following after me and motioning toward the forest. "They're disappearing!"

"Keep your voice down," I whispered harshly. "I know this is new to you, but part of maintaining order is not questioning the decisions I make."

"I'm not one of your soldiers," she quipped.

"No," I agreed hotly, "You're an outsider."

Her eyes narrowed. "You promised me input."

"I remember what I promised you," I growled. "But when shit like this happens our lives depend on fast, concrete decisions. It is *not* the time to argue and it is *not* the time to make my soldiers doubt me."

"So we're just going to let them get away?" she asked with frustrated sarcasm. "They'll come back."

"They might, but you know what? This isn't the first time we've dealt with raiders. While you've been hiding out in sewer tunnels," I gestured beyond the fence, "We've been out there. We can handle it."

Imogen glared with offence. "You don't know where I've been."

I groaned, rubbing my hands over my face so I wouldn't shout my frustration out. I was tired of all the fighting. Done with pressure from every fucking direction I turned. "Alright," I sighed, attempting to come at this from another angle. One that wouldn't cause so much stress. "What's your concern?"

"My concern," she answered, "Is that I put the lives of the two people I care about most in your hands, and you just let people who threatened that get away."

"Did you see how many raiders there were?" I asked seriously. Imogen answered in the negative. "Do you know where they were headed? Or did you get a good glimpse of what kind of firepower they had?" Her gaze dropped with understanding as she shook her head. "I'm not risking their lives," I told her, pointing at my soldiers and Echo, "Or your life, or Cyrus' life over that many unknown variables. Not out in the open when we could run straight into an ambush."

"Okay, but you have more than twenty other soldiers," she argued. "You could've called for backup."

I shook my head, telling her matter-of-factly, "And by the time they got here the raiders would've been gone anyway."

"I disagree," she said with a shrug.

I resisted the urge to react on frustration. "I'm sorry you feel that way," I replied blandly. "Next time you have an issue, bring it up with me personally." Before she could say anything else or argue more, I strode back to the soldiers, who were loading the last dead Feral onto the vehicle. While I reached them my eyes wandered past the fence, and for the first time I caught sight of a massive road sign the raiders had dropped nearby. On the white back of it 'LEAVE!' was painted in dark, runny red letters. "Powers, you know that fast food joint on the other side of base?" He nodded. "Take Carlson with you, go see if the new doctor wants the bodies. If not, then burn them in the dumpster behind the restaurant. The rest of you, stay here until I send some people over to fix the fence."

By the time I looked around again, Imogen and Cyrus had already disappeared, so I motioned for Echo to start following me back. She fell into step at my side, asking, "You doing okay?"

"If I have to go through that kind of resistance every time I make a decision," I grumbled, "Then I'm going to end up shooting someone." I tilted my head to glance sideways at her, "And by someone, I mean Imogen."

"You're not going to shoot her," she laughed amusedly, but a moment later she looked at me seriously. "Are you?"

It was such a relief that she could get me to smile, and I chuckled while I shook my head. I felt only a moment's peace before I realized that I was walking back with Echo, and if Micah was around to see it he'd probably get upset. But I didn't want to see him right now, because I didn't know how to face him. Didn't know what I'd say if he wanted to argue again.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked, and Echo raised her eyebrows to prompt the request. "Can you go down to the urgent care and let April know that nobody was hurt?"

"I mean, I could," she answered suspiciously, "But why don't you just tell

her over the walkie-talkie?"

"She'd feel better hearing it in person," I supplied.

Echo knew better, just like she always knew better. After studying me for a moment she guessed, "It's because of Micah." I couldn't look at her, and when I failed to respond she sighed gloomily, "You're choosing him."

"I told you," I began, feeling a revival of frustration, "I'm not choosing anything."

She stopped to turn and face me, just like she always did when she was starting to get upset. "Then why are you trying to avoid me?"

"Don't take it personal," I mumbled, picking up walking again, "I'm avoiding him too."

"Why?" she asked in shock, but I didn't answer. I couldn't deal with being around anyone right now. Everyone wanted something from me, or to argue with me, or to make me feel like shit. "Genevieve, what's going on with you?" I stopped walking, feeling the frustrated heat in my chest on the verge of boiling over. "Talk to me."

"Not now, Echo!" I snapped. "For fuck's sake, can I get some goddamn space to breathe?" At the immediately shocked expression on her face I panicked, worried she'd get upset like she'd been doing lately and stop talking to me. "I'm sorry," I murmured frantically. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I buried my face in my hands, trying desperately not to lose it again.

Echo's hands fell on my shoulders, and when I didn't get mad or push her away they wrapped around me. "It's okay." I dropped my own hands, letting my face fall into her neck. "I was being pushy." I felt her huff with amusement before she teased, "But honestly you should be used to that by now."

I chuckled into her warmth, and then took in a deep breath, filling my nose with the comfort of her scent. I promised Micah I'd stop this, but I could've made a million promises and it wouldn't have made it easier to pull away. Everything faded when she was close. Nothing mattered, and

nothing bothered me. Nothing except for the fact that my Dad would be so disappointed. I inhaled one last time before lifting my head and backing out of her embrace.

"He's mad at me," I explained. "I don't know where I stand with him, and it's complicated enough without him seeing us together all the time." I adjusted the straps of my backpack, suddenly uncomfortable with how willingly and intimately I was confiding in her. "Everyone needs time to adjust. I just… need time. Okay?"

She nodded with understanding. "I'll stop bringing him up."

"Echo," I prompted, stopping her as she turned to start for the urgent care. "You know we're not, um… a couple, right?"

Her lips thinned with an accepting, defeated smile. "I know."

"Echo," I prompted, stopping her when she turned once more. She raised her eyebrows at me. "Thanks for turning your handheld on."

Echo huffed with amusement. "When Genevieve says jump, I ask how high."

"I'm not the boss of you," I told her with a smirk.

This time, her laugh line deepened with only half a smile. "That's just what I want you to think." She turned again, waving at me over her shoulder. "I'll see you later. Try not to shoot anyone."

While You Decide

Time by Chase & Status (Queensway Remix)

While You Decide

Echo

My shovel crunched into the dirt as I slammed the tip down, letting go of the handle when it was stiff upright. The last couple days I'd been helping the farmers prepare the land for farming. I'd offered when I thought it was just the grass that needed clearing, but now we were doing things like removing any sod left behind from the grass and tilling the soil, which meant endless digging and mixing. When that was done I'd heard someone mention blending in fertilizers found at the garden section of the base's large supermarket.

Already it was one of the warmest days yet. Spring was almost here, and while the air still had a chill, today the sun was bright. I shrugged off my coat and hung it over the waist high fence that enclosed the football field we were using for farmland. While I reached for my shovel with one hand, my other arm came up so I could wipe my sweaty forehead against it. The dirt crunched again with my next stab, and this time I pushed my foot against the spade, twisting sideways to break it up.

"Hard work looks good on you," said a familiar voice, and when I turned Imogen was leaning forward against the fence I'd just set my jacket on.

I glanced down at myself, taking in my sweat-soaked clothes and muddy boots with a disbelieving chuckle. "It's reminding me why I never liked sports. Or exercise." I strode back over to the fence, leaning the shovel against it before taking off the leather gloves I was wearing to protect my hands from blisters. "I'm sore as hell." Imogen's full lips parted in an amused smile, and I tried not to react in an encouraging way when her eyes dropped to scan me over. "What job did you sign up for?"

"Ty's been teaching me how to make the biofuel," she answered.

"Brain work," I mused, "Sounds a lot better than this."

"Come with me." She nodded in the direction of the motor pool. "We're sort of in the waiting stage of the process, but it looks like you could use a break."

I glanced back toward the field, taking in the progress we'd made over the last couple days. "Give me one second," I said to Imogen, and then I jogged over to the lead farmer to let him know where I was going in case anyone came looking for me, particularly Genevieve. I had my radio on, but it seemed she was reluctant to call me over it in case Micah was near someone else with a handheld and would hear it. When I got back to Imogen, I stuffed my jacket into my backpack, threw it over my shoulders, and then hopped over the fence. "I'm ready."

While we started our walk to the nearby motor pool I stomped my feet with every step, knocking the caked dirt off my black boots in chunks. Imogen watched me do it with a look of amusement on her face, and after a minute asked, "Not a fan of sports or exercise, huh?"

I brushed some of the dust off my cargo pants. "Before the outbreak I was a bit of a nerd."

"Never would've guessed that," she said, and I raised my eyebrows curiously. "I just mean you're confident and outspoken, but I guess a little introverted in the kind of way that you might punch someone for asking too many personal questions. Like Tripton."

"Trip can be an ass," I laughed, but gave a more sober shrug as I explained, "To survive, with the raiders, I had to change. I'm still a major bookworm though."

Imogen didn't make an immediate response, and when I glanced over she was staring at the pavement thoughtfully. "Did they make you stay with them?"

At her question I drew in a long, deep breath, as though I needed it to fill the guilty void the inquiry punched in my chest. "There were plenty of chances to leave that I never took." I cleared my throat uncomfortably,

"To be honest, Imogen, I've made a lot of bad decisions that I don't really like to dwell on…"

"Yeah, I'm sorry," she said with an apologetic wave of her hands. "I didn't mean to pry."

I gave her a reassuring smile. "It's fine." We reached the mechanics building of the motor pool, but instead of heading inside Imogen strode around it to a ladder leaned up against the side. "What are you doing?" I asked when she began to climb up it.

"I told you, waiting stage." She ascended a few steps and then looked down at me. "I want to sunbathe."

She disappeared onto the roof, and with a roll of my eyes I reached for the ladder. I would've declined the opportunity to be lazy for a few minutes if it weren't for the fact that just pulling myself up ached my muscles. When I reached the top Imogen was lowering herself into a fancy lawn chair, and after she'd sat she grabbed a second one and opened it up for me.

"You were prepared," I noted, dropping into the seat at her side.

"Can't pass up a sunny day like this," she said, giving me a toothy grin. "Only thing that would make it better is an ice cold beer."

I shrugged naively, "Never had beer."

Her head swiveled toward me with a horrified look of shock. "Didn't you live with raiders?"

"They preferred the harder stuff," I laughed. "And in high school I thought not doing my homework was a capital offense."

Imogen snickered, shaking her head in entertained disbelief. "You're killing the rebel image I have of you."

"Sorry to disappoint," I said. While her laughter died down she leaned forward, pulling her t-shirt over her head to tan in the sports bra she was

wearing underneath. Then she reclined the lawn chair a little, throwing her hands over her eyes to shade them from the sun. "Are you trying to get me in trouble?" I asked. It was obvious Imogen and Genevieve clashed, and if Genevieve came looking for me this was sure to give her the wrong idea.

"With who?" Imogen's voice was innocent, but there was a knowing smirk on her face.

"You know who."

"Never," she answered with teasing seriousness, but her gaze wandered over so she could tell me sincerely, "If it's making you uncomfortable I'll put my shirt back on."

Since it seemed like this genuinely wasn't an attempt to flirt with me, I shook my head to let her know it was okay. I was about to ask her a question when something brushed against my leg, and I was so unprepared for it that I nearly jumped out of my seat. "You scared me," I told the animal, reaching down to pet the cat Genevieve and I had seen in the house.

"That's Kitty," Imogen chuckled.

"You named your cat Kitty?" I snickered.

She shrugged, smiling with amusement. "I mean he's not really my cat. He sort of just followed us around whenever we came out of the sewers."

The cat wandered over to Imogen, rubbing the side of its body against her leg for moment before chasing after a moth that flew by. "So you and Ty are making fuel," I asked, "What's Cyrus been doing?"

Imogen sighed. "Training with some of the soldiers so he can join a platoon."

I watched her for a curious moment before observing, "You don't sound too happy about it."

"You don't know him like I do," she said, a hint of worry clear in her tone

"You don't know him like I do," she said, a hint of worry clear in her tone. "He's the oldest of us, I'm the youngest, why do you think I'm the leader?" She dropped her head to the side to look at me, but she didn't wait for me to respond. "He's always been enthusiastic, and he's strong and capable, but he's too sensitive. When I got taken, it was only a handful of raiders. Him and Ty found a way to sneak in and get me, but we got caught on our way out." She gave a huff of laughter. "I got taken down, and Cyrus, the idiot, he couldn't even shoot the guy about to stab me to death."

"What about Ty?" I asked curiously, knowing he was older than her.

"He can handle himself, he doesn't hesitate in the moment, but him and Cyrus argue like brothers." She rolled her eyes. "We'd never have gotten anything done if he'd been in charge." My response was an understanding chuckle, and we sat there for a minute in silence. "Can I ask you something?" I answered in the affirmative. "Does Genevieve want to be commander?"

"I honestly wouldn't know how to answer that question," I told her. "Why?"

"I don't know," Imogen shrugged, a hesitant gesture like she was trying to be careful about what she said. "I just think, maybe, I'd be more confident in someone more experienced… more focused."

"Is this about the raiders the other day?"

Imogen's head nodded side to side. "It's about a lot things. The raiders, her view on the Doc testing Ferals, her age, and to be honest, you and her brother." My eyebrows furrowed at that last part, and I turned to ask her what she was implying. "I'm just saying," she began apologetically, "She's got a lot on her plate. When I think of a commander I think of someone who isn't neck deep in… drama." At that her face twisted with a pleading wince, begging me not to be offended.

Maybe I would've been offended, if I couldn't see lately just how much all that 'drama' was wearing on Genevieve. I didn't want her to be commander either for that reason, because of all the stress, but it wasn't my choice to make. "Who would you put the burden on?"

"M[illegible]

¨More than one person,¨ Imogen answered readily. ¨There're a lot of intelligent people around here, including Genevieve, that could make decisions collectively. Like a counsel."

I could see Imogen's point, but as long as Genevieve was set on doing the job Cap assigned her, I'd never debate it. "I've never questioned her lead." I shrugged. "Their camp lasted so long because they had one leader, and the soldiers had a clear path when they were given orders. If you give her an honest chance… she knows what she's doing." Imogen nodded, but a moment later she started snickering. I could tell exactly what she was thinking too. "Yeah, I'm whipped. Go ahead and say it."

When I acknowledged it she laughed even harder. "Oh God, you're hopeless." Her amusement died down enough so she could tell me sarcastically, "And you say you're not in a relationship."

My hands went up defensively, and I playfully washed them of the denial. "Hey, she's the one who always reminds me we're not together."

Imogen cocked her head at me more seriously. "But you want to be?"

"I mean, yeah. But…" I paused to chew the inside of my cheek as I thought. "The way things are between us – I couldn't *actually* be with her like this. It's not… good enough."

Imogen made a meditative humming noise, saying like it was an epiphany, "You *do* have some self-respect."

I guffawed in shock, throwing a hand over my heart, as though I were offended while I laughed, "Ouch!"

"Sorry," she chuckled, "Just calling it like I see it."

"Damn," I mumbled, still smiling with surprised amusement, "Get me where it hurts."

The smirk on her face shifted to a sympathetic smile while she said, "I just don't get how she could have feelings for you and not want you completely."

"Who said she has feelings for me?" I asked rhetorically.

Imogen dropped her chin to look at me through her eyelashes. "Anyone with eyes can see that she has feelings for you."

I just shrugged, unable to find a way to respond to that. Most the time I couldn't tell whether or not Genevieve even liked being around me. While that had been changing lately, I still wouldn't say with confidence that she had more than a physical attraction to me. She was starting to trust me more and more, but if it weren't for the sex that would've just seemed platonic.

"Alright," Imogen prompted, leaning forward and twisting in her seat to face me. "If you don't think she has feelings for you, then what's your fixation?" I squinted, unsure of what she meant until she explained, "Why can't you move on? Just accept that she's not the girl for you, and let her go." I let out a heavy sigh, slouching down in my seat to rest my head against the low back. "That wasn't meant to be a difficult question…"

"You don't know how complicated it is," I told her.

"I've got a pretty good idea."

I just shook my head, because though most people around camp knew why Genevieve hated me, they didn't know we had history. "We knew each other before the outbreak." I spared a glance over at Imogen. She looked shocked, and even more intrigued. "I had the biggest crush on her. She was everything I admired… and then I took her family away." With another deep sigh I leaned forward, setting my elbows on my knees, afraid to look at Imogen for fear she'd see the pain on my face. "Genevieve knows the things I've done, where I've been. She *hates* it about me, and she should. But if she could forgive me, if she could love me anyway, what could ever be more real?"

There was no answer, and after a few moments I looked up. Imogen had sat back in her chair, and now she was staring past the roof at the vehicles in the large parking lot, thoughtfully tapping a finger against the armrest of the chair. "You know, in Buddhism, a crucial practice is-"

"You're Buddhist?" I interrupted amusedly.

Imogen chuckled, shaking her head. "I've just always been fascinated by religion." She gave me a scolding squint and pointed her finger at me. "Now listen. A crucial practice is the art of letting go. You hold on to things that aren't good for you, and it puts you in this cycle of endless suffering. The only way to break that cycle and move forward is to let go."

My lips tensed with a smirk as I asked, "Don't you think you're a little biased?" Imogen's head tilted with inquiry, so I explained bluntly, "Little more than a week ago you were trying to get in my pants."

"Make no mistake," she laughed, "I'm still trying." As her amusement died down her eyes fell on me seriously, and when she spoke her voice was sympathetically soft. "But I wasn't talking about Genevieve. I was talking about guilt." My face fell at the same time my gaze did. "Echo, have you even forgiven yourself?"

To try and cope with the flood of emotion without tearing up, I teased, "You think you're so smart."

"I know I'm smart," Imogen countered with an entertained huff. She scooted her chair closer to mine, shifting in her seat to face me again. "When I told you I was taken by raiders, you apologized as if you were there. That same night you asked if I was afraid of you. And on the way over here you couldn't even talk about the fact that you didn't leave the raiders on your own." I'd stopped looking at her. I was staring at the surface of the roof in shame, but she leaned over to get in my line of sight. "How can you expect Genevieve, or anyone else, to forgive you, if you can't forgive yourself?"

"What if I don't deserve it?" I murmured.

"I don't think even Genevieve believes that." Imogen shook her head, brown eyes scanning me sadly. "You got to learn to let it go."

I raised my hand to my neck, rubbing hard at the back of it. Imogen had no idea the things I'd done. The things I was still capable of. There would always be guilt I couldn't forget, that would creep up on me when I least

expected it. Now Micah was here, and he wouldn't let me get past it. Not with myself, and not with Genevieve, and I couldn't forgive myself until she did.

"That's easier said than done."

Imogen blew air out the sides of her lips and shrugged, "Well, I tried."

"And I appreciate it," I told her with a grateful half-smile.

"Hey, Imogen?" called a searching voice from down below.

Imogen reached down for her shirt, pulling it back on before standing and striding to the edge of the roof. "Up here." It was Ty, and after he'd told her a tank was ready she returned to me, offering a hand to help me out of my seat. "Back to work. You want to help?"

I let her pull me up, but shook my head when I reached my feet. "Thanks anyway."

Her brown eyes scanned my face, taking me in for a thoughtful moment. "I didn't cross a line or anything, did I? I know you didn't exactly ask for my opinion."

"No, I didn't," I agreed with a lighthearted laugh, "But you cared enough to give it anyway." I followed her to the ladder, waving goodbye once we reached the bottom. "I'll see you later."

Now that I'd taken a break from working in the field, it felt good to relax. Not quite ready for that break to be over, and needing some emotional recovery from talking with Imogen, I headed in the opposite direction of the field. It wasn't obvious where my feet were taking me until I got there. Until I was standing in front of the same blue door Genevieve and I had ended up at the other day.

Testing the handle let me know it was open, and I headed in. After I'd closed the door behind me, however, I just stood there. I didn't know what it was about this place that was so magnetic until that pull took my eyes to the piano. This house was a portal to old feelings and loves and

comforts. Right now I wanted that comfort more than anything. Wanted to throw myself into the music like I always used to, and drown everything else out.

Before taking that first step toward the instrument, I twisted sideways to tap my forehead against the flag on the wall. I don't know why I had the urge to carry out Genevieve's tradition, but for some reason it *had* to be done. When I got to the piano I pushed the fallboard up and sat down on the bench. My fingers tested a few of the keys. The notes were engrained enough in my head that I could tell the piano was slightly out of tune, but it was still beautiful.

I closed my eyes, running my fingers over the keys without pressing on them to see if the motions would come back to me. It only took a minute to get it, and then I started playing. I didn't even know what I was playing. I just let my hands do what they wanted. Let them take me where the rest of the world couldn't follow. For almost five whole minutes I got so lost that everything disappeared, and when I heard the front door close it scared me enough that I jumped.

Even without turning I knew who it was that'd just shut it from the inside. "How long were you standing there?" I asked, absentmindedly wiping at a spot of dust on the wood.

"I just got here," Genevieve answered. "I didn't want to stop you, but," when she paused I swiveled on the bench to face her, "I didn't want it to upset you if I didn't."

The corner of my mouth twitched with a grateful smile. "Were you looking for me?"

She shook her head, and after dropping her backpack near the door she strode over to the stairs between the piano and the couches. "Coincidence." She plopped down on the second step, setting her feet on the floor below.

I took in the exhausted expression on her face, and the tired bags under her eyes. "You doing alright?"

She glanced down at the empty spot beside her, scooted over, and then glanced at it again, as if motioning for me to sit there. "I don't want to talk about commander stuff," she answered, watching while I stood, timidly making my way to her.

"What do you want to talk about?" I fell down at her side, pulling my feet up onto the step just below us so I could fold my arms over my knees.

She leaned forward, setting her elbows on her own knees and propping her head up in her hands. "Can we just sit here?"

I nodded, staring across the house toward the kitchen while we sat there in silence. It was only a few seconds before I felt Genevieve start to lean into me. I don't know if she realized she was doing it or not, but her shoulder and thigh were nearly attached to mine. After hardly being around her the last few days, it felt so good for her to be this close. I wanted desperately to try for more – to lean back on my hands with one of them behind her back, or to set one of my hands on her knee. It even seemed like she wanted to be close to me. She was the one who'd wanted me to sit here, and she was the one who'd started leaning into me. But she seemed so delicate right now, like the last thing she needed was me trying to hit on her.

Minutes passed before Genevieve spoke again. Her head turned, and her eyes fell on the piano. "Would you ever play for me?"

"Genevieve," I whispered with pleading protest.

Her demeanor fell, and she went back to staring across the house without even trying to convince me otherwise. I didn't know what to do. I'd never really known my boundaries with her, and now that Micah was here they were even more unclear. But I had to cheer her up somehow, and the only way I knew was to try and make her laugh.

"You know that big guy that helps with farming?" I asked her. "Conrad?" She nodded, glancing at me once more to give me her attention. "This morning when we started working, he went to grab his gloves off the ground, but there was a massive spider on them." I made a fist-sized circle with my hands to show her how big it was. "He made this high

circle with my hands to show her how big it was." He made this high-pitched screaming noise and threw the gloves into the air. But he threw them sideways, and when he went to run away he ended up running into the gloves as they fell back down." I paused to gather composure, because I was already laughing at the memory. "Smacked him right in the face, and he panicked so bad he did a stop, drop, and roll right in the mud."

She managed a soft chuckle, saying with disbelief, "The spider wasn't that big."

"It really was," I assured her.

She smiled, but it faded faster than I'd have liked. I watched her for a few seconds, hoping the lift to her mood was just delayed. When it didn't come, my eyes wandered to the piano. I didn't know what else to do to cheer her up, so I stood. I could feel her watching me as I sat down at the bench, but I already felt too vulnerable to even think much about her watching.

The piece was an old one, but after I started playing I realized it was one that'd always made me think of Genevieve. The same one my mother could always tell had me lovesick. Soon after I started Genevieve came over and lowered herself onto the bench at my side. She sat there, quiet and unmoving, but I'd had to turn my head away. She hadn't made up her mind about Micah or I. She hadn't followed through on her promise not to drag this out, even though I was almost positive she'd have to. That made this infinitely more painful, because right now I was giving her more than I ever had on the belief that I'd get nothing in return, and it was terrifying.

One song was all I had in me, and when it ended I stared down at the keys, too afraid to look up.

"You didn't have to," Genevieve said eventually, running her finger down a key I'd used only seconds before.

I forced myself to meet her glance, and the fact that she looked so much happier made it worth it. "I did it for this," I said, raising my hand to briefly

brush my thumb against the edge of her smile.

She turned around on the seat to face the opposite direction, and then motioned for me to do the same. "Who taught you?" After I turned she slid onto her back, dropping her head in my lap while her legs dangled off the edge of the bench.

It was so unexpected that I had to clear my throat in order to even think of an answer. I wasn't getting nothing in return for my risk. I was getting affection, and I didn't want it to stop. "A teacher, at first," I answered, reaching behind me just enough to pull the fallboard down so I could lean back on my elbows. "Then I sort of taught myself."

"Yeah?" she asked, as though encouraging me to keep speaking. Maybe now that Micah was here, and alive, it really would be easier for her to forgive me.

I nodded. "I was always motivated to practice because my parents really liked listening." I paused as a series of memories came flooding back, and then I chuckled. "They had this old disco ball in the basement, and a black light because sometimes my mom did paintings with crazy colors." Genevieve was looking up at me, eyes wide with interest, so I just kept going. "Sometimes I'd play along to upbeat songs, and they'd dance. My sisters were too cool for it most the time, but sometimes they couldn't resist either."

Genevieve's smile grew, but her eyebrows furrowed curiously. "What do you mean she painted with crazy colors?" I shrugged. "You mean like psychedelic colors?" She gasped and sat up. "Were your parents hippies?"

I couldn't help that I huffed with laughter, my head bobbing side to side. "You know, I think they might've been in their younger years."

"Oh my God," she giggled with pure amusement and stood.

"Where are you going?" I asked through a chuckle.

She paced a few excited steps. "It's like I just got a big piece of the

puzzle that you used to be."

I stood, trying to catch her wrist to get her to stop walking back and forth. "What are you talking about?"

She danced away from me with an entertained grin on her face. "You used to be so gentle, and, like…" She paused thoughtfully. "Awkwardly comfortable just being you, even though you were shy." She glanced toward the ceiling, searching for some word. When she found it she snapped and pointed at me. "Free-spirited," she breathed in a teasing and exaggeratedly relaxed tone.

I could see what she was saying. My family had always been liberal in everything they did, but she looked so happy about it that I couldn't help being just as amused as she was. "You're losing your mind," I chuckled, trying to reach for her again. I wanted to pull her back to the bench. Back into my lap.

She dodged, moving away so the couch was between us. "I'm Echo," she stated with a playful smirk. "I used to be all about peace, and love, and I wore a tie-dye shirt once a week for the entirety of fifth grade."

I gasped with feigned offense, "You did not just mock the tie-dye!"

She snorted with laughter, running the opposite direction when I tried to chase her around the couch. "Now instead of peace and love, I like to smoke cigarettes," she continued, securing herself on the opposite side of the island in the kitchen. "And all I want to do is wear dark colors and flirt with Genevieve."

I buckled over because I was laughing so hard, and she did the same, cackling bad enough that she leaned back against the counter behind her. She got so distracted that I couldn't resist, I vaulted myself over the top of the island. Genevieve let out a startled shriek and tried to take off running again, but she was too unprepared for it. I caught her before my feet even touched down.

"Gotcha!" I hollered triumphantly, grabbing her wrists to lock them against her shoulders while I pulled her backwards into me. My chest was

shaking against her back with remaining laughter, and I could hear her breathing inconsistently with the same level of entertainment.

"Now what are you going to do?" she asked with teasing sarcasm.

My mind drew a blank. She wasn't poking fun at me anymore, and she wasn't struggling against my grip or trying to one up me. "I hadn't thought this far ahead," I admitted, feeling my cheeks tint sheepishly.

"If it's any consolation," she said, huffing with a residual laugh, "I never could stop staring at you in that shirt." My laughter faded completely as I felt my heart flutter. My grip loosened, and she turned in my arms just enough to look at my reaction. It was like she'd caught herself saying something she shouldn't have, because she added, "It was so damn bright."

Genevieve's face was only inches from mine, and both of us had stopped breathing hard so that everything fell quiet around us. She appeared so comfortable with the way I was touching her, without a reservation about the fact that I was in a position of control. It had been a long time since I'd tried instigating a kiss, but right now I wanted it more than anything. My eyes purposefully dropped to her lips, giving her an idea of what I was about to do. It was her chance to pull out of my grip, or to say no or look away. All she did was use the tip of her tongue to wet her bottom lip.

There was a faint click of static from somewhere across the room, and a moment later a voice carried from the radio attached to Genevieve's backpack. "First patrol to Genevieve. Come in, Genevieve."

Genevieve let out a sigh while her head dropped back onto my shoulder, almost like she was disappointed about the interruption. Then she seemed to recover, and reacted more the way I'd have expected her to. She shook me off, clearing her throat uncomfortably while she strode over to her bag.

"This is Genevieve," she said into the radio. "Go ahead, patrol."

"Ma'am," the voice responded, "We got a building on fire. Over."

Her eyes darted to me with instant panic. "Where?" she asked frantically.

I was already reaching for my stuff, and when the voice told her the location we both rushed out the door. We could've spotted it without patrol telling us where, because when we got outside there was a pillar of black smoke billowing into the air. It didn't take us long at all to run over, and by that time a crowd was gathering. Some of them were civilians or soldiers who'd run over with gallons of water and were trying to throw it onto the fire. Others were standing around to spectate helplessly. It was really only a small wooden shed on the outskirts of the base that was burning, and the buildings surrounding it were mostly brick, but the gallons were helpless against the flames.

"McMahan, Powers, Morgan," Genevieve began calling instructions, "Make a safe perimeter, get people back. Tripton, I need you to go hitch the water tanks to a vehicle and get them here with the water pump from the river."

While everyone scattered Genevieve ran toward the fire, and past it to the nearest building, the only one that wasn't made of brick. The flames were lapping against the side, already turning it to a charred black, and in a minute more it would start to burn. Genevieve searched around frantically for a solution, and then rushed to a large metal dumpster nearby. She threw her hands against it, pushing it toward the building, but it was too heavy. So I hurried to her side, driving my shoulder into it as we pushed together. We scooted it toward the building, nudging it between the charring wall and the flames to block them. This close to the fire was already getting too hot, and the metal of the dumpster was already heating enough that it was beginning to burn against my shoulder. I pulled away, not wanting another wound like the one I'd gotten from the cabin, but Genevieve left her hands against the side, still pushing to try and line it up perfectly.

"It's good enough!" I hollered at her over the roaring of the fire, and when she didn't listen right away I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her away.

At a safe distance I took her hands in mine to make sure she hadn't burned them, and she pulled them away instantly, telling me reassuringly

burned them, and she pulled them away instantly, telling me reassuringly, "I'm fine."

Until Tripton got back with more water there was nothing we could do but watch the structure burn. Even in broad daylight it was too bright to stare at, and while we waited I searched for what could have started it. The weather wasn't dry, there were no lightning storms, or gas leaks, or accidental candle fires. While I searched my gaze fell on an old car parked on the street nearby. It only caught my eye because of something stuck in the hood, waving with the slight breeze. I walked over, and when I reached it I closed my fingers around the shaft of an arrow stuck in the metal. It took a couple hard yanks to pull it out, and by the time I did Genevieve was on her way to me.

"What is it?" she asked.

I showed her the arrow, and then stretched out the attached strip of rag in my hands to see what was written on it. "Fuck off," I read, showing it to her.

Her jaw clenched as she slammed her hand down on the hood of the car. "Dammit!"

A vehicle came to a stop nearby, and Tripton jumped out with Harvey in order to get the pump running. In hardly a minute there was a steady stream of our drinking water being fed to the flames.

Blake came over to us, turning to sit on the vehicle. "What is it?" he asked. I showed him the note. "Those raiders?"

"Think so," I confirmed. Then to Genevieve, "What do you want to do?"

"What can we do?" she retorted, holding her hand out for the arrow. "We don't know how far away they're hiding, but we can't sit on our asses until they burn the whole base down."

"I don't think they would," Blake said thoughtfully. "You said at the fence there was a sign that said to leave, and this one has the same message."

"They want the base," I mused.

"They want the base," I mused.

"If we're holding tight," Genevieve finished, fingering the tip of the arrow, "Then there isn't much they can do."

"Not without destroying what they want," I agreed.

Genevieve let out a deep breath, shaking her head with what looked like relief. "It looks like this fire isn't too bad. Why don't you guys get all the civilians back to the barracks area? I'll stay until this is out."

Blake and I ushered all the civilians back to the front area of the base, and for the rest of the day I went back to work at the field. Come dinnertime I was starving, and even though I wanted to sit with Genevieve to ask how things had gone with the rest of the fire, I couldn't because Micah was there. Instead I sat with Imogen and Tripton, who were both theorizing and suggesting solutions for the raider problem.

Clearing the field was exhausting work, so after eating I went straight to my room. We had electricity now, thanks to some solar panels Harvey installed, and since I wasn't ready to sleep I cracked open a book to read by the light in the ceiling above my head. I got so engrossed in it that hours must have flown by, and I probably would've kept reading if it didn't sound like someone was at my door. It was a soft, repetitive clicking, as though someone was tinkering with the knob.

Suspicious, I set the book aside and stood, creeping closer. Someone was definitely doing something. When I reached the door I grabbed the handle, swiftly twisting and throwing it open. I couldn't hold back a laugh when Genevieve looked up at me innocently, holding a set of bobby pin halves in her hands.

"You know it was unlocked?" I asked teasingly. She gave an embarrassed smile and shook her head. "You know I was in here?" This time she nodded, but she didn't get up from her kneeling position, and I squinted at her in confusion. "You want to come in?"

"I want to pick it first," she answered, motioning for me to leave the room. "Lock it and come out to help me."

I did what she said, and after I'd locked and closed the door I sat myself on the floor at her side, knowing this would take a while. "The fire's taken care of?"

She nodded, sticking the bobby pins back in to tinker with the lock. "Used up all our water stores though. We had to refill the tanks at the river tonight."

With a hum of acknowledgment I fell quiet to let her concentrate. It only took a few minutes for me to chuckle at how little progress she'd made. "Have you even shifted any of the pins yet?"

Genevieve gave me a playful sideways glare and mumbled, "Maybe."

My fingers twisted at the bracelet around my wrist where my own bobby pins were stored. "You're terrible at this," I said playfully.

"Your face is terrible," she muttered under her breath, the edge of a smirk visible on her lips.

"Real mature," I teased, reaching over and giving her a soft push.

She had to steady herself so she wouldn't fall over, and then she handed her tools over and motioned for me to unlock the door. "I'll get it eventually." I traded places with her, my fingers knowing what to do without much thinking being needed. "How do you *do* that?" she whined as I pushed the door open.

"You should see what else I can do with my hands," I told her flirtatiously. I motioned for her to go in first and then closed the door behind us.

Her lips pursed to hold back an amused smile, but she replied seriously, "I'm not here for that."

"What are you here for?" I asked, handing her back the bobby pins.

She stuck them into her pocket while her eyes wandered toward the couch. "I was wondering if maybe… I don't know… I could sleep in here?"

"Oh," I said in shock, forcing myself to recover so she wouldn't change her mind. "Yeah." And wanting her to be as comfortable as possible I offered, "Take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No, no." She shook her head. "I'm not kicking you out of your bed."

"Really," I pressed, "I insist."

"No *I* insist," she said.

We both looked at the couch, and then at each other defiantly, and I could see that we were thinking the exact same thing. I couldn't miss the mischievous smirk on Genevieve's face, and when she recognized the one on mine we sprang into action, both darting for the couch at the same time. She was so much faster than me though that she reached it just as I threw myself toward it. She'd already flopped onto her back when I landed, dropping on top of her so hard it knocked some air out of her.

But she was laughing, and her hands pushed against my hips, trying to knock me to the floor. "Get off."

"You get off," I countered, trying to wrestle her hand away so I could wedge myself between her and the back of the couch, where I'd have leverage to push her off.

"It's your room." Her finger jabbed me in the ribs, and even though she was trying to move me her hands steadied against my hips when it almost caused me to fall from the couch. "It's your bed."

"Yeah, it's my room, my rules," I forced through my own laughter, catching her finger when she tried to poke me again. "And it's just for tonight, so take the bed."

She wiggled to the side, cutting me off with a happy giggle when I tried once more to wedge myself into the couch. "But it's not just-" She caught herself midsentence and stopped, but at what it sounded like she'd been about to say I ceased struggling. "Tonight," she finished when I pulled back to look at her. I was beyond surprised, and it must've showed,

because she added, "It gets so lonely by myself. I can't sleep."

My eyes scanned her face, taking in the sincerity of her request. She was genuinely lonely now that we weren't sharing a tent, and she'd come to *me* to remedy it. "Can I kiss you?"

Her lips curled into her characteristically modest smile. "Are you trying to blackmail me again?"

"You can have the couch either way," I told her, shaking my head. "I just really want to kiss you."

She studied me for a few seconds, brown eyes soft but thoughtful, considering what I'd asked. Her hands were still on my hips, and as her thumb made a mindless stroke against me, her chin dropped once with the slightest of nods. Never when I asked had she ever been even this accepting. I almost didn't want to believe it, so I lowered my head painfully slowly. Maybe it would've been better if I didn't give her time to think about it, because my lips just brushed hers when one of her hands set against my chest, holding me back.

"I promised him," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut only to open them after she'd let out a deep breath. "I promised Micah this would stop."

I felt so instantly defeated that I sighed and let my head drop against her shoulder. "Okay, and you promised me you wouldn't drag this out," I mumbled. "So why are you here, Genevieve?"

There was no answer at first, but I could feel her keep inhaling like she was trying to say something. "He said I was lying to him," she told me quietly, and something about the tone of her voice caused me to pick my head back up. She couldn't look me in the eyes. All she could do was watch my lips as she traced them with the tip of her finger. "Is it… breaking a promise if he never believed it in the first place?"

It wasn't until her finger stopped, and she finally met my gaze searchingly that I realized she wanted a response. "You know I'm only going to give

you the answer *I* want to hear."

She pushed herself onto her elbows, bringing every inch of her closer to me. It took everything I had not to just kiss her when she set her forehead against mine. "Say it anyway," she pleaded.

We were so close that every word caused her lips to brush against mine. Every breath, heavy with anticipation, lingered hot against my mouth. "Does it matter?"

Her chin tilted up so my bottom lip could hover between hers, but she didn't complete the motion. She didn't kiss me. She let her teeth graze my flesh, refusing to finish it until hearing what she needed. "Yes."

My tongue slipped forward readily to wet my bottom lip, to prepare for what I wanted. But her mouth hadn't moved, and when it was her upper lip I skimmed with the tip of my tongue every ounce of desire in me lurched at the feeling. "Then no."

Her dark brown eyes met my gaze for only a moment before her lips crashed into mine. She slid her arms around my neck and fell back, pulling me all the way down with her, and at first it felt like everything was falling into place. One of her knees was pulled up, cradling the curve of my hip with the length of her leg. While one of her hands stayed around my neck, the other fell forward only to run back up again through my hair. The pressure of her against me rippled – her chest, her stomach, her hips, never close enough at every given second.

But each of those seconds that went by I felt a growing discontent in my gut, a disheartening disappointment in chest. The touch of her lips, the taste of her tongue, they'd never lose their power over me. I'd always want it, but not like this. It should've meant something that she wanted me enough to lie to Micah. But she promised him she'd choose. More than that, she promised that she'd pick him, and that sucked every grain of sweetness out of this moment. She cared enough about me to break that promise, but not enough to be honest with him about it. She didn't care enough about me to tell him she wouldn't choose, or that she couldn't stop being with me no matter what he thought. She cared more about saving face, and I could never turn the tables. I could never make

about saving face, and I could never turn the tables. I could never make the same demands of her, because I was sure that forcing her to pick would drive her away, and that was nearly heartbreaking.

I pulled away from the kiss, and at the same time that my heart praised me for it, my body cursed me. What made the conflict even worse was the confused look on Genevieve's face as she asked, "What's wrong?"

She was breathing hard with excitement. I could feel every rise of her chest against my own. "Why can't you stop?" I could tell she knew that I was asking if she had feelings for me, because her eyes gained a panic familiar to every time she wanted to avoid an answer. It was instinct that caused me to pull back out of reach when she tried to kiss me again, clearly desperate to distract me.

She dropped back down with a crestfallen lack of grace. "Echo, please," she whispered while her eyes begged me to let it go, "Why do you always do this?"

"Are you ever going to say it?"

Her eyebrows furrowed with so much pain that I felt it in my own chest, and she just stared at me for a silent minute with that hurt expression before she realized that I wasn't moving until she answered. "There's nothing to say," she murmured.

A wounded breath escaped my lungs, but as I moved to get off the couch her hands cupped my face, bringing me back to meet her pleading gaze. There was that rare but desperate look that she got whenever she didn't want me to be mad at her. But I wasn't mad, not now. I was discouraged, and confused.

"I can't do this right now," I said, watching Genevieve's eyebrows furrow. "I'm not comfortable with it." Her brother already hated me, the last thing I needed was for him to find out about this. To give him another reason to hate me even more. Even then, I couldn't get up completely knowing Genevieve was afraid I was mad. So I lowered myself timidly in case she'd stop me, and ducked my head just enough to give her one soft, lingering peck. "Goodnight, Genevieve." When I turned off the light and

slid into bed I heard her let out a somber sigh in response.

So many times I'd told her that she wouldn't break me, but this wasn't the first time I could feel myself beginning to fracture.

Man So Small

**** Can I get a what what? *sings in my Olaf voice* Iiiiiiiit's suuuuummerrrrrrrr! :D Got a really big update for you guys this time around. This chapter is a decent size, and both Gen and Echo's are pretty massive. Also, you might notice that this chapter is from Kara's POV instead of Dugan's. And if you didn't notice, then now you know :). Alrighty? Cool. Read on, you beautiful people!*

After The Storm by Mumford & Sons

Man So Small

Kara

I was dreaming about them, just like I had every time I'd fallen asleep since Oklahoma. Namiko, and Wolf. I could feel all of it, the fear all over again, the breaking of my heart, and every time Jed hit me. Sometimes, like now, I'd see the pain on Dugan's face, and feel what he did. It felt real, and I woke up gasping, clutching at my chest for a few moments before I recognized there wasn't really any pain. Not physically. This is why I'd hardly slept.

There was enough sunlight left from the dying day that I could see across the jail cell to where Dugan was sleeping. I stood to check on him, and crossed the cell to his bed. His breathing was rapid, but so weak that the only reason I could tell he was still breathing at all was because of the accelerated movements of his chest. The veins in his neck were popping out more than usual, revealing that his breathing wasn't the only thing that was rapid. His pulse was racing, and the fact that there was a clear blue tint to his dark skin was terrifying.

I don't know what I thought was wrong, but the idea that I might lose him too caused my eyes to water. "Dugan?" I whispered, tapping on his arm. "Dugan." Nothing. "Dugan?" I said a little louder, trying to blink away the tears, trying not to panic just yet. "Dugan!"

I [illegible]

His eyes shot open, and when he took in a frightened breath his face scrunched with agony. "Don't scare me like that," he groaned, letting his eyes droop closed again.

"*You* scared *me*," I complained, retreating to my own bed. "You wouldn't wake up."

"Sorry." He smiled apologetically, and then took in the worried look on my face. "I'm fine, kid." He tried to sit up, but only got halfway before his strength failed and he lay back down.

Instead of telling him I knew better, I strode back to him, offering a hand to help him sit. "You want to go to that hospital soon?" I asked.

He took my hand, grunting as I pulled him upright. "Yeah, and then we'll get back on the road."

I glanced toward the door out to the office, my stomach rumbling ravenously. It had been since morning that we'd eaten the food Mal left us, and already I was starving again. The fact that she had food available made me wish she were here, or that she'd be here soon.

"If we see Mal again," I began to ask, but Dugan immediately shot me a stern look, ending the question before I could finish.

He felt guilty for Namiko, like it was his fault because he couldn't protect her. I was the only one he wanted to worry about, that's what he told me. Anyone else was a distraction, and 'if something happened to you I couldn't live with it.' What he didn't know was that there was a completely different fear at the back of my mind. He was getting worse, and no matter how hard I tried to fight acknowledging the possibility that he might not make it, it haunted me. If we left here, just the two of us, and he didn't make it, then I'd be all alone again. He wouldn't be able to protect me any better if he was gone, and now that we knew about those stalker Ferals…

I dropped onto my bed while my stomach growled again, but only lay there for a minute until I got tired of holding still. We had to wait a little longer into darkness before we could go out, so I grabbed the revolver and took it to my bed. I could feel his eyes on me when I dumped the

bullet out of the cylinder, and when I took out my pocketknife to continue carving into the side. The 'E' of Jed's name was almost finished, and every time the tip of the knife dug into the metal of the bullet a little bit of my anxiety melted away. It gave me something to focus on, and even though those raiders were nowhere around, it felt like something of a solution.

"You ready to go?" Dugan asked after about an hour. It was completely dark out now, and I'd started carving by the beam of my flashlight.

I nodded, tucking the bullet back into the cylinder of the revolver while he reached for his weapon. It was the only thing he had to carry – his backpack was still in the Hummer – but he only had it resting over his shoulder for a few moments before he started slumping under the weight of it. A few more and he set it down on his mattress.

"I'll carry it," I offered, throwing my backpack on and picking up my shovel.

It looked like he wanted to protest, but it was clear he was just too tired. I handed him the revolver, which he tucked into the waist of his jeans, and then grabbed the shovel so I could carry it. It was a bit awkward trying to figure out how to hold both of our weapons, but eventually I settled for letting them both suspend over each shoulder.

Dugan led the way out of the jail, and we began our trek in the direction of the hospital. Progress was slower than it ever had been, Dugan was wheezing and taking a step for every one of my four. He looked miserable, and when he noticed that I looked worried about him it only seemed to make it worse. Like he was worried about me worrying for him. I didn't know what else to do, or how else to cheer him up, so I began spinning around playfully. The weight of each tool over my shoulder added momentum to my spins, more than I could get on my own, until I was spinning in swift, tight circles.

"I'm dandelion fuzz in the wind," I crooned just loud enough so Dugan would hear it over his breathing. He chuckled as I spun nearer to him. "Off to sprout on my own in the world." I circled around him, making whooshing noises to imitate the sound of a breeze, glad that he looked

whooshing noises to imitate the sound of a breeze, glad that he looked amused.

It didn't take long for me to get too dizzy from spinning though, so I stopped and attached the length of each tool to my arms, sticking them straight out. "I am securitron," I muttered in an automated voice, pointing the ends of my 'robot' arms at Dugan. "Show me your clearance, kind civilian, please."

"Kara," he whispered quietly.

"Clearance, not identified. You are not authorized to be here," I continued, pretending to jab at him with the end of the shovel. "Must destroy the Feral."

"Kara," he repeated more urgently, and I dropped my arms to listen to him.

"What?"

He'd stopped walking, and now he squinted through the dark, searching in every direction. "I feel like we're being watched again." Even after such a short distance it sounded like he'd just run a marathon. He was hunched over too, unable to hold himself straight.

"Do you think it's Mal?" I asked curiously.

His lips pursed thoughtfully. "I told her not to follow us anymore."

"I know, but…" I didn't have to finish that sentence for him to know what I meant, so instead I ended it with a shrug.

"Just stay close, okay?"

I nodded, raising my robot arms again. "Self-destruct activated." Dugan rolled his eyes with a smile and started on again, and I began spinning in the fastest circles I could, making whirring sounds. After a few seconds I raised my arms in the air and made the quiet noise of an explosion, but I was so dizzy that when I stopped twirling I almost fell over. "Whoa," I laughed, regaining balance and clumsily hurrying to resume Dugan's

side.

Once at his side I searched for another way I could entertain him and distract him from the pain while staying close. The first thing that came to mind was to pretend I was shooting at street signs. I raised one garden tool like a shotgun and cocked it. "Chk-chk." Then aimed at the nearest sign. "Pew." I immediately dropped to one knee facing the other direction. "Chk-chk," aimed at another, "Pew." I heard Dugan laugh when I whispered, "I got your six," and turned against his back. I set the butt ends of each tool against my hips, firing on an invisible enemy with my assault rifles, "Gat-gat-gat-gat-gat."

"Did you sleep at all?" Dugan asked amusedly, stopping to catch his breath because he couldn't walk and speak at the same time.

"Barely," I shrugged, and then spun around slowly, murmuring, "Who else wants a piece of me?"

"How do you-" he took in a series of wheezing breaths, "Have this much energy?"

"It's the adrenaline," I said playfully, reluctant to tell him my real motive, "That happens when you go into battle." I turned to fire at more invisible foes. "Gat-gat-gat."

"Okay, Rambo," he chuckled, "Let's go."

He picked up his slow pace again, and I skipped in front of him to turn backwards and ask, "Who's Rambo?"

His head dropped, and he shook it with pity. "Oh, you poor child."

I'd started to giggle, but there was a noise from somewhere nearby – the faintest of clatters, like someone had just barely kicked a tin can. It was too quiet to have pinpointed where it came from, but it was close.

Dugan scanned our surroundings, and called in a whisper, "Mal?" There was no answer, and no other sound. "If that's you, come out," he said. "I won't shoot you, I promise."

"She said there were smart Ferals in the area, right?" I asked, tightening my grip on the weapons in my hands. "Mal," I called, hoping she might feel safer about coming out if I called her name.

When nobody materialized, Dugan waved me on. "Come on. Let's keep moving."

We started at a faster pace in the direction of the hospital. It was so close I could see it looming in the distance, less than half a mile now. But going faster than we had been was too much for Dugan, and after only a minute he could barely walk. His steps were clumsy, dizzy. His wheezing shallower than ever. I shifted both of my weapons to one hand, grabbing his arm to lift if over my shoulders and offer help. He always tried to act strong, but this time he accepted it without a second thought.

I was so much shorter than him that he had to lean sideways just to use me for support, but that's how bad he needed it. He was heavy too. After another quarter mile I was starting to pant a little. I did my best to hide it though, because if he knew I was struggling to carry the amount of weight he was putting on me then he'd try to tough it out. The last thing we needed was for him to collapse in the street.

Eventually we made it to the entrance of the hospital. Dugan wanted his weapon then, even if it was hard for him to hold it. The sliding doors of the entrance were offset, angled to create a triangular opening at the center. Dugan slipped in first, and I followed, holding my shovel over my shoulder, ready to swing if any Ferals came jumping out at us. In the reception area of the hospital there was a long glass window, separating the reception desks from the waiting seats. Or, rather, there used to be a window. It was broken now, shattered and scattered across the linoleum floor.

I clicked on my flashlight, shining it toward the different doors to see where they led. There was a wall of elevators on the left, and past the reception desk was a door that led to the emergency room. To our immediate right was a pharmacy, at which Dugan nodded when I looked to him searchingly. We strode over to it, only to find that the electric sliding doors were closed.

"Can you hold this?" I asked, extending my shovel to Dugan.

Once he'd taken it from me I curled my fingers through the slit between the doors, pulling hard in one direction. It wiggled a bit, opening a mere inch. I shifted positions, figuring it might be easier to push than pull, and stuck both my hands in. Straining against the weight of the doors, it took all the strength I had, but eventually I'd managed to ease it open enough for us to slip through.

I held my hand out for Dugan to return my weapon. "What kind of medicine do you think might help you?"

He had to stand straight in order to squeeze through the opening, the effort putting a painful amount of tension on his chest. He made it to the other side, answering as I wiggled through, "I don't think anything will, but grab what you can. It might come in use later. Or we could trade it if we have to, maybe for a gun."

I took my flashlight behind the service counter, reading labels with words I'd never heard before. "What stuff would be good to trade?"

"Antibiotics," he answered thoughtfully, "Anything with cin, c-i-n, at the end. Or um, painkillers."

While Dugan gathered bandages from the front of the pharmacy, I shrugged off my backpack to stock up on pills. I grabbed anything that ended with cin, just like he said, and then tossed anything else that sounded important into my bag – which was pretty much everything, so I chose the ones with the longest names. I was working my way around to the shop side of the counter when there was a noise from the reception area. Someone had stepped on the shattered glass of the reception window, and when I heard it I swiveled toward the doors, shining my light out into the lobby.

I took in a breath to call for Mal like Dugan had done, but when I inhaled he immediately said, "Don't." He motioned for me to turn so he could put the supplies he'd gathered into my bag. "I don't think it's Mal."

"Did you see something?" I heard the zipper close, and turned back

around to see Dugan shaking his head. He opened his mouth to say something, but I interrupted with, "Stay close, I know." Dugan squeezed back out into the lobby, with me following close behind. "Do you think the x-ray machines still work?"

"Not without power." Dugan turned toward the emergency wing, furrowing his eyebrows at me. "What do you want with an x-ray machine anyway?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it would tell us what's wrong with your chest."

He nodded in understanding, but stayed quiet as we went down the hall and scanned the curtained rooms for Ferals. Not finding any, we skirted through a curtain to search the first one for supplies. There was really just more bandages and a couple syringes of old medicine, but Dugan already looked exhausted of how much walking we'd done tonight. He could barely even hold the spear up any more, so he pushed himself up onto the bed to rest for a few minutes.

Wanting to get out of here as soon as possible, I pulled back the curtain, preparing to go to the sectioned off room across the way where Dugan would still be able to see me. But the moment I pulled back the curtain something massive snatched me by the shoulders. It startled me so bad that I dropped my shovel, the spade clattering loudly against the floor. It was one of those Ferals, and it was so large and powerful that just by the strength of its arms it lifted me off my feet.

"Kara!" Dugan hollered in an instant panic, throwing himself off the bed.

The Feral's jaws were wide, and it was lifting me upwards to bite straight into my neck. I kicked my feet against it as hard as I could. It only caused the creature's eyes to lock on mine, bone chillingly cold, and angry, and hungry. I shoved both palms against its forehead, trying desperately to keep its face away from me as it continued to bring me toward its teeth.

The very next moment the prongs of Dugan's fork whizzed right past my chest, burying deep in the Feral's midsection. It dropped me as it stumbled back, but the wound only made it angrier. It roared, closing its dirty fingers around the shaft of the weapon and giving a hard tug. The prongs came out bloody, and the Feral snarled ferociously, throwing the

prongs came out bloody, and the Feral snarled ferociously, throwing the weapon aside. I grabbed my shovel right as it recovered, and delivered a hard swing to its head.

It fell back a few more steps, shaking its head, but when its foot touched down again it shot forward with a vengeance. It was coming straight for me, but before it reached me Dugan lunged, tackling the Feral all the way into the room across the hall, where they went crashing into the side of the bed and dropped straight to the floor. The Feral darted up, snarling at Dugan from its feet and then turning on me.

I raised the shovel again, ready to swing when it lunged. It took an intimidating step, watching the weapon in my hands while every breath it let out happened through a growl. Behind it I watched Dugan try to rise, his eyes met mine, and it looked like he was trying to say something. Or breathe. But he couldn't, and his hand clutched at his chest and he collapsed.

"Dugan?" I whimpered pleadingly. In response a low rumble echoed from the Ferals throat, and it took another step forward. "Dugan get up," I begged louder.

The Feral roared again, crouching down to finally spring at me. My grip tightened on the shovel, and my heart stopped in anticipation. The creature had barely bent its knees when an arrow pierced straight through the side of its skull. It dropped instantly, and I knew who'd come to the rescue, but I didn't care about anything.

I shot right for Dugan, dropping to my knees at his side and shifting him onto his back. "No, no, no, Dugan. You have to wake up." I shook him hard. "Please wake up." I heard footsteps thudding toward me. "Dammit wake up!"

"What happened?" Mal dropped down beside me, a sense of urgency in her voice as she pushed me aside.

"He's not breathing," I sniffled, pulling my knees to my chest as if that would shield me from the heartbreak. Mal immediately put the heels of her hands against his chest, pushing hard and repeatedly. "You can't," I

said in a panic, worried she'd make it worse, "His rib's broken."

"Is that why he's hurt?" she asked hastily, ceasing her compressions while she plugged his nose, leaning over to breathe into his mouth. I felt a flood of tears go down my cheeks as I nodded. "Kara, you got to stay with me. I need your help." I nodded again while she resumed pushing on his chest. "He broke his ribs, yeah?" Another weak nod. "You know CPR?" This time I shook my head, and she motioned me over. "Do what I'm doing. Thirty compressions, and then tilt his head back and breathe twice. Got it?"

She pulled me into her spot, guiding my hands over his chest until I started copying her movements. "Where are you going?" I pleaded when she stood.

"Thirty," she instructed, throwing her hands to her head and searching around. "Count." She rushed away, and she frantically repeated 'shit' while I heard her open and slam drawers and cabinets.

I counted thirty compressions, trying not to break into sobs so I'd have the breath to give to Dugan. I tilted his head back like Mal had told me to, and pinched his nose like she'd done, and then I breathed into him twice before picking up the motion on his chest. I couldn't see anything through the tears in my eyes. They kept dropping, cascading down my cheeks and flowing off my chin.

"Dugan please," I begged through an escaped sob, bending to breathe into him again.

"Don't stop. What side did he break?" Mal demanded, throwing herself to the opposite side of him with a blue box and packaged needle. My eyebrows furrowed with anguish. I was in such turmoil that I couldn't think, and I shook my head. "What side, Kara?" she asked again.

"Left," I blurted.

"You sure?" Mal pulled a knife from her belt. I nodded. "Move your hands." I stopped my compressions, and she ran the knife down the front of his shirt, cutting it open and pulling it away from his chest. "Go." I

resumed CPR while she reached for the needle, breaking it out of the package.

"Please don't leave me," I cried, almost too broken down with emotion to even keep up my compressions.

Mal rubbed an alcohol pad over Dugan's left breast, and pressed her fingers in, silently feeling for something beneath the muscle. I was too terrified of losing him to question what she was doing, but after she found what she wanted she leveled the empty needle over the same spot, and then plunged it into his chest. We'd both fallen instantly silent in anticipation, and hardly a moment after the tip of the needle made it into his chest a steady hiss escaped from it.

"Is that air?" I asked in shock.

"Move your hands," Mal commanded, throwing open the box she'd brought. "Please work," she murmured, flicking on the switch and then sighing with relief when the small machine beeped on. She pulled two rectangular pads out of the box, and after ripping off the covering stuck them onto Dugan's chest. "Come on, come on," she whispered to the machine, on which red lights looked like they were trying to get a reading.

"Stand clear of the patient," the machine said. "Shock advised." Mal inhaled tensely. "Press the flashing orange button." Mal slammed her finger down on the button. "Shock administered."

But there was no change.

"What's happening?" I asked hysterically.

"Analyzing," the machine answered.

I wiped at my tear-soaked cheeks, struggling to breathe through my relentless sobs. Air was still hissing out of the needle in Dugan's chest, but it was coming slower, and quieter. The machine began to repeat its instructions, and I froze while I waited for it to tell Mal to push the button. When it did she slammed her finger down again, and at the very same moment the machine told us the shock had been given, Dugan took a

breath. A full, deep, healthy breath.

I broke down, folding my arms over his stomach and burying my face in them as sobs of relief and residual terror poured out of me. I couldn't stop, and I was crying and laughing and bawling, unable to contain the multitude of emotions. Mal fell onto her back, throwing her hands over her face in visible relief. We both just lay there for minutes, hearing nothing but our adrenaline-fueled breaths and the dying hiss of air from the needle.

Eventually Mal stood. She picked up the shovel and carried it to the entrance doors of the emergency room, shoving it between the handles to lock them closed. She grabbed the garden fork too, and disappeared down the hall to check the other entrances.

When she returned she lowered herself to the ground at my side, and her hand set on my back. "You okay, Kara?"

I lifted myself off of Dugan, wiping the remaining tears from my face. But I couldn't help it, I was so relieved and grateful that I wrapped my arms around Mal's torso, squeezing her so hard it forced some air out of her.

"Yeah, you're welcome," she chuckled.

After letting her go I sprawled out on the floor beside Dugan, close enough that I could hear and feel comforted by every breath he took. I don't know if it was because of the fact that I knew Mal was watching out for us, or relief that Dugan might finally be okay, or because of all the sleep I wasn't getting, but I felt exhausted. With my arms folded beneath my head as a pillow, I drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning I woke in one of the emergency room beds, and I shot up, almost panicking as my eyes searched for Dugan.

"Hey," Mal's accented voice said instantly, "It's okay." She was on the floor beside the bed, still sitting next to where Dugan was lying down. She had freckles, I noticed, you couldn't see them at night, but now their faint outlines littered her cheeks and nose.

"How long was I out for?" I asked, kicking my feet over the side of the bed.

Mal glanced down at the heavy-duty watch around her wrist. "I'd say you got at least sixteen hours."

I didn't know how exactly that made me feel, but it was something similar to relief, and I let out an amused huff. "Has Dugan woken up yet?" Her brown eyes wandered from me to him, and she shook her head. That worried me a little, so that I slid off the bed and sat on the floor on the opposite side of him as Mal. "Is that normal?"

"I don't know," she shrugged.

One of my eyebrows rose curiously. "Aren't you a doctor?"

"Shit," she laughed, "I'm too young to be a doctor."

"How old are you?"

She reached down to play with the zipper on one of her boots. "Twenty-five. How old are you?"

"Fifteen," I answered, and her lips pursed with surprise. "Where are you from?"

The corner of her mouth tugged into a smile. "Are you going to tell me my accent is funny?" I let out a soft giggle, nodding timidly. "I moved from Scotland when I was eight, and then I grew up here." I tried to nod again in acknowledgment, but had to bury my face in my hands as my mouth widened in a yawn. "You still tired?" Mal asked in shock.

"I haven't really slept in like a week," I told her, my hand subconsciously running over the fading cuts and bruises on my face.

Mal's eyes followed the action. "Is that," she paused awkwardly, and then nodded toward Dugan, "Did he?"

"No," I answered hastily, "Dugan would never hurt me." Mal seemed to believe me, but I added for good measure, "He'd never hurt anyone if he

believe me, but I added for good measure, "He'd never hurt anyone if he didn't have to." She offered a small smile to let me know she understood. She still looked curious about my face, but unsure of whether or not she could ask. So I answered her unspoken question. "It was raiders." Her eyebrows rose with intrigue. "Their leader, Jed, he wanted our stuff that we locked in a safe. He hit me until we gave him the combination." I sniffled away the wetness in my sinuses. "They killed our friend for no reason, and took my dog."

"That's how he got hurt?" Mal concluded sympathetically, looking at Dugan.

"He got hurt by one of those," I corrected, nodding toward the Feral, which I noticed Mal had dragged further away from us. "But he was getting better, and then they made it worse."

We both fell silent for a few minutes after that, and in the stillness I finally started to notice the burning in my stomach again. It was like recognizing it made it worse, because then it rumbled loud enough that Mal chuckled. She reached behind her to where she'd set her bow on top of a leather backpack, and pulled the bag into her lap. After digging around for a moment she pulled out a plastic bag, tossing it across to me.

"What is it?" I asked, holding the bag in front of my face and squinting at the meat inside. After Van, I was suspicious of anything fresh.

"Raccoon," Mal answered. "I usually stay in the woods around town. It's not as tasty as rabbit…" she stopped, laughing at the fact that I'd already shoved a piece into my mouth, "But you don't seem to mind."

"We've barely eaten since the raiders took everything," I offered shyly through a full mouth, forcing myself to slow down.

Mal sighed, shaking her head. "How was he not going to let me come?"

I swallowed, reaching into the bag for another piece while I followed her gaze to Dugan. "He's protective of me." My mouth tugged to one side thoughtfully, and I shrugged as if to say I didn't mind. "He had a family once. I think… I don't know, I think even grown men get scared."

"I think you're right," she said with a soft smile. Not wanting to take advantage of her kindness, I reached out to give her the bag of meat back, still half full. She waved it off. "Finish it. There's always more."

I was hungry enough that I could've easily scarfed down the rest of it, but I wanted Dugan to have something to eat when he woke up. So I tucked the bag behind me, too shy to see what Mal would have to say about it.

"Where you guys heading, anyway?" Mal asked, pulling a second bag of meat from her backpack and tossing it over to me with an amused smirk on her face.

I couldn't help but laugh, and swapped the new bag with the half empty one so I could eat the rest. "We heard the raiders talk about going to some place near Pittsburgh, where there's people. We're trying to get there and warn them."

"Hold on," she said in shock. "You guys almost get killed by a group of raiders, and you're *following* them?"

"Are you rethinking wanting to come with us?" I chuckled.

The only response she gave was an unsure whine, and she smacked her palm to her forehead in disbelief. Before either of us could say anything else, Dugan let out a groan, lifting his head off the ground.

"What the hell," he grumbled, and then his eyes focused on the needle. "Is that a freaking needle in my chest?"

He tried to push himself up, but Mal put her hands on his shoulders to try and stop him. "You need to lay down."

For a moment he looked mad that Mal was here, so I leaned over to make sure he could see me. "It's okay, Dugan. We're safe. Do what she says."

He groaned again, dropping his head back to follow instructions. "I'm so sore," he mumbled, raising a hand to rub it over the center of his chest.

"Probably the CPR," I told him.

"Probably the CPR," I told him.

He looked immediately confused. "What happened?"

"You went into cardiac arrest," Mal answered. "You're lucky that AED still had some juice in it after all this time."

"How in the-" He tried to sit again, like he was tired of being down, but stopped when he looked at the needle again. "Can we take this out, please? It's freaking me out."

"Um," Mal hummed thoughtfully. She didn't know if it was normal for Dugan to be unconscious for so long, and she didn't appear to know how long the needle was supposed to be there either. But eventually she nodded. "Okay."

Dugan cringed when she set one hand on his chest and wrapped the other around the needle, but it didn't look like pain, it appeared he was grossed out. When she yanked it out he sighed with relief, taking the hand I offered to help him into a sitting position.

"I can breathe again," he mused, but when he pressed his hand into his ribs to test them he winced. "Still broken though." He shook his head, scratching at his chin in wonder. "How do you have a heart attack from broken ribs?"

"Tension pneumothorax," Mal answered readily. "It's when air gets into your chest cavity, and it sort of puts pressure on everything else. Like your heart."

Dugan nodded understandingly, struggling to scoot himself across the floor to the wall so he could lean back against it. "What kind of doctor were you?"

Mal looked at me, smiling with amusement at the fact that Dugan and I had both assumed the same thing. "I was just a college student."

"A medicine major," Dugan assumed, wiping away at the spot of blood from the tiny hole in his chest.

I began to dig through my backpack for bandages while Mal told him, "Undeclared, actually."

Dugan looked confused again, but smiled gratefully when I handed him an alcohol pad and a small bandage. "How'd you know what was wrong with me?"

Mal chuckled nervously, "I used to watch a *lot* of reality TV."

Dugan stopped wiping the pad over the wound and froze. "You stuck a *needle* in my *chest*," he began, and I couldn't tell whether he was angry or shocked, "Because you saw it on TV over six years ago?"

"It worked, right?" she asked, wincing almost apologetically.

He took in a deep breath, shutting his eyes tight like he was pushing down the immediate reaction he wanted to have. After a few long, silent moments he let that breath out in a rush, opening his eyes and saying calmly, "Thank you."

I wanted Mal to come with us, I liked Mal, and figured now was the best time to try and earn her some extra points. I grabbed the bag of food and handed it to him, "She brought food too." He took it from me, passing her a grateful smile and immediately shoving a piece into his mouth. "Dugan, um…"

"Yeah," he cut me off, already knowing what I was going to ask. "Yeah, Mal can come." He swallowed down the bite in his mouth to say teasingly, "But no more needles." I looked at Mal, seeing the relieved and happy glint in her eyes, and I couldn't help but grin.

Another's Two Feet

Bury Now by Crywolf

Another's Two Feet

Genevieve

My eyes scanned the ceiling, wandering in the direction of Echo's bed and then directly above me again. I lifted my head a little to see if she was still sleeping or not, but her face was buried in her pillow and it was impossible to tell. It was still really early in the morning, but it had been at least an hour now since I'd woken. Between wondering if Echo was up and telling myself I should get up and start the day, it'd been impossible to drift back off.

I took in a breath to ask Echo if she was awake, but before I got the question out I hesitated, unsure of whether or not she really wanted to talk to me. It took a couple more tries before I finally managed "you awake?" in a careful whisper.

There was a hummed confirmation, and things went quiet again. It wasn't a tired hum, the kind to let me know she was still half sleeping. It was a reluctant hum, like she didn't know if she wanted to respond. I sat up, stealing a cautious glance over at her, and when I found she hadn't moved I stood. I tiptoed to the bed and lowered myself onto my stomach at her side, unsure of what to do or say next. I just didn't want to feel awkward anymore.

"Are you still upset with me?" I mumbled, folding my hands under my chin.

One of her eyes opened and fixed on me. After watching me for a moment the other cracked, and she rolled onto her side. "I wasn't upset." She pulled at the blanket under me so she could bring it up to her neck, and under the covers I could see her shrug. "I'm not used to being conflicted about wanting you." I wanted to tell her welcome to the club,

because conflict was all I knew. But I kept my mouth shut, and a moment later she added, "And I'm not used to you being so… willing."

My gaze darted away, and I busily picked at a stray thread on the blanket beneath me. "You caught me in a good mood is all."

Echo let out an instant sigh. "Stop making excuses."

"Stop backing me into corners," I countered. "I wouldn't have to give you answers you didn't want to hear if you didn't ask questions that I can't answer."

"Can't?" she asked rhetorically, "Or don't want to?"

I laid my head down sideways, meeting her smoky gray eyes again and saying softly, "The problem is that you think there's a difference." I didn't want to argue.

"What is it about this that's so hard for you?"

"Corner," I warned.

Echo squinted with frustration. "So I'm just not allowed to ever ask you anything?"

"What do you want from an answer anyway?" I asked elusively. She'd have every answer she wanted if she stopped worrying about what I said. She'd have so many answers if she stopped asking questions.

"I don't know," she breathed dejectedly. "You told Micah you'd choose him, and I'm afraid that you really will." She shrugged once more beneath her blankets. "I just want a reason to convince myself you won't."

No matter how many times I'd told her that I wouldn't choose, she didn't believe it, and I know it didn't help that I'd promised Micah. We weren't together, and I didn't know if we ever could be, but she put too much importance on the things I wouldn't say. That wasn't what mattered. It wasn't where she was going to get her answers.

I lifted myself enough to pull the blanket out from under me, and then I

slipped beneath it. "It's not enough that I'm here?" After a moment of thought all she did was shake her head. "Well," I started unsurely, "What if I kiss you?"

"It's not enough," she said quietly. So I did the next best thing I could think of. I reached for her pants. Her hands instantly shot down to grab mine, and she backed her hips away. "This isn't a problem with a physical solution, Genevieve."

"Not even for multiple finishes?" I asked with teasing hopefulness. That was the easiest way. The way I knew and that wasn't dangerous and the way I was comfortable with.

Echo rolled her eyes. "Are you really going to play that card right now?"

"Guess not." I removed my hands. "If I could give you a reason," I asked seriously, folding my arms into my chest, "Would you stop asking me questions all the time?"

Her laugh line deepened as she said with some sad amusement, "I could try."

I wasn't sure what I could do to prove to her that I wouldn't choose. It felt so clear to me that she was essential to everything I needed, but I didn't know how to tell her that without saying what I could never say. How to show her without showing her too much. But I'd find a way.

We both lay there in silence for a few minutes, just watching each other. Eventually my eyes started drooping closed, but before I could fall asleep again there was a knock from my room next door. It was just a few taps and then a pause, too formal to have been Blake, who would've called out for me. The knock sounded again, and while I staggered to my feet I figured it was one of my soldiers, or April. When I opened Echo's door and saw who was outside the next room over, the first thought I had was, *shit*.

Then Micah turned and saw me standing in Echo's door, and the first words out of my mouth were, "I slept on the couch."

His face went completely blank, and he said without a hint of emotion, "Your radio's off. Samuel wants you." He turned to walk away without saying another thing to me, but as he strode off his arm shot out, and his fist went straight through the drywall. He didn't even look back before he disappeared down the stairs.

"Perfect," I murmured, closing the door behind me as I retreated back into Echo's room. I dropped face first onto the couch, drowning a loud, frustrated groan into a cushion.

"I'm surprised you didn't go after him," Echo mused, sitting up to get out of bed.

"Why?" I asked. "So he could tell me I'm a damned liar? So he could yell at me for-" I caught myself before saying 'how I feel about you', and finished, "For being here?" I flopped onto my back, letting one arm dangle dramatically over the edge. "I should just lock you two in a room together until he gets over it a little."

"I told you I wouldn't kill the kid," Echo chuckled, "Don't make a liar out of me too."

"Thanks a lot," I mumbled sarcastically.

"You want me to go see what the doctor wants?" Echo strapped her pistol holster to her thigh, and then reached for her backpack. "If Micah's there I'll give him a smile and a wave. Maybe blow him a kiss." In response to that I grumbled about her getting punched, which caused her to laugh. "I'll meet you afterwards for breakfast."

She was already on her way out the door, so I called after her, "Seriously! Don't provoke him!"

It took me a couple minutes to get up and get all my stuff ready. When I finally got to the door, Blake and Casey were on their way out of his room. I greeted them happily while I closed the door behind me. Blake barely looked at me as he gave Casey a parting kiss, but once she was gone he grabbed me by the sleeve.

"Get in here," he whispered, yanking me into his room and swinging the door shut.

"What the hell?" I laughed, in shock at his behavior. It wasn't until he turned away from the entrance to face me that I noticed how pale he was. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep breath, blinking fast a few times before his eyes went wide again. "Casey's pregnant."

My jaw dropped immediately, and the moment the news sank in I squealed, jumping into the air to get my arms around his neck.

Blake pushed me off him and sucked in another breath. "Oh Jesus, shit, fuck."

"Why are you so shocked?" I asked, unable to conceal my amusement at his panic because I was so excited. "I know you know how sex works. And don't tell me you honestly thought using a condom would be effective after all these years. It's been a while since I've done the hetero thing, but that's just common-"

"Stop talking," he interrupted, and he fell back to lean against the door.

"Blake?" I prompted cautiously. I'd never seen him like this. "Are you okay?"

"She's going to have a baby," he murmured. "My baby." His hazel eyes locked on me. "A whole little tiny human being, Genevieve."

"Maybe you should sit," I suggested, pointing toward his bed. He scurried over and dropped down, and I lowered myself next to him, afraid to make any sudden movements and freak him out even more. "If you're worried about safety," I started softly, "We made this base as safe as we could." He made no response, so I added searchingly, "And April's a great doctor. Casey's in good hands."

"That's not what I'm afraid of," he whispered eventually. He glanced up just long enough to see my questioning expression, and then he leaned

forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "My dad walked out before I was born. Every boyfriend my mom ever had after that was a complete dick. I don't know the first thing about how to be a father." His head turned sideways so he could look at me, his brow furrowed with worry. "What if I'm terrible at it? What if the kid hates me?"

"Blake, you goon," I couldn't help but laugh, and I reached over to wrap my arms around his shoulders. When I let him go I leaned forward to catch his gaze. "Alright, listen here. All I had for a long time was a dad, so I know a little something about fathers." He straightened up a bit to listen. "Here's the trick. You ready?" He nodded. "Be yourself." And then he rolled his eyes. "Blake, you're honestly the nicest guy I've ever met in my entire life. There's no way you could fail, and there's no way that kid could ever hate you, because I know you. You're kind, and strong, and fun. It's going to come so natural to you that you're going to look back on this panic, and you're going to laugh at how ridiculous you're being."

"You really think so?" he asked with a timid smile.

My chin dropped in a confident nod. "I've never been so sure of anything." I couldn't help but grin as I added, "And I never knew how bad I wanted to be an aunt until now."

"You're going to be the best aunt," he said, reaching one arm around my shoulders to give me a grateful hug. "Thanks, Pipsqueak."

I bumped him with my elbow and stood. "Let's go eat."

He got up too, following me to the door while he asked, "How are things going with Micah?"

"He caught me sleeping in Echo's room last night," I sighed, falling into step next to him as we strode down the hall. Blake glanced over at me with a suspiciously raised eyebrow. "We didn't do anything," I told him defensively. He clearly didn't believe me. "Fine, we made out a little, whatever."

He snickered. "It seriously gives me a headache trying to figure you guys out."

"That's nice, thanks," I chuckled, giving him a playful push. While I waited for him to laugh it off I glanced upward at the darkened sky. It looked like it was going to rain. It'd be the first of the season. "Micah made me promise I'd stop being with her."

"You know she's terrified of that," Blake said somberly.

"I know," I groaned. "I lied to him, and he knew it, and he's pissed at me for it."

"Gen," Blake said, turning toward me and stopping because we were getting too close to the cafeteria. "You know how much Echo would sacrifice for you, right?" I nodded knowingly. "At some point… and I'm not saying you do or don't have feelings for her, okay? It doesn't matter. But you obviously care about her, and at some point you got to ask yourself what *you're* willing to sacrifice for *her*."

"Micah's my brother," I muttered.

"You don't know anything about him," Blake pointed out gently. "Look, I'm not trying to list out choices like anything about this situation is easy. Maybe you'll never have to sacrifice anything. I'm just saying think about it."

"Hey!" Echo called, jogging to meet Blake and I at the cafeteria patio.

I turned away from Blake to greet Echo, the weight of his advice too great for me to dwell on. "Hey, what did Dr. Issa want?"

Echo held out her hand, extending to me a capped syringe. "Blood sample." My eyebrows furrowed with confusion as I took the needle and glanced down at my own arm. "From a Feral…" she added with a laugh.

"Oh." My cheeks tinted, and I pulled my backpack around to put the syringe in while mumbling, "It would be easier to just bring him a Feral."

There was a cackling laugh from somewhere nearby, and all three of us turned to look at the source. It was a couple of civilians coming out of the

cafeteria, but they were staggering and giggling like they'd been drinking. When they stumbled past us I glanced into the cafeteria, trying to see who was dishing alcohol. There were only a few people eating breakfast because of how early it still was, and I didn't see a bottle on any of them.

"That better not become a normal thing," I said, each of us watching them stagger away.

Echo shrugged. "Maybe it's one of their birthdays."

"Anyway." I turned on Blake with a huge grin, motioning to Echo. "Can I tell her the news?" He chuckled and nodded. "Casey's pregnant."

Echo gave a smug smile, looking completely unconcerned. "Yeah, I know." Both Blake and I made our shock known, and it caused her to laugh. "She told me when we were at the hospital the other day," she explained, "Asked me to keep it a secret until she told Blake." Then she gave him a hug, finishing it with a pat on the back. "Congrats."

"Thanks," he said, turning again as someone else staggered toward the cafeteria from the other direction.

"Okay, what is going on?" I asked seriously. The man could barely stand, but he made it to the gutter of the sidewalk, where he vomited into the street. "Hey," I prompted, taking a few steps toward him, "Are you alright?"

"Water," he croaked, clutching at his stomach.

"You thirsty?" Blake asked, pulling his backpack around to grab a bottle. "It's a little early, man, don't you think?"

"No," I mumbled, my head swiveling around to look into the cafeteria again. My heart dropped when on sheer instinct my mind made a connection between this and the raiders. He wasn't asking for water. He was warning about the water. "Poison." I barely said the words when Echo ran into the cafeteria to shout for everyone to stop drinking. "Blake, take him to the hospital."

I hurried in after Echo while Blake carried the man away, and ran to the

I turned in after Echo while Blake carried the man away, and ran to the large water tanks, giving them both hard pushes to see how full they were. One was nearly empty. The other was completely full.

"Who else was here?" I asked Aminah frantically. She strode around the serving counter, a worried look on her face. "What tank have they been drinking out of?"

Aminah set an indicating hand on the full tank, squinting at it unsurely. "We filled it yesterday after the fire." I sighed and pulled my handheld radio off the shoulder strap of my backpack. "There've only been a handful of people."

"Imogen," I said into the radio, "It's Genevieve, come in." Static sounded over the other end, and I waved for Echo to follow me outside while I said again, "Imogen, it's an emergency, over." With Echo on my heels I strode out into the middle of the street in front of the cafeteria.

"What happened?" Imogen's voice asked through my speaker.

I stomped at the heavy metal cover of the manhole in the road, but it wouldn't even budge, like it hadn't been moved in years. "I need you at the DFAC right now. Over."

"On my way," she answered.

"You think raiders snuck in through the sewers?" Echo asked, trailing me toward the alley behind the cafeteria.

"Maybe," I mumbled thoughtfully, scanning the ground as we walked.

We turned the corner to the very back of the building, and the sight caused me to jog over. The circular sewer cover was offset, and fresh, muddy shoe prints surrounded the hole. That wasn't what really caught my attention though. It was two bright silver, empty jugs discarded next to the sewer. They were too clean, too fresh to have been sitting in the alley for long, and when I read the label my jaw clenched.

"Fuckers!" I growled, smashing my toes into the side of a jug and sending it flying down the alley.

it flying down the alley.

Echo picked up the other, reading out loud, "Antifreeze?"

"April," I said into my radio. "You copy?"

"Gen, it's Casey," came the response. "There are some sick people here. We can't treat them unless we know what to treat."

"Antifreeze," I told her, pinching the bridge of my nose. "They drank antifreeze. Over."

"Okay, if anyone shows signs of intoxication or sickness, send them here. Time is critical."

"Roger," I answered.

"Genevieve?" Imogen's voice carried from the front of the building.

"Out back!" I called, squatting down to get my fingers beneath the metal cover. Echo lowered herself at my side when she saw what I was doing, and together we pushed the heavy grate away from the hole.

"I heard over the radio," Imogen said, reaching us as we straightened back up. "Told you we should've chased the raiders."

I shot her a glare, in no mood right now to argue over whose fault this was. "Could they have gotten in through here?" I asked, shining my flashlight into the sewer. "Are there exits outside the gates?"

"I mean, yeah," she answered, "But the ends are gated and locked."

"Where's the nearest exit?"

"Straight shot from here." She pointed in a direction beyond the gate. "I've never been on the outside of it, but I think it's in a little ravine. It empties into a smaller branch of the river."

"A ravine?" I repeated, to which Imogen nodded. At first I'd wanted to take the sewers all the way there. It was the fastest, the most concealed. But if we came out of the tunnels into a ravine and the raiders were

But if we came out of the tunnels into a ravine and the raiders were waiting for it, then they'd have the higher ground. It could be a perfectly set trap. "How far is it from the perimeter?"

"I don't know, um…" Imogen let out a thoughtful breath. "A mile? Give or take a little."

I was done playing games with the raiders. The Ferals and the fire hadn't gotten anyone hurt, but I didn't know how dire poisoning was. And what if Casey had been one to drink it? She could've lost the baby. Now the raiders were endangering the people I was responsible for, and I couldn't let it continue. "We're not waiting for them to make another move," I grumbled, and then into my radio, "Blake, do you read me?" After a second I heard 'loud and clear'. "I need you to start gathering Second Platoon. Rally at the armory."

"Second Platoon?" Imogen asked, following when I started with Echo back toward the front of the building. "Cyrus has been training with them."

"Yeah?" I said questioningly.

"Leave him behind."

"Imogen," I sighed, "If you have issues with him joining a platoon then he's the one you need to take it up with."

"I'm taking it up with you," she argued.

Echo had dropped back a few paces like she didn't want to get involved, but this wasn't something I wanted to get involved in either. It sounded like a family debate. "I don't have time for this right now."

"Make time!" Imogen said fiercely, cutting into my path to stop me. "Please," she asked more sincerely, one corner of her mouth twitching almost apologetically. "I'm making a genuine request. I'll talk to him, but for now, don't take him. He's not a soldier."

"Yeah, alright," I agreed, taking in the concerned look on her face. I could understand perfectly the protective spark in her eyes. "I'll leave him here."

She was visibly relieved, and even managed to crack a small smile. "Thank you."

After she'd walked away, Echo strode at my side again. "Where are we going?"

"Motor pool," I answered, wiping at the first drop of rain that splattered against my cheek. "I want a fast getaway if we're outnumbered." I had my light gray sweater on, so as the drops started coming heavier I pulled the hood on.

Echo only had a long sleeved shirt over her usual tank top, but she swung her backpack around to take her black beanie out and drop it onto her head. We picked up jogging the rest of the way to the motor pool, hoping not to get soaked by the time we reached a truck. It was no use though. We were both dripping as we got into the cab of the smallest cargo truck on the lot. While I fired up the engine Echo took her hat off, wringing it out over the floor at her feet. Her hair got even wavier when it was wet, and even though I shifted the vehicle into drive I wished at the back of my mind that I had time to admire it.

Blake had managed to gather the platoon by the time we got to the armory, and they were all standing outside, waiting. Stopping the truck in front of it, Echo and I hopped out, and I took the key to the lock from the string around my neck.

"Blake," I motioned him over before opening the doors to the armory. "I want you to stay here and figure out the water situation. Maybe see if you can find a way to harvest some of this rain."

He looked suspicious of my motives, like maybe he thought I didn't want to put him in danger because of the news about Casey. "Are you sure?"

But that wasn't why I nodded. "Get the rest of First Platoon to run a second patrol. I don't know that the raiders aren't watching, planning something once the rest of us leave. Keep an eye out. Be ready for anything."

"I'm on it," he said understandingly, and as he headed off to start his task

already he called, "Be careful."

With a grateful smile, I turned to unlock the doors to the armory. "Bulletproof vests, everyone," I announced, swinging them wide open and ushering my soldiers inside. I noticed Cyrus amongst the group filtering in. As he passed me I put my arm in front of his chest and directed him away from the door. "Not you."

"Why not?" he asked, almost looking hurt that I didn't want him to come.

"You're not ready," I offered.

His dark brown eyes scanned my face, and then he let out a sigh. "Imogen did this." Instead of answering, not wanting to get Imogen in trouble with him, I watched as Echo filed in last. "She's just being overprotective," Cyrus pleaded when I didn't respond. "I'm a great shot. I know all the hand signals. I'm ready."

My soldiers began to come back out already, and I motioned for them to jump into the bed of the truck. When Echo exited she dropped a vest onto the wet ground for me. "I haven't seen it for myself yet," I told Cyrus, slipping the item over my head.

"Then let me prove it now," he said, making a move to go in and grab some gear. "Let me come."

I blocked his path, and after checking to make sure nobody was still inside I closed the doors, relocked them, and replaced the key around my neck. "Next time, Cyrus." It made me feel bad that he looked so disappointed I wouldn't give him a chance. It almost made me reconsider, but I already had enough issues with Imogen. Hurting Cyrus' feelings a little was worth lessening the tension between us. "I'm sorry." Before he could argue further, I walked away, telling the soldiers who hadn't gotten into the truck bed yet, "Load up."

Echo and I jumped back into the cab, and once I heard someone from the back slap the window I put the vehicle in drive. At the gates all I had to do was flash the high beams, and the guards on watch opened them up to let us out. From the road outside the gate I veered into the woods

up to let us out. From the road outside the gate I veered into the woods, taking it slow so none of my soldiers would bounce out of the back. I couldn't see anything out the rearview mirror because two guys were standing, leaning over the roof to keep an eye out as we drove. I kept my eyes peeled too, squinting through the rain to try and scan ahead.

The trees were just thin enough and the truck just small enough for us to make a straight path to the ravine. There, we had to head away from base, searching the length of it for the opening of the sewers. Echo had rolled down her window to get a better view.

After a few minutes of driving along the side she pointed. "There."

I stopped the truck and got out, trudging to the beginning of the downgrade to get a good look at the gate to the tunnel. It was set in the side of the ravine, which already had a few extra inches of water at the bottom because of the heavy rain. The gate was swung wide open, off the hinges and horribly bent as though it had been hit by something massive or blown off. It was definitely how the raiders had gotten in, and for now all we could do to fix it was lean the gate back against the opening. At least that way no Ferals could wander in.

"I need two," I called to my soldiers as I started down into the ravine.

Two of them followed me down, and together we lifted the heavy gate back into place. After it was upright I glanced around, searching for something to make it a little sturdier. My eyes fell on large stones, the tops of which were just sticking out of the water.

"A few more," I said, waving them down, "Pile these rocks to hold it in place."

It took a few minutes to gather the rocks, but eventually we had enough that they made a stack a couple feet high in front of the gate. But the raiders were nowhere to be found, which meant that they were camped out somewhere nearby. As we started back up the hill toward the truck I considered our options. Connelly – Cap's friend who had taught me all about the forest's herbs and animals – had also taught me to track. There'd been enough boot prints at the manhole behind the cafeteria that

I was sure there'd be a good trail to follow to wherever the raiders were hiding.

Upon reaching the top of the hill my eyes met Echo's, and she made a guilty glance to the side, instructing me to look. I followed the shift, letting out a sigh at the familiar face. "Cyrus, I told you to stay behind."

"I can do this," he said defensively.

I'd clearly told him not to come with us, but now he was here. There was no way that I'd send him back alone, not through the sewers, and definitely not through the forest. It was too dangerous. Nor could I leave him at the truck by himself while we wandered off to find the raiders. At least he had his own automatic rifle, but he'd come without a bulletproof vest because I'd closed the armory before he could grab one. With a groan I dropped my backpack and rifle to the ground, and began to unstrap the one I was wearing.

"What are you doing?" Echo protested, grabbing one of my hands to stop me.

I shook her off. "I'm not letting him come without a vest." When she made a move to start taking her own off I shot her a glare. "Don't you dare." Her safety was more important than mine.

"I'll be okay," Cyrus said, waving his hands to try and stop me as I continued to remove my vest. "I'll stay behind cover."

"If you're trying to prove to me that you can follow orders," I grumbled, pulling it over my head and handing it to him, "You're off to a bad start. Put it on." He did so, refusing to look me in the eyes again like he was regretting that he hadn't listened to me. "Here's the plan," I announced to everyone else while I returned my backpack to my shoulders, "We're going to track the raiders to wherever they're hiding. I'll decide what to do once we see what we're dealing with. Let's go."

All of us had our weapons drawn as we started down into the ravine and back up the other side. The rain might've made it more difficult to track if the raiders had been lighter on their feet. There were clear prints defined

in the dirt, but broken sticks and undergrowth would've showed me the way even if the rain had washed the prints gone. There were only six sets of footprints that I could make out, but that didn't mean there couldn't be more people than that waiting where they were camped at.

At such a slow pace, it took us a while to walk the few miles until we finally came up on an end. I stopped our progress before the woods ended, and squinted across the dirt road to the place on the other side of it. It was a large plot of land, with a big, one-story building at the center. There was an empty pasture to the left of the building, surrounded by a livestock fence and looking like it wrapped around to the back. To the right was another large area that appeared connected to the building. It was completely enclosed by a brick wall except for the chain-link gate, big enough to let a vehicle through, opening toward the front.

In order to get a better view of what was inside the walls, I lifted my rifle and pressed an eye to the scope. Based on what I could see beyond the gate, this place looked like an old animal shelter. There were rows of kennels inside the walls, set perpendicular to an expanse of overgrown grass. I couldn't see anyone inside or outside, but there were eighteen of us, and I was pretty certain that we wouldn't be outnumbered.

"Alright," I began, motioning for everyone to move in close enough to hear me over the loud patter of rain. "We're going to flank them. Charlie Squad, I want you guys posted at the main entrance, follow us around the side to stay out of sight and then cut to the doors. Delta Squad, we're going through the walled area on the right. Cyrus, you're with us in Delta. You all know the rules, shoot on sight."

Everyone nodded, so we started forward. I led the way through the woods around the perimeter, staying hidden until we could make a straight line for the brick wall without being seen. Once we were close enough we cut across the empty road and crept to the brick wall. I leaned my back against, peering in just enough to see if anyone was outside, and then I waved Charlie Squad past, keeping an eye out as they sprinted across the opening of the gate toward the front door of the building.

When Charlie was in position at the front door, I swung the unlocked gate

When Charlie was in position at the front door, I swung the unlocked gate open just enough for us to slip through one at a time. I kept my eyes on the windows as we hurried along the brick wall toward the corner of the building, watching to make sure nobody would see us. We reached the edifice undetected, and stayed crouched below window level as we snuck our way through the grassy border. There was a single door in the side of the building, and we'd almost reached it when Echo grabbed me by the sweater and yanked me back.

She let out a relieved breath when I landed on my backside, and then stretched her hand past me to show me why she'd done it. With her fingers she traced the length of a tripwire, following it to the lengthy grass growing against the side of the building, hiding the attached hand grenade. She scooted forward and untied the wire to disarm the trap, then stuck the grenade into her backpack. Even though that was taken care of, it was no relief that the raiders had explosives. It must've been what they'd opened the gate of the sewer tunnel with, and there was no way of telling how much they had left.

Since Echo had better eyes than I did, I motioned for her to go ahead of me the rest of the way. At the door, she scanned it for more booby-traps, and then waved that we could head in. I was about to reach for the handle to open it when there was an explosion from the other side of the building. There was no time to wonder who from Charlie Squad had set it off and whether or not they were okay. We rushed in, weapons aimed and fingers on the trigger.

There was one massive desk set against the back wall of this reception room, with a door leading further into the building on either side. The door on the left clearly connected to an entrance area near the front doors. If it wasn't because I could see the doors from here, it was because a cloud of dust was still settling from the explosion.

"Hurry!" shouted an unfamiliar voice past the door on the right.

I rushed toward it with my soldiers at my back, into an open room that had been converted into living space. The remaining soldiers from Charlie Squad came through another entrance at the same time we did, right as a foot of the last raider disappeared through a freshly uncovered

hole in the roof. As the foot disappeared it was replaced by an arm, which dropped a live grenade down and then disappeared again as footsteps sounded above our heads.

"Get out!" I yelled, retreating back out the door behind my soldiers.

I dove behind the desk in the other room right as the grenade went off, sending debris shooting through the doorway. I didn't wait to recover. Didn't want to give the raiders time to get away. So I shot out the door back to the kennel yard, only to skid to a half before making it very far. Bullets exploded into the ground at my feet, and I backed up against the wall and scooted to the far corner of the building, firing my own weapon upward as the rest of my soldiers filed out and glued themselves to the wall too.

The raiders above us retreated a little as we all began to fire upward, but it didn't stop the back and forth. I craned my neck to see around the corner to the back of the building, looking for an alternate route to either escape or get the upper hand. I did it right in time to see a man in a black and red leather vest hurl himself from the roof, across a gap to land on the roof of the closest line of kennels. I fired his direction, unable to aim because I couldn't lean enough with the shots coming from above us. The raider threw his hands to his head to cover it as he kept running to the end of the row. When he got there he pulled on a rope, dropped it, and sprinted back for the roof. I shot at him again, but I only got a couple rounds off before I saw what he'd done.

They had Ferals in the kennels, and he'd just released them.

"Shit," I breathed, as what looked like at least a dozen of them came snarling around the corner. "Run!"

Every one of us took off for the gate, dodging bullets on the way. I threw myself into the fence, forcing it open even more so we could sprint through in a rush instead of filtering out one by one. I wanted to stop and close it so the Ferals couldn't come after us, but the raiders on the roof were still firing at us, and stopping was a death sentence.

"Go!" I yelled to Charlie Squad, who'd been posted against the wall like

"Go!" I yelled to Charlie Squad, who'd been posted against the wall like we were at the front of the building. We headed for the road, turning every other second to fire a shot at the Ferals or the raiders on the roof. As I turned to fire another shot, one of my men at the rear of the group got hit by an enemy bullet, and even though it only caught him in the arm he stumbled and fell. He was down just for a moment, but it was enough for him to get caught by the Ferals.

"Stay in front of me!" Echo hollered, grabbing my shoulder and propelling me forward in front of her because I didn't have a vest.

Bullets kept whizzing by, and the farther we got from the building the farther it seemed the bullets got from hitting us. But the next one that got close caught Echo in the back, throwing her off her feet. Skidding to a halt in the mud caused me to slip backwards, and while I scrambled back up I grabbed Echo by the vest, hauling her to her feet as we took off running again. We were barely up when someone ahead of us went down.

"Cyrus!" I shouted, catching up to where he'd fallen.

"I got him!" Powers yelled, grabbing Cyrus by the waist and yanking him to his feet.

Powers supported Cyrus the rest of the way to the cover of the woods, where the bullets couldn't hit us anymore. When we got there we turned on the Ferals, having the firepower now to put them all down without getting shot. The remaining seven that we hadn't killed by chance while firing backwards came charging into the trees after us, and we dispatched the rest of them.

I turned to scan my soldiers. To count how many we'd lost in so short a time. Powers was bending over Cyrus, pushing both hands hard against either side of his leg.

I rushed over, dropping to my knees at their side. "What happened?"

"He's unconscious," Powers answered, and no matter how much pressure he applied to Cyrus' wound, blood kept pouring through his fi

ıingers.

"No, no, no," I stammered. It had only taken a minute after he got shot to run into the cover of the trees. And only thirty seconds more to kill the Ferals. "He *just* got hit!" We were almost there. He could've made it. "We have to get him back."

"It hit his artery," Powers murmured. His head fell, but when he pulled his hands away I panicked and dropped down, pushing my own palms against the entrance and exit bullet holes. "It went clean through. It's already too late."

In the distance there was a collective shout from the raiders, barely audible over the rain. "Better get out of here! We have more!"

"Ma'am, we have to go," another of the soldiers said timidly.

"Go," I murmured, removing my bloody hands.

They started running ahead for the ravine, and after I'd struggled to my feet I followed after them. My soldiers were already in the bed of the truck when Echo and I got there, and as I strode around to the driver's side I counted. Fourteen. I fired up the engine. Fourteen left out of the eighteen we'd attacked with. Two gone from Charlie Squad's explosion. One lost to the Ferals. And Cyrus. The tires threw debris up behind us as I tore away from the sewer. Four deaths too many, and one of them shouldn't have been there at all.

"Fuck," I muttered, turning sharply onto the main road back to the base. Then I slammed my hands against the steering wheel. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I wasn't prepared for those kinds of defenses. Wasn't prepared for raiders who had a backup plan, or hand grenades, or Ferals to set loose.

My eyes filled with hot tears as Echo's hand landed on my thigh. "It's not your fault."

The only thing I could see was my bloodstained fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. "Please don't touch me right now," I begged. I pushed Echo's hand off, and then wiped the backs of my own hands against my

soaked jeans to try and get the blood off.

I laid on the horn when we got close enough to the gates, alerting them to our return. I drove straight through, only stopping when we reached the armory to put our gear away. A few people who'd been waiting for us at the gates had come after the truck, and reached the armory as Echo and I got out of the cab. It was Blake in the Growler, with April, Casey, and Imogen in the passenger seats.

"Anyone hurt?" April asked.

Bullets had grazed an additional two of my soldiers, so Blake let Casey get into driver's seat so she could shuttle them and April back to the hospital. I used my key to open the doors of the armory, and when I turned I could see Imogen scanning every soldier that went in to store their vest.

"Did Cyrus go with you?" she asked, worry clear in her eyes as she hurried to me. "I haven't been able to find him."

"Imogen," Echo whispered, trying to lead her away to deliver the news.

But Imogen wouldn't take her eyes off me. "Did he go with you?" she demanded, but by the tears that welled in her eyes I knew she could already tell. "Where is he!"

I couldn't speak. Couldn't find the words to tell her that I hadn't wanted to take him, or that I'd given up my own vest for him, or that there was nothing we could've done. All I could do was glance down at the blood that remained on my hands. When I looked back up Imogen's bottom lip quivered, and her hand whizzed through the air, letting out a loud smack as her palm connected with my cheek.

"Whoa, hey," Echo said, stepping in front of Imogen and backing her away from me.

I touched my fingers to the stinging in my flesh as my own eyes filled with tears, but Echo didn't need to come between us. Even if Imogen didn't appear too heartbroken to do more than slap me, I wouldn't have

retaliated anyway, and without saying anything else she ran off.

Echo turned, gray eyes full of worry. "Are you okay?"

I knew that some of the soldiers had seen, and I could still feel them watching me. I wiped at the single drop that cascaded down my cheek, nodding, not wanting them to see that I could cry. After I'd nodded, Echo looked in the direction that Imogen had disappeared, and then back at me for a moment before once more searching the distance. She seemed torn. I knew her and Imogen had become friends since we'd been here, and even if it made me jealous, the concern on Echo's face was obvious.

"Go," I mumbled, tilting my head in Imogen's direction. Echo's eyebrows rose with shock. "I'll meet you outside the cafeteria in a bit."

"You're alright?" she asked unsurely, almost appearing reluctant to leave.

I wasn't alright, and we both knew she could tell that. But what I wanted was to hug her, to let slip a few tears so she could make me feel better about the terribly stupid decision I'd just made. We both also knew I wouldn't do it with the soldiers around.

"I'm fine."

Echo watched me for a few attentive moments, and then slipped her vest off and hurried where Imogen had disappeared. I picked it up off the ground and returned it to its place inside the armory, trying desperately hard not to think about what had happened. Trying desperately hard not to blame myself. Over and over I kept thinking about what Cap would have done. There weren't many alternatives. Probably nothing would have been different. But that didn't stop the guilt, made worse by the fact that I'd told Imogen I wouldn't take Cyrus along. I knew what it was like to lose a brother.

Blake didn't say anything while I secured the armory, and after it was locked he followed silently at my side all the way to the medical complex. It stopped raining while we walked, but it didn't do anything to help lift the mood. At the medical complex I checked up on how my injured soldiers were doing. One of them needed a couple stitches, and the other only a

bandage. But we'd lost two more people to the poison, and another three were in critical condition. Blake stayed behind to spend time with Casey and help, but I started for the cafeteria, desperate to see Echo. Desperate for a comforting touch, or even a word, or a look.

She wasn't there when I arrived. Normally I'd have called for her over the handheld radio, but if she was still with Imogen I didn't want my voice to interrupt them. So I trudged inside to where Aminah and a few others were preparing lunch.

"Hey," I greeted, not even managing a half-hearted smile. "Did Echo come by here yet?"

To my surprise, Aminah nodded. "She was waiting outside for a little bit. Then your brother came by, and they left together."

"What?" I blurted in an instant panic. "How long ago?" I knew in my heart that there was no way Micah had come by to work things out with her. No way they walked away together to bond.

"Just a couple minutes," Aminah answered.

"Which way did they go?" I demanded. Her mouth dropped open thoughtfully, but she didn't answer fast enough. "Which way!" I pleaded.

"Down that street." She pointed, and I darted out the door.

"Echo!" I shouted into my radio. Only silence replied.

I knew Micah was furious at me this morning, but I hadn't thought he'd be plotting some way to take it into his own hands. I couldn't handle it. Especially not today. After what had just happened. We'd lost soldiers. I had failure weighing on my shoulders and heart. And all I wanted right now was to be with Echo. There was no way I could lose her. My sanity wouldn't survive it.

"Echo answer me," I pleaded into the speaker again. She would've answered if she had her radio. It had to be off.

I sprinted down the street Aminah had pointed to, running as fast as my

I sprinted down the street Aminah had pointed to, running as fast as my limbs would carry me. Every alley I passed I looked down, hoping to catch a glimpse of them before it was too late. I was so frantic I could barely breathe, and I was struggling not to just break down before even finding them, not to collapse because I was already so terrified of what I'd see.

The next alley I passed I went by so fast that all I really caught was a blur. But it was enough that I knew what I saw, and I hit the brakes, sliding to a halt across the still wet cement. They were both down the alley, but even though Micah had his shotgun aimed, Echo wasn't fighting back. She had her hands up in surrender.

I used my skidding momentum to change direction, shooting down the alley. "Micah!" I screamed.

My panic was so severe that I wasn't thinking anymore. At hearing my voice he turned his head just slightly, stopping what he was doing. The very next moment I reached him, and when I shoved him backwards into the wall of an enclosing building he dropped the gun from his hands. It didn't matter that he'd given up instantly. I was in instinctual overdrive. I'd already taken my knife from the sheath at my thigh, and as I pinned him against the wall I pressed the sharp edge of the long, cold blade to his throat.

"Listen up, you little shit," I growled menacingly. Even though he was half a foot taller, I felt him stiffen beneath me in pure fear. "You might be flesh and blood, but I barely know you anymore. That girl has saved my life more times than I can count." His muddy green eyes were wide with terror, and he looked too afraid to even breathe. "Look at her, Micah." His focus dropped to the pavement beneath us. "Look at her!" His eyes snapped in Echo's direction, filling with tears when they locked on her. "Now look at me, and listen very carefully to what I'm about to tell you." I waited for him to meet my gaze. "You don't have to like her. You can hate her as much as you want. But do *not* make me choose. You understand? Because I promise you, you will *not* like my decision."

He was still too afraid to move, until I loosened my grip and stopped pressing the knife so hard against his throat. Then he nodded in haste.

I released him completely, feeling my fury begin to melt into a fresh panic. "Get out of here," I ordered. He peeled himself from the wall, but when he began to reach for the gun on the ground I growled, "Leave it." He'd officially lost weapon privileges.

He ran off, and the moment he was out of sight what I just did hit me like a punch to gut. "Oh, God." I felt sick. The knife slipped from my hand, clattering loudly against the cement.

"Genevieve?" Echo whispered, taking a few careful steps toward me.

"Holy shit," I gasped. Through the shock I was struggling for air, so I leaned back against the wall, bending over to put my hands on my knees. "Oh, I can't believe I just did that."

"Are you okay?" she asked, striding a few steps closer. "Are you going to have another panic attack?"

"Oh my God," I muttered, straightening up as I brought my hands to my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting the cold of the brick wall behind me seep in to the back of my skull. I kept saying I wouldn't choose. I was determined against it, never wanting to have to pick between Echo and my own brother. But I just had. I chose. "Holy shit."

Echo reached me, but she looked shocked too, and afraid of how I'd react if she touched me. "Do you want me to kiss you or something?"

"No, don't kiss me," I said rapidly, dropping my arms. Now that it wasn't raining anymore it felt hot, and my wet clothes were sticking to my skin. In my anxiety it only added a feeling of claustrophobia, and I clutched at the fabric over my chest, panicking at the weight of it and its cling. "I need to change," I murmured.

Before Echo could say anything else I ran off, desperate to get rid of this feeling. Desperate for some level of control even if it was just over my clothes. I sprinted all the way to the barracks, and then up the stairs to my own room. We'd scavenged the homes for useful items, so now I had a couple extra articles of clothing in my trunk. I barely thought to swing

the door shut behind me when I got there, immediately stripping off my wet sweatshirt, and then the tank top underneath. I dropped onto the bed, unable to undo the laces of my boots fast enough no matter how rapidly I pulled. Then finally. Finally I tugged off my tight, wet, suffocating jeans, and the cool air was relaxing against the damp of my body.

I took in a deep breath, using it to calm the rushing of my heart, and then reached for the towel in my trunk. Micah would probably hate me after this. Is that the kind of sacrifice Blake was talking about? It was too much. I'd just threatened my own brother for Echo. It was crazy. Irrational. I wasn't in control of anything anymore. And I didn't know what was happening to my loyalties, or if I was even worthy of using that word. But I'd done it, and no matter how crazy it was, I still couldn't convince myself to think it was wrong.

Once I'd dried myself off with the towel I grabbed a fresh pair of jeans. As I reached for a dry shirt there was a knock on the door.

"Genevieve?" Echo called softly, coming in and closing the door behind her. I pulled the shirt on and leaned back against the TV stand, too afraid of myself to make eye contact with her. She made her way over and set a bottle down on the surface next to me. "I brought you some liquid numb."

She was holding two small cups in her other hand, extending them to me as though asking whether or not I wanted a drink. When I nodded she set them down and opened the bottle of amber fluid, and I fixated on the relaxing simplicity of watching her hands work. I watched them grip the bottle to pour, and then watched her fingers twist the cap back on. I watched her extend a cup to me, and when after a minute I couldn't bring myself to move, I watched her set it back down.

"Are you okay?" She put her cup down too, its contents untouched.

But I'd had time to think while calming myself. Time to consider what had actually happened. "Why wasn't your radio on?" I finally met her gaze, but she'd immediately looked away. "You turned it off, and you followed him," I stated, studying her reaction. Taking in the guilt that flooded her expression. "You knew what he was doing." I felt an angry heat set in my

chest. ¨You knew he was going to kill you.¨

"I can spot the look from a mile away," she admitted.

Hearing her say it only made me angrier. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked, straightening up. "You knew and you just followed him? You just threw your hands up and surrendered?" She mumbled about trying to talk him out of it, but that was far from satisfying, and as my mind processed the panic I was feeling I pushed against her shoulders. "What? You want it to be *him* I could never forgive?" I shoved her again, not caring that her eyebrows furrowed pleadingly, because for some reason I felt hurt. "Were you just going to let him shoot you? Without fighting back?" When I brought my hands forward once more she caught my wrists, and I felt a hard pang in that wounded hole in my chest. "What's wrong with you!" I demanded again. "Why would you do that!"

"I told you I wouldn't take him from you again," she said softly. "I thought… I don't know… it's what you'd want." Her head fell shamefully. "I thought it'd make all this easier."

That confession and the hurt I felt caused my eyes to fill with tears, and I yanked my wrists from her grip. "You don't know anything about what I want!" My fingers ran through my hair stressfully, and I let out an exasperated breath. "God, it's always the same with you." Her head tilted with confusion. "A fight doesn't always have to end with someone dying, Echo!" I yelled, frustrated. "When are you going to get that? If someone tries to hurt you, fight back! I don't care who it is! Don't ever give up like that!" I made a rough swipe at a tear that cascaded down my cheek. "Don't ever do that," I sniffled, falling back against the desk again. "Don't ever make a choice for me."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, taking a cautious step toward me. She continued slowly, until I'd let her get close enough that she could sit by my side on the edge of the TV stand. "He was set on making you choose. I never thought…" I glanced up just enough to meet her gaze, to see the end of that sentence in her eyes. She never thought I'd choose her. "I just," she started, pausing thoughtfully, "You're my path to redemption, Genevieve. If I can't have that, what's the point of being here?"

"You're as much a part of this camp as anyone," I told her urgently, "You helped build it."

"I'm not talking about camp." She looked over at me to see if I understood, a pleading, guilty look in her eyes.

When I realized what she meant, and that she meant living, the corners of my mouth dropped with emotion. "Everything you've done has been to survive. You'd just throw it all away?"

"Surviving isn't enough anymore," she argued, "You're not the only one who looks at me and sees a raider." She held up her wrist to show me the mark on it. "Even if they don't act like it, people look at me, and they see this tattoo, and these scars, and they can guess with accuracy what I've done to get it. I wear my sins, Genevieve, and it's exhausting." Her head fell, and she let out a shaky sigh. "I've been working so hard to earn your forgiveness. If Micah took that away, then all I'd have left is guilt, and no way to make it right."

Every conflict I felt about her made that feel like she'd shoved a dull blade straight through my chest. Despite my desperate resistance on account of my dad, and Micah, she'd become my greatest comfort. I don't know what I'd do without her, or how I'd have kept pushing through the last few weeks. I needed her enough that I threatened my own brother. Now I felt no other option but making a second sacrifice. Because I never wanted her to do something like this again. And because, even if it wasn't completely true, she deserved to hear it.

"Echo," I said quietly, and when I looked over she was wiping a tear from her face. Before I could change my mind or convince myself I was heading into territory I wasn't ready for, I forced out, "I forgive you." But the moment the words left my tongue, I knew I meant them. It was like I'd shrugged off a weight I'd been carrying for far too long. It felt good. It felt freeing.

Her eyes shot up, filling with more tears when they locked on mine. "Please don't say that if you don't mean it."

She watched me as I slid off the desk and moved in front of her. When I

She watched me as I slid off the desk and moved in front of her. When I was standing between her legs I set my hands on her knees, looking her straight in the eyes and saying once more, "I forgive you." A waterfall of drops spilled down her cheeks, falling from her chin to her lap. "Promise me you won't ever do something like that again," I begged. "Promise me," and because of how relieved the look on her face made me feel, I couldn't help but smile, "Because that was really fucking stupid."

She let out a teary laugh, sniffling the tears away. "I didn't mean to be so stupid," she said, shaking her head at herself, "I just couldn't imagine living in a world where you chose him."

I raised my hands to rub them over my face, working off the last of all the overwhelming emotion. "I, uh," I started, taking a deep breath as I dropped them to Echo's thighs again. After a moment, I let that breath out in an amused huff at how accurate she'd just been, at the fact that I could actually admit this without admitting too much. "I guess I couldn't either."

Echo scanned my face, the shock clear in those gorgeous gray eyes. She just stared at me for a few seconds, frozen. Stunned by this whole conversation. After a minute she raised one hand to my face, slow and timid, like she was afraid I'd stop her. But I didn't stop her. I let her palm set against my cheek, savoring the warmth of her flesh so thoroughly I leaned into it. As her thumb stroked my skin my focus dropped to her lips, and I felt the longing in my expression when my eyes met hers again. I didn't want to hold back anymore. Not like I had been, stopping myself every time I wanted to kiss her, or touch her, or hug her. Stopping her every time she wanted to do the same. I couldn't tell her yet how I felt – I wasn't brave enough, I wasn't ready – but I could try harder than I had been to show her. I could give her more. Hold back less.

Echo inhaled, watching my mouth as she began to ask, "Can I k-"

"Yes," I interrupted readily. And it was all she needed to pitch forward and kiss me.

Her kiss was earnest as always, but I already wanted more. She wasn't close enough. So I set my hands on her waist to slide her off her seat. She responded readily by turning us around, and when she pushed me

back into the stand my arms wrapped around her in eager acceptance. The touch of her free hand left goosebumps in its wake as it slid up my hip, up my waist and my ribs, until it joined the other to cup my face. My fingers dug into the small of her back, pulling her deeper into me so I could push every part of my body against her. My lips parted to feel the gentle silk of her tongue, and every stroke it made against the tip of my own, every time it brushed the flesh of my mouth caused a spark of need to shoot through me, echoing in each increasingly shallow breath.

And I could feel each of her charged breaths. Could feel her stop breathing for seconds at a time, until my grip on her tightened. Until I pulsed against her, and that breath she was holding escaped in one excited rush. Her tongue would follow, and the warmth of it hit my upper lip at the same time the breath did, and it rippled through me like a wave until my fingers would press into her back once more, holding her close so I could grind myself into her. Then she held her breath all over again.

I could feel myself losing control, and I needed to stop this before I was gone completely, because parts of me were still afraid. But when I ran my hands up her back, to press into her one last time before pulling away, she let out a soft whimper of pain and ended it first.

"Sorry," she whispered, still wincing. Her thumb made another apologetic stroke across my cheek as her other hand reached around to remove mine. "I'm bruised."

"Why?" I asked worriedly, thinking Micah had hurt her before I got there.

"I got shot…" she answered with chuckle, "Those vests should come with a warning: you won't die, but it'll hurt like hell."

I would've laughed, but I was too concerned about how bad the bruise was. "Let me see." I gave her hips a gentle push to turn her around, and then sat on the stand again to get comfortable.

"Just don't touch it," Echo told me suspiciously, backing up between my legs to get close enough.

"Of course not," I agreed, barely setting my hands against her hips to

make sure she believed it.

When she didn't flinch I slid them upward, my fingers brushing her skin as they took her shirt up with them. I pushed her layers of clothing all the way up to her shoulder blades, and then held them there to look at the bruise halfway up her back, left enough that the bullet almost missed her. It hadn't been long enough for the wound to turn too many colors. For now it was more of a welt, circular in shape but big enough to look painful.

I shifted her shirt to one hand, watching my other as it snaked down the right side of her back. My eyes ran back up along the smooth line of her spine, then down again, across to the curve of her hip. This time my hand followed my eyes, caressing the soft skin of that curve into the dip of her waist, out again and up her ribs, feeling her. Drinking her in. I'd never looked at anyone the way I was looking at Echo now. Never admired the shape of a body, or every line of muscle and bone, for the feelings it stirred within me. Never looked at a freckle like the dark one just visible above her pant line, and had to run my finger across it or risk obsessing over it for days.

I'd never been so seduced by a sight that I accidentally whispered, "Wow," out loud.

"What?" Echo glanced over her shoulder at me, and the way she twisted to do it shifted her body in a way that made me want to stop and study it all over again. It made me want to remove all her clothing so I could trace her with both hands. Made me want to remove my own so I could see just how perfectly her curves fit against mine.

"Nothing," I muttered, pulling my hands away.

Letting her shirt fall back over her torso, I cleared my throat to help rid the intense desire I felt, because no matter how attracted to her I was I still had walls. Those walls made me terrified of letting go absolutely, because Echo was who she was. The raider was still in there, and no matter how strongly I felt about her I hadn't forgotten it. She wouldn't let me forget. Micah wouldn't let me forget. And because I was who I was. I

had too much going on to make things more complicated. I'd chosen Echo at the very heart of the issue, but I still cared what Micah thought. I still cared that he hated her. I cared if he felt betrayed by my choice. But most of all, I cared that I already couldn't stand to lose Echo. I didn't just have feelings for her. I had powerful feelings. They were real, and deep, and terrifying. And it was like she had a constant target on her back. That raider who tried to strangle her. Me. Kellan. Micah. She was always being threatened, and the pain of losing her would've already been bad enough without giving her everything I had. I was already in *so* much deeper than I was comfortable with.

Echo turned to face me again, still standing between my legs. I was too afraid of the desire I had to look at her, but after a minute of standing there she set her fingers beneath my chin, nudging it upward. "Genevieve?" she whispered, shifting her hand so her thumb ran soft along my jawline.

I met her eyes, studying the desperately curious spark in their pearly gray color. "Don't," I begged, afraid she was going to ask what all this meant. Even though I was getting tired of holding back, I didn't know what it all meant, and I couldn't handle her pushing it further. Not yet.

"I know, no questions," she said, dropping her hand from my face as if to reassure me that she wouldn't ask. "I just wanted to say thank you."

My gaze dropped to her laugh line, deep with satisfaction. I'd always had the subtle curiosity of what it would feel like to kiss that line. Now that I thought about it, if I didn't then I'd obsess about it like I would've over that freckle. So I leaned forward just enough to press my lips to the corner of her mouth. "You're welcome."

At the kiss her smile widened, her laugh line deepened, and it was so cute that she was so clearly trying to hold it back that I couldn't resist. I pecked the corner of her mouth again, and when her smile grew even more I couldn't keep my own lips from pulling into a fond grin. But the exchange made me shy – I'd *never* been that candidly affectionate with anyone. I didn't even know I was capable of it. And with an embarrassed laugh I dropped my head against her shoulder, so she couldn't see that I

was blushing.

Now that we'd had a moment to catch our bearings, I didn't want to think about what had to come next, or what Micah would say or do the next time I saw him, or how we'd take care of the raiders. Instead of pulling away to start solving problems, I nuzzled my face into the crook of Echo's neck, and while her arms wrapped around my shoulders I took in a deep breath of her scent, musty in her still rain-dampened clothing. I took in a deep breath of the comfort that she'd become – my own source of serenity, whether she knew it or not.

There is Calculation

Glory and Gore by Lorde

There is Calculation

Echo

It was hard to tell what time of morning it was with the shades of my room drawn, but even before my eyes cracked open I could tell it felt late. Usually Genevieve woke first, and got me up because she was ready to start working. Lifting my head, I glanced over at her on the couch. She was on her back with her hands folded behind her head, eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling.

"Been up long?" I asked, running a sleepy hand over my face.

She shifted, rolling onto her side while she answered, "Kind of."

"You didn't want to-" I paused to yawn, and pushed my arms above my head to stretch my limbs, "Wake me?"

I hadn't heard her get up, but a moment later she dropped onto the bed next to me, folding her arms beneath her head. "I don't want to leave the room."

It wasn't a specific response, but the reason was obvious. She didn't want to face Micah. I didn't really know what to tell her though – I was still reeling from the shock of it. "Admit it," I teased, for lack of a better response, "You just want to lie in bed with me all day."

Genevieve huffed with amusement, adjusting so her chin was resting on her arms, and she was staring at the headboard instead of at me. "That would be exactly what you're thinking about right now," she said sarcastically.

The corner of my mouth tugged into a smile, but I watched her carefully as I asked seriously, "Do you regret it?"

She drew in a loud breath, turning her head to look at me again, and then giving it a soft shake. "I'm just worried he won't forgive me for it."

There was a point when I didn't think Genevieve would ever forgive me, but she had, and her and Micah had a far closer history than we ever did. "He will," I told her surely. "Maybe it'll take some time, but he will."

She gave a grateful smile, and fell to watching me quietly for a couple silent minutes. During that silence she reached over to trace the corner of my mouth with the tip of her finger, where I knew I had that line. Something in her had changed yesterday. I couldn't say exactly what it was, or what it meant, but I felt it. Felt it in the way she'd kissed me. In the way she was looking at me now. It was like I'd pulled back a curtain. Like I'd pushed past one of her infinite layers, and it was an important one.

Not even that change I felt made me confident in my boundaries though. I could hold her when she wanted. I could touch her, and kiss her, and hug her, but always when she wanted. Almost always only when she instigated. I wanted to test those boundaries. To see if now I could treat her the way I'd always wanted. So I reached up to where her finger was still running over that line, and taking her hand in mine I brought it to my lips, placing a tender kiss against her knuckles. She just stared at me for a second afterward, blinking, eyes shifting between my own and my mouth. She didn't pull her hand away, but I wasn't sure if it was the barely visible smile on her mouth or the fear in her eyes that was a better indicator of what she was actually feeling.

"Was that too much?" I don't know exactly what I meant by that, but we both seemed to understand.

"Um…" she hummed unsurely, removing her hand from mine. "No." She reached out indecisively, as if she was going to replace it, but then she tucked it under her chin. She broke eye contact, clearly uncomfortable with her lack of confidence. "I don't know."

Whether she was okay with it or not, one thing was perfectly clear – we still weren't a couple – so I'd still have to be careful. Like always, I'd

still weren't a couple – so I'd still have to be careful. Like always, I'd probably have to analyze the mood and timing whenever I got the urge to act on my feelings. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she replied, and it caused me to squint at her curiously when she added, "It's not all because of you." That added to my growing list of questions, but the more affectionate she seemed to get the more I knew I couldn't ask. She met my gaze again, and gave a short sigh before pushing herself up onto her elbows. "You know what? It was fine."

"You sure?" I asked, holding back a happy smile in case she changed her mind.

But she nodded, "Yeah," and leaned over to peck me on the cheek. "Are you ready to get up now?"

"Not really," I mused, no longer holding back that grin, "I kind of like having you in my bed."

She chuckled, "And if I got out of your bed?"

"Then I'll still be lying here," I told her playfully, "I'll just be depressed and lonely."

"You poor thing," Genevieve laughed, making a sarcastically pouty face at me. "What if I promised to kiss you before we left the room?"

My eyebrows rose with intrigue. "I'm not above taking a bribe." I squinted at her with exaggerated suspicion, and then stuck out my hand. "Deal." But when she took it in her own to shake with me, I added with a smirk, "Seal it with a kiss?"

She yanked her hand away, her lips pulling into an entertained grin as she gave my shoulder a lighthearted push. "You're so obnoxious!"

She began to push herself off the bed, still giggling. I wanted to grab her and pull her back, to kiss her, but I couldn't. Not even when she was in as playful a mood as she seemed to be now, because I was too afraid of how she'd receive it, even if she'd been okay with me kissing her hand. So I sat up, and stretched my arms above my head again while she went

So I sat up, and stretched my arms above my head again while she went to strap her knife to her thigh.

"Do you want me to sit somewhere else?" I asked, slipping my feet into my boots. "If Micah's at breakfast."

Genevieve sat down on the couch with thoughtful slowness, and reached for her own boots to pull them on. "No," she answered eventually, "I don't want him to think I'm second-guessing myself."

I finished tying my laces, knowing she caught the surprise on my face. I would've thought she'd still want to ease him into it, not wanting him to see us together all the time like she had since he'd got here.

"You know I'm not, right?" she asked with genuine concern in her voice. "Second-guessing myself."

My eyes met hers, I took in the sincerity in them, and thinking about how she'd acted in her room yesterday, and how she was acting now, I couldn't keep myself from grinning like an infatuated idiot. "Yeah."

She observed the smile on my face, watching me instead of the laces that her hands continued to work on, and in response to it her lips curled. It was obvious she tried to stop the smile – she twitched the corners of her mouth down, and when that didn't help she licked her lips – but neither worked, so she set to focusing on her boots. I continued to gather my things, still more curious than I'd ever been. I wanted to ask her why she wasn't second-guessing herself, wanted to see if she'd finally tell me whether or not she had feelings for me, but she didn't like when I asked questions, and I didn't want to mess this up.

Genevieve finished getting ready before I did, and strode to the door to wait while I searched for a missing item. She stood by a minute before murmuring with a jesting tingle in her voice, "Any day now."

"I can't find my radio," I said, dropping down to look under the couch. Getting back up, I set my backpack on the bed to dig through it, but when my walkie-talkie wasn't inside I put it back over my shoulders.

"I guess you don't want that kiss," Genevieve speculated teasingly

"I guess you don't want that kiss," Genevieve speculated teasingly.

"I want it," I whined, hearing her chuckle in response, and dropped down onto my knees again to search under the bed. "But I can't find my handheld."

"Does it look anything like this?" she asked, and when I looked over she was holding one in her hand. I pushed myself to my feet while my eyes narrowed in a playful glare. It was mine, because there was a second one at her shoulder.

I strode over, laughing while I grabbed it from her, "I've never met a bigger tease in m-"

She cut me off with that kiss, taking my face in her hands to bring me closer. I would've gotten lost in it if she'd given me the time, but the moment I recovered from the surprise and set my hands against her lower back she stopped, shifting one arm so it was angled around my shoulders. "Couldn't resist," she giggled guiltily.

A pleasured shiver ran through me when I felt her gently finger the short hairs at the back of my neck. "I could get used to it," I breathed honestly, tilting my head forward, glad that she didn't pull away when I kissed her again.

"Breakfast?" she suggested cheerfully.

"Do we have to?" I groaned. I didn't want this to stop, and I knew she wouldn't do things like this once we left the room. I was shocked she was even doing it now. It was different. It was incredible.

"Yep," she said, giving my cheek an affectionate pat and then heading out the door.

I huffed with amusement and hurried to catch up with her, thinking that this playfulness was a much better kind of whiplash. She was connected to my side the whole walk there, and though I tried to bump her with my elbow a couple times, she seemed to have shifted out of her lighthearted mood. Nervous, that's what she was, and about seeing Micah, no doubt.

"You sure you don't want me to sit somewhere else?" I asked one more time as we neared the cafeteria entrance.

"Yeah," she answered as she reached for the door. "I want you to sit by me."

I couldn't help but watch her intently after she said that, and for a moment, we both just stared at each other. I don't know if she'd frozen for the same reason I did, but there was only one other time since we'd been reunited that she'd used 'want' and 'you' in the same sentence without a 'don't' in there somewhere. Only one other time she'd ever said she 'wanted' anything from me – I want you to stay. Now that word hung in the air, and maybe I was the only one who felt like it was significant, but I couldn't keep another stupid grin off my face.

One of Genevieve's eyebrows rose curiously, and I covered my mouth with my hand shyly, unable to stop smiling. "Sorry," I mumbled awkwardly.

She smiled, reaching up to pull my hand away. "It's just breakfast," she said delightedly, "Calm down."

"Okay, okay," I said with resolve, and flexed my jaw to work the smile away. I stared at Genevieve with intense focus for only a couple seconds before the grin returned, and my inability to control it caused me to snort with laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, giggling her confused amusement.

I felt like a five-year-old idiot, but asked, "Where do you want me to sit?"

"By me…" Genevieve answered hesitantly.

My cheeks hurt. "Say the whole thing."

Her face scrunched suspiciously, but she repeated unsurely, "I want you to sit by me?"

It was all I could do not to shriek. I clenched my fists at my sides to keep

from bouncing with giddy excitement. So stupid. I couldn't help it. "I want to hug you so hard right now."

"Is this like some grade school crush reaction?" she asked, lips curled in a smirk. "'Cause you're freaking me out."

She didn't wait for a response, and instead shook her head at me and opened the door to the building. I followed her to grab our food, and by the time we reached the table Blake and Casey were sitting at I'd managed to bring it under a little control. Until we sat down, and Genevieve plopped herself so close she was once again glued to my side. The grin returned, and my cheeks tinted with embarrassment because I just couldn't stop.

"Hey," Blake greeted with a nod, eyes lingering on me for moments longer than usual.

"Morning," Genevieve replied, ripping open her MRE package.

I could feel both Blake and Casey watching me while I opened my own meal, and it wasn't just them. Garcia and Jarvis were sitting here too, both staring at me curiously.

Blake cleared his throat exaggeratedly, causing both Genevieve and I to look at him. "Did you guys just knock boots or something?"

Genevieve hadn't even taken a bite or drink of anything and she choked, patting her chest to remedy it. "What?" she asked in shock.

Blake pointed at me. "I haven't seen a smile that big since… ever."

Genevieve pulled back a little to get a good look at me, and chuckled while she rolled her eyes and turned forward again. "I told her I wanted her to sit by me," she explained, clearly still entertained, "Apparently it's the highlight of her life."

Blake watched me for a second, huffed with amusement, and then full on laughed, "You're a dork."

I was in such a good mood that I set a piece of my cardboard-tasting

I was in such a good mood that I set a piece of my cardboard-tasting stuffing on my fork and pulled back, flinging it at him. He snickered when it hit him in the nose, and put a noodle on his own fork, sending it flying at me. I gasped like I was offended, and hastily stabbed at another bit of stuffing.

Before I could shoot it across the table Genevieve half-stood, stretching her arms out between us. "No wasting food during the apocalypse!"

She was completely serious, but Blake and I locked gazes, and his lips were pursed hard to hold back maniacal laughter. I couldn't control it as well as him, and once I snorted we both burst out laughing. It only took a few seconds before Casey's shoulders were shaking, then Garcia's and Jarvis'.

"Whatever," Genevieve laughed, dropping back down at my side.

While our laughter faded two people walked in the front door, and at seeing who it was mine died. It was Micah, walking in with Dr. Issa. Genevieve followed my line of focus, and when her amusement ceased our group gradually fell quiet, though everyone else seemed a little confused. They didn't know what happened yet, not even Blake, and I wasn't sure if the doctor was aware or not.

Nerves made it so that I wasn't smiling anymore. I wasn't worried about him trying to attack me again, I'd probably never be worried about it with how terrified he looked when Genevieve threatened him. Parts of me were afraid Genevieve would see him, and if he ignored us then she'd start to regret it, and this morning would never happen again. My fears hit a peak when after Micah and Samuel got some food they wandered over, sitting opposite Garcia and Jarvis, who were on the other side of Genevieve as me. Micah wouldn't so much as look at me, but hatred seemed to be only a small portion of the emotion behind it. Most of it appeared to be shame. He did look at Genevieve though, and while that shame remained one corner of his mouth twitched with a tentative *almost* smile.

"Good morning," Dr. Issa greeted uncomfortably, nodding toward everyone around the table. He knew.

Everyone murmured some awkward response, and things fell silent. The doctor's eyes shifted around, eventually looking from me to Micah, who still hadn't appeared to even know I was present. I was okay with that, and busied myself with shoving a bite of cornbread stuffing into my mouth. It didn't last though, because the doctor cleared his throat and nudged the teen, as if expecting something.

At the nudge Micah reluctantly turned his body in his seat, angling it my direction. It took him nearly a minute afterward to raise his eyes, and when they met mine there were distant. He clearly still didn't like me. "I'm sorry," he began flatly, "That I tried to shoot you." When everyone around the table heard it for the first time each of their heads turned toward him in shock. "It won't happen again." He looked at Samuel, who nodded his approval, and then added in a bitter murmur, "Just don't touch my sister."

"Micah," Samuel scolded quietly.

I felt all eyes fall on me, waiting to see how I'd respond. Nothing about his apology sounded sincere, nor would I have expected it to. It would've been unrealistic to think he'd like me overnight, especially since Genevieve had threatened him. But he wasn't a child, and I wasn't going to treat him like one. "If I do?" I asked seriously, though my tone was far from challenging. I genuinely wanted to hear his response, and I thought Genevieve needed to hear it too.

Every stare shifted back to Micah, who glanced around the table uncomfortably before looking at me again. "I don't want to see it," he said, and if I could read people at all there was an underlying desperation in his plea. "I don't want to hear about it."

He went back to focusing on his food without waiting for a reply. I kind of felt bad for the kid, and his request sounded fair to me. I was about to honor it right away by scooting an inch apart from Genevieve, hoping it would earn me a little bit of favor with him. Genevieve must've sensed it, because the moment I shifted to move her hand seized my thigh under the table, holding me in place. I was too afraid to look at her for fear that Micah might catch it, or think too much of it, and I didn't want to reach down to grab her hand because it would've been too obvious.

So I sat there, stiff with indecision, until Genevieve's grip loosened, and when she was confident I wouldn't scoot away she removed it completely. Once her hand had been replaced on the surface of the table I gave her the smallest of acknowledging bumps with my elbow. It was a grateful gesture for her wanting me to stay close, and I didn't expect anything in return, but when she returned the nudge I had to work extra hard to keep another of those uncontrollable smiles off my face.

The rest of breakfast passed in continued tension, and I couldn't say I was disappointed that it was shorter than usual and with less socializing. Unsure of what I wanted to do today, I followed Genevieve outside, thinking maybe I'd get to stay with her seeing as we'd been separated a lot lately. We didn't get very far before someone called her name, and when we turned Micah was pacing over, head drooped timidly. He didn't say anything right away when he reached us, and he was staring straight at the concrete beneath his sneakers.

"I was, um," he started quietly, glancing up for only a moment, "Wondering if we could, I don't know…" He looked up again, briefly over at me, and back at Genevieve. "Talk?"

When his focus acknowledged me once more, I got the message that he wanted Genevieve alone. She met my gaze unsurely, but I gave a forced smile and stepped aside so they could continue on without me. "I have my radio if you need me," I assured her.

They strode away from the cafeteria, leaving me behind to come up with something else to do. I was still watching them walk away when Tripton arrived. He stopped at my side, purposefully mirroring my stance as he followed my stare. Seeing as he hadn't said anything, I glanced sideways at him.

He did the same, whispering, "How long we got to check her out for?"

"Shut up," I laughed, giving him a friendly shove.

He shoved me back, hopping up to sit on the surface of a nearby table before I could retaliate. "Where they going?"

I sat down by his side, figuring he was putting off eating breakfast just to chat with me. "Beats me," I answered, reaching into a pocket of my cargo pants and pulling out my box of cigarettes. "Micah said he wanted to talk."

Tripton pulled one out of the box when I offered it to him, a leaned over to light it with the lighter I was holding. "I heard the kid tried to shoot you."

"Who told you that?" I asked, turning my head to raise a shocked eyebrow at him.

"I was in the med center when he came in, looking pasty as hell." He paused thoughtfully, and then chuckled to himself. "Stupid kid. I heard Samuel pry it out of him."

I took a breath of smoke into my lungs, letting it out while I replied, "What kind of upset was he?"

Tripton let his cigarette dangle on his lips while his hand scratched at the stubble on his face. "He looked like his sister almost cut his throat," he shrugged. "I think he was in shock or something." All I could do was nod, not really sure what to say about it. "So, what, did you know Gen was going to show up?" I shook my head. "And you didn't kick his ass because…? We both know you could've."

"And risk her getting pissed at me?" I asked rhetorically. "She comes up with enough excuses already."

"Seriously?" Tripton blinked at me, wide-eyed. My shoulders rose and fell. "You care way too much what that girl thinks of you."

"That's what happens," I began, but stopped short with a sigh, unwilling to finish.

"When you fall in love?" Tripton supplied. "Is that what you were going to say?" Then he snorted amusedly. "'Cause that's the corniest shit I ever heard in my life."

"That's not what I was going to say, you dick," I grumbled, punching him

in the shoulder. I took a final puff of my cigarette and then tossed it to the cement. "I was going to say, that's what happens when you got shit to bury."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Because you used to be a raider?"

"Some people might tell you I'll always be a raider," I told him.

"Which people?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, "People."

"Are you projecting?" he speculated, to which my eyebrows furrowed with surprised thoughtfulness. "Huh?" he prompted, nudging me impatiently. "Do *you* think you'll always be a raider?"

When it took me a moment to answer he leaned forward to get in my line of sight, like I'd forgotten he was waiting. "I don't know," I groaned. "But that's why I need her." He knew I was talking about Genevieve, and his head cocked for explanation. "When she loves me, *that's* how I'll know. That's when it's safe to be who I used to be, before all this bullshit."

"Tell you what, Echo," Tripton mused, leaning back on his hands, "There isn't a soul left on this planet that hasn't done questionable things." He nudged me again, this time more gently, and with a smirk on his face added, "Even precious Genevieve."

"Trust me," I huffed with amusement, "I definitely haven't tricked myself into thinking she's perfect."

"Nope," he chuckled in agreement. "I'll tell you what else," he said, "I would never work that hard for a girl. No way."

"Oh yeah?" I asked teasingly. "I bet girls just fall into your lap."

"Damn straight," he gave a hard nod, and then motioned to himself cockily. "I mean, look at me."

I couldn't help laughing as I rolled my eyes. "Okay, hot shot."

He snickered for a few seconds before saying, "No, I'm just messing with you." He kicked his feet out, his long legs reaching the ground. "I was engaged."

"What?" My head swung toward him in shock.

"Yeah," he assured me, looking slightly entertained by my disbelief. "There was only a few months left until the wedding when shit hit the fan."

"Wow," I muttered, still thrown, "I never would've…"

"I don't look like the marrying type?" he asked through a smug grin.

"It's not that," I told him seriously, worried it might offend him even though he was always so lighthearted. "It's just, most people, you can see it on their faces, you know? No matter how long it's been."

"Well," he sighed, pulling his feet back up to rest them on the bench below us, "That's a thing I learned a long time ago. You let this world get the best of you and it'll eat you alive. You just got to remember that life's a gift, especially now, I'm not going to waste it sulking over things that are done." I could feel him glance over at me, so even though I was staring across the street I nodded in response. "I mean, don't get me wrong," he continued, "I had a proper grieving period. Sometimes I miss her, but life goes on, and so do we."

"I'm sorry you lost her," I said sincerely.

He pursed his lips in a grateful smile, but changed the subject with a loud groan, patting his stomach. "I'm starving."

"Go eat," I chuckled, hopping off the table so I wouldn't keep him here any longer. "Have you seen Imogen anywhere?"

He shook his head while he got to his feet. "No, sorry."

"It's okay," I started off, waving at him over my shoulder. "I'll see you later."

Unsure of whether or not Genevieve was still with Micah, I figured I'd see if I could find Imogen. She hadn't wanted to talk to me yesterday, she was too upset, but I wanted her to know that I was here for her. I just wasn't sure whether or not she blamed me too.

I trekked all the way to the motor pool to see if she was working in the garage with Ty. Ty was there, busying himself making fuel. The only acknowledgment he gave me was a solemn nod. When I asked him if Imogen was around he didn't even look at me while he answered, telling me that she was probably still in her room. So I trudged back to the barracks, into the second building and down the first floor hall to her room.

My knock was so light and timid I wasn't positive she'd hear it even if she were inside, but a couple seconds later the door opened. Her full lips were set in a consistent frown, and while there was no hint of moisture or teary redness in her eyes, her eyebrows were pulled together with a lasting cringe. After answering the door she watched me for a few moments, and I almost was afraid that she blamed me. But eventually, gradually, she swung it wider open to let me in.

I only took a couple steps into her room while she closed the door behind me. Silence lingered before I asked gently, "How are you?"

She shrugged, answering in a barely audible murmur, "Been better."

To offer my sympathy I moved forward, raising my hands to her waist, prompting her for a hug. It took a second for her to accept it, but then her arms wrapped around my neck, and I returned it by curling my own around her torso. "I'm sorry," I said in a whisper.

Imogen drew in a long, deep breath, as though she needed it to keep from breaking down. Releasing me she started for the bed, saying as she sat down on the foot, "It's not *your* fault."

I dropped my backpack near the door and followed her, absorbing her words while I settled myself at her side. Her voice was hollow with grief, but it sounded like there was someone she did blame, and I was afraid of who that might be. "Imogen," I began cautiously, my tone soft and quiet

Who that might be." "Imogen," I began cautiously, my tone soft and quiet, "Genevieve told-"

"Don't," Imogen interrupted, letting out a heavy sigh as she dropped onto her back. I twisted enough so I could still see her, enough to catch the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "There's a big part of me that wants to blame her," she said, sniffling and crossing her arms above her head, "But I know it's wrong, and I'm trying so hard not to."

I wanted to lie down too, so Imogen would know that I felt bad, but I couldn't. There was no way she was thinking of sleeping with me right now, I knew that, but it still felt too intimate. Instead, I settled for resting a hand on her knee.

"I know how determined Cyrus was," Imogen continued, bringing a hand down to her temple, wiping away a tear that escaped from the side of her eye. "I know it, I'm just not ready to hear it."

My chin dropped with a gentle nod, and I let it go. "Do you need anything from me?" I asked, leaning sideways back on one hand, my other still on her knee.

She shook her head, sniffling away the last of her tears and giving me a half-hearted smile. "I just appreciate that you came."

"Of course," I acknowledged, lifting my hand to give her leg a friendly pat.

While I tried to come up with something else to say, there was a crackle from my radio near the door, and then a voice prompted, "Genevieve. Come in Genevieve, over."

"Sorry," I apologized to Imogen for the interruption, and stood to go turn the radio off.

As I strode over Genevieve's voice replied, "I got my ears on. Go ahead."

I reached down to turn it off right as a soldier said, "Ma'am, we got people at the gate." I straightened with the radio in my hand, turning to look at Imogen, who'd sat up curiously.

"Hold tight," Genevieve said, "I'm on my way." After the soldier said 'roger' I heard, "Echo, do you copy?"

"Heard it all," I answered into my handheld. "Be right there." Then I turned to Imogen. "Coming? I know you want to see."

She let out an amused breath, and after pushing herself to her feet she inhaled deep, preparing to leave the room. We left the barracks, and since they were so near the gate we got there before Genevieve did. 'People' was a bit of an understatement. Parked outside our fences were two massive tanks and a truck, and there were so many people that a lot of them were perched on the outsides of the vehicles. While more and more of our civilians gathered around to look at the arrivals, I scanned each and every one of them.

Almost all of them were wearing military clothing of varied colors, all except for one. He was a tall, thin man with long, messy auburn hair and pallid looking skin. He was in faded jeans and baggy long-sleeved shirt. He was standing at the entrance of our gates beside two others, a man and a woman. It appeared they were the leaders of the group. The other man was enormous, with a tattoo on his bald head and facial hair that matched the other man's. The woman was in similar dark blue camouflage cargos as the second man, and as her dark eyes studied everything on our side of the fence they met mine, and I shivered.

A hand landed on my shoulder, breaking my stare with the woman. "Hey," Genevieve greeted with a smile, and she guardedly passed one to Imogen on my other side. She nodded for us to follow, and as we strode to the gate Blake reached us. "You got ammunition in those tanks?" was the first thing Genevieve called to the group on the other side, as she pointed to the long cannons directed toward our fence.

The bald man in his uniform pants and black t-shirt shook his head. "Just in the machine guns up top," he answered readily.

Genevieve raised one hand to casually grip the links in the fence, and she was doing such a good job of remaining calm that she even had me convinced. "You mind pointing them somewhere else?" The man didn't hesitate to let out a loud whistle and wave his hand through the air, and

hesitate to let out a loud whistle and wave his hand through the air, and in response the cannons and gunners on the tanks adjusted the sights away from base. "What can we do for you?"

"Can I talk to your leader?" he asked.

"That's me," Genevieve told him. I almost missed the amused twitch of his mouth, but the scrawny man beside him let out a fiendish giggle. The bald guy nudged him hard with an elbow.

"Good then," the man said with a grin. "My voice might carry easy, but you think we could talk face to face?"

Genevieve took in a thoughtful breath, glancing over at Blake and I. "I can let two of you in."

"With all due respect," the man appealed, "There's Ferals out here."

"With all due respect," Genevieve copied firmly, "You've lasted this long."

This time the twitch of the man's mouth curled into an actual smile. He turned to say something to the lanky guy, who gave a series of sloppy nods, and then motioned for the woman to follow him. They walked up to the first entrance gate, and after closing it behind them they strode through the second one. On the inside they made their way to the four of us, and the man stuck out his hand.

"Jed," he introduced himself happily.

He shook down the line as each of us said our names, but when he took my hand his gaze dropped. I was in a long-sleeved shirt, but the sleeves were pushed up to my elbows, and his brown eyes lingered on the tattoo on my wrist. For some reason it made me severely uncomfortable, and I didn't want him looking at it. But it was difficult to yank my hand from his excessively firm grip, like he was doing it on purpose, and as I awkwardly rolled my sleeves back down I caught a smirk on his lips. By the time I shook hands with the woman – she introduced herself in a British accent as Mia – my sleeve was down and the tattoo was hidden.

"Quite the security you've got here," Jed mused, taking an indicative

"Quite the security you've got here," Jed mused, taking an indicative glance around.

"We do what we can," Genevieve told him, and I saw her gaze wander to all the civilians that were standing around. "What are you doing in this part of Pennsylvania?"

"Well, we've been going around the country," Jed answered with a nonchalant shrug, "Doing what we can to get rid of Ferals."

At that I squinted curiously, another subtle alarm going off in the back of my mind. I'd almost forgotten the church with all those Ferals locked in, and the SOS written in the tower. I leaned in to Genevieve's ear, feeling Jed and Mia's scrutiny on me as I whispered, "Remember the ghost town?"

Genevieve's head turned just enough for her to look at me. She stared for a thoughtful moment and then swallowed hard, shuffling a foot with the first sign of anxiousness. "What do you mean getting rid of Ferals?"

Mia met my gaze again. Her eyes were unnaturally cold, but there was so much consideration in them. She didn't flinch when I caught her looking, she just kept on staring, and it had been a long time since I felt unnerved like this.

"I mean with firepower," Jed answered simply.

"Mhm," Genevieve hummed in concentration. It took her almost a minute to speak again, as though she was afraid to hear his response. "You ever use humans as bait?"

Jed didn't miss a beat. His eyebrows rose in shock, and he asked innocently, "Excuse me?" He chuckled, setting his hands on his hips and leaning back like he wasn't sure whether to be offended or amused. "That's a hell of an accusation."

"Sure is," Genevieve told him flatly, watching carefully for his reaction.

Imogen made a loud show of clearing her throat, shooting a look at Genevieve that clearly said we weren't being courteous enough. At least

Imogen was exchanging her usual routine of challenging Genevieve openly for passive aggression. Still, I could practically feel Genevieve bite back the urge to roll her eyes.

"I assure you," Jed said enthusiastically, "No humans were harmed in the making of our destruction." It was the first time I caught anything similar to entertainment in Mia's dark expression.

Genevieve glanced around at the civilians and soldiers again. Some of them were close enough to overhear this conversation, and she clearly wasn't comfortable with that. "What brings you to our gates?"

"We're running low on supplies," he began, and the astute distrust I already had for them caused my hand to brush against the grip of the pistol at my thigh. "I was hoping you might provide a place for us to rest a while. Until we can gather our strength and head out again."

"Think we could talk about it somewhere more private?" Genevieve asked, motioning to a nearby building because she wanted to be away from the prying eyes and ears of everyone else.

"I'd prefer to stay where my men can see me," Jed answered calmly.

"Right," Genevieve murmured, gaze wandering beyond the fence. "And how many men is that?"

Jed followed her focus to his tanks, and truck, and troops. I doubted if any of them were truly former military. "Seventeen of us total." He motioned to everyone else standing around. "We're far out numbered. I'm putting a lot of trust in you here."

"Give us a minute?" Genevieve asked, and when Jed nodded she began to lead us away.

We walked far enough that Jed and Mia could no longer hear us, but April, Casey, and Dr. Issa had accompanied us. Not to mention that random others were standing nearby, close enough to hear but acting like they weren't listening. We probably would've gone inside so nobody could hear if any of us were comfortable taking our eyes off the

newcomers. I, for one, didn't want them out of sight.

"I don't like it," I said instantly.

Imogen scoffed with disbelief. "We barely met the man."

"Exactly," I argued, "Everything about him screams raider."

"Like what?" April asked, looking over her glasses at me.

Genevieve mumbled in agreement, "His face."

"Nice, real sound argument," Imogen said sarcastically.

"The one outside has a bite scar on his neck," Samuel mused thoughtfully. All our heads turned toward him, and when Blake asked how he knew he held up a pair of binoculars. April took them from his hand, and while she used them to see for herself, Samuel shrugged and gave the excuse of, "I'm a scientist. I get curious."

"He does have a scar," April said almost happily.

"If he's survived a bite," Dr. Issa explained, "He might be our only chance at finding a cure."

"Genevieve," I pleaded when she let out a burdened sigh. There was nothing about this that I was comfortable with.

She massaged her fingers over her forehead like she always did when she was stressed, and I could tell that the crowd around us was getting tighter as civilians and soldiers got more and more curious. "There's just something about him," Genevieve whispered.

"What if they could earn their way in?" Imogen proposed. I shook my head, Genevieve looked reluctant, but everyone else seemed interested. "We got a raider problem, and they might have the man power and the gun power to take care of it."

"I don't know if it's worth the risk," Genevieve said quietly.

"Yeah?" Imogen asked angrily, and loudly. "How many more have to die before it is?"

A steady, quiet rumble went through the crowd of civilians, and I knew the information was spreading. I could also see a lot of them were nodding, as if they agreed with Imogen, and my heart sank. Imogen had just put Genevieve in a compromising position, and I knew already what the outcome would be.

"She's got a point…" Dr. Issa speculated, and April gave a slightly apologetic nod of agreement.

Genevieve looked at Casey, who mumbled, "I don't see why not."

"Blake?" she asked.

Blake looked at me, and when I shook my head at him he threw his hands up with indecision. "I don't know."

Genevieve folded her hands behind her head and paced a few steps back and forth. "Dammit," she sighed, dropping her arms to her sides. Without saying anything else to the rest of us, she paced back to Jed and Mia, while we followed hot on her heels. "We have a proposition for you."

"Let's hear it," Jed suggested earnestly.

"There are some raiders a couple miles that way," she told him, pointing, "They've been giving us trouble. If you can take care of it, we'll open the gates for you."

"How many raiders?" Jed asked.

"Handful."

"Sounds easy enough," he nodded, appearing to have little concern about it.

"Good," Genevieve said. "If you make it back, and you're expecting meals, all your men have to earn that too. Everyone works."

"Wouldn't want to be a burden," he consented.

"Proof," I grumbled, and when Genevieve hummed at me curiously I clarified, "We need proof that they took care of the raiders."

"What kind of proof?" Jed asked smugly.

Genevieve's lips pursed thoughtfully. "Oh, one of them was wearing a black and red vest. Leather. Bring it back."

"I'll do my best," he pledged, sticking out a hand for Genevieve to shake. After she did he extended it to me with a teasing sparkle in his eyes. He was taunting me, but I refused to shake with him again, and he withdrew his hand with an amused huff. "We'll be back."

We watched them exit the gate, and continued to stand there watching until the tanks and truck pulled away. Once they were gone Genevieve turned, and I caught the glare she gave Imogen as she started to walk away.

"Genevieve," I called, hurrying after her. I wanted her to take it back and not let them in. She didn't acknowledge me, but I knew she heard, because she immediately veered toward the nearest building, the small office where we'd set up the ham radio. "Genevieve," I prompted again, the worry clear in my voice, thinking she was trying to ignore me. I followed her into the building, past the two soldiers manning the radio, and into a small office. "Genevieve, you have to trust me on this," I pleaded as she closed the door behind us. "You know how I said I could spot the look from a mile away? He has the look. All of them do. Please trust me."

"Stop," she said gently, taking my face in her hands to make sure she had my attention. "I do trust you."

My eyebrows rose with surprise. "You do?" She nodded. "You can't let them in."

"I don't have a choice, Echo," she sighed, removing her hands. She dropped her backpack, strode over to the desk, and sat down on the

edge of it. "Everyone heard what Imogen suggested. You saw them, they liked her idea." She braced her hands against the corners, meeting my eyes for a moment before shaking her head. "I might be commander, but it'll only stay that way if people trust my decisions. They're not going to trust anything I do when they think there's a better alternative. And if I get booted then nothing I say matters."

I let my own backpack fall and trudged to the cushioned chair on the opposite side of the desk, mumbling as I settled into it, "It's the wrong choice."

"Maybe," she agreed, turning to face me. "But they weren't really hostile. Maybe we're overreacting. Maybe we're already bitter, cynical old women." I laughed for few seconds before blowing defeated air out the side of my lips. "Me and you will keep an eye on them, okay? We'll deal with it, just like we always have."

I nodded because it was the only thing left to do, but I couldn't keep from noticing how she kept saying 'we'. While it didn't bring one of those uncontrollable smiles back, it did lift my mood. "Come here?"

"Where?" Genevieve asked in confusion. I patted the desk in front of my seat, and she squinted at me suspiciously. "Why?"

"Just, please?" I patted it again, this time giving her a pleadingly cheeky grin.

She slid off her seat and moved around the desk to my side, but before she could hop up to sit down again I grabbed her hips and pulled her into my lap. It was a risk, considering I still wasn't sure if I was allowed to do things like this, but if I didn't try then I'd never find out.

She let herself fall into me, but her eyes were wide with surprise and there was a disbelieving smirk on her face. "That was ballsy," she chuckled.

I had one arm around her back, sitting on the armrest of the chair, and watching for her reaction I stretched my other across her lap, timidly setting my hand on her thigh. "But was it a mistake?"

Genevieve kicked her legs over the other armrest while one of her hands set on my chest. We'd kissed so many times, but the way she was looking at me caused my heart to skip so hard I was sure she could feel it through my shirt. Then she leaned her head forward, and my eyes drooped closed dazedly when she planted a long, delicate peck on my mouth.

"You tell me," she whispered after pulling away.

It took me another few seconds to open my eyes again, and when I did the pleased curve at one corner of her mouth caused my cheeks to tint. "Who *are* you?" I asked in an awed laugh. "It's like I don't even know you anymore."

Her forehead creased with bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"You're so different," I answered cautiously, hoping it wouldn't change her mood, "Since yesterday."

She lifted herself a couple inches out of my lap, a teasing smile on her face. "You want me to stop?"

"No!" I blurted hastily, pulling her back down. The reaction made my cheeks color an even darker shade of red, but I added decidedly, "God, no." She laughed at the same time her hand wrapped around the back of my neck, so that when she pulled me into another kiss I could feel her smile against my lips. She paused for a breath, her forehead still resting against mine, and it was the perfect opportunity for me to beg sincerely, "Please don't ever stop."

Her dark brown eyes met mine, and for a moment she stared at me, drinking in the desperate look in my eyes. Tilting her chin forward, I felt her lips brush mine, and it sent a bolt of excited anticipation straight through my chest. When she did it again I parted my lips, silently pleading with her to finish it, but enjoying the delicious agony of the wait too much to finish it myself. The next time her lips glanced mine she paused, I could feel them thin into another smile, and then we collided.

The release of tension caused me to draw in an astonished breath, and the heat that flooded every cell of my body made my fingers clamp down on her thigh. Her free hand joined the other around the back of my neck, and she pulled herself deeper into me at the same time her tongue made its first stroke against mine. I encouraged the silky feel of it by digging the fingers of my other hand into her back, pressing her even closer.

The hand on her leg shifted upward, running along the shape of her thigh, knowing by memory just when it would curve into her hip. But when I reached it I didn't want to stop, so I slipped my thumb under the bottom of her shirt, testing her reaction. When I felt her fingers curl at the back of my neck in approval I slid the rest of my hand in, setting my palm against the smooth warmth of her stomach. Her breathing picked up immediately, and she had to pull away from the kiss to be able to get air. I immediately lowered my mouth to her neck, and her chin fell back with eager acceptance.

My fingers traced up her stomach, feeling the way it expanded and collapsed with each breath. As it ran back down I thrust my tongue against her neck, causing her to inhale sharply and hold. She didn't let that air out again until I planted a soft kiss in the same spot, and it escaped in a vigorous rush. I kept going, kissing higher on her neck while my fingers continued to explore her torso. I worked my mouth up to the spot just below her ear, where I got even more of a reaction as her fingers tangled in my hair. Liking the response I got, I parted my lips a little more with the next peck, letting my tongue slip out to graze that spot before they touched down. When she felt it, Genevieve, who was always so quiet at times like this, let out a breathy hum so stirring it sent jolts of excitement shooting through me.

My mouth wasn't leaving that spot. Her fingers clutched more desperately with every kiss I landed, and she was so distracted by it that I don't think she noticed my hand shifting further up her shirt. Not until I reached her chest, and with my first gentle pinch over the fabric of her bra she let out low moan. She immediately threw her hand over her mouth, and I couldn't help but release a quiet laugh into her skin. To suppress another she pulled back, only to lurch forward again and kiss me. But I wanted more of that noise, it was so rare, and there was only one way I could

think to get it if she was so determined not to.

My hand left her breast, trailing back down while her lips and tongue drifted against mine. When I reached her hips again it shifted inward, gradually until I reached the button of her jeans. I gripped it between my fingers, ready to give it the brief flick it required to undo. But the moment I had it Genevieve's hand shot down, she grabbed mine to stop me and pulled away from the kiss.

At first I worried she'd be upset I tried – all these months anger was the emotion I knew best in her – but when I met her gaze she winced. "Sorry," she apologized sincerely.

I took my hand away, wondering if it was just too fast. She'd always been the one to touch me; I'd hardly touched her at all before this. Just that once in the cabin, but so much felt different now. "You're not ready?" I guessed understandingly.

"No, it's just," she paused, her cheeks shading a dark crimson while she raised herself out of my lap, "Not *here*." She moved back to the desk, perching herself on the edge of it. "And it's not a good time, while we're waiting. We shouldn't have even…" She took in a deep breath, refusing to look at me and saying as she let it out, "Wow."

"Wow?" I repeated curiously, pushing out of my seat. "Good wow?" Genevieve chuckled, rolling her eyes as an answer while I set my hands against the desk on either side of her, pushing myself between her legs. "I told you I was good with my hands."

"It was more your," she stopped to clear her throat, and pointed a finger toward my face, "Your mouth."

"Oh right," I said knowingly, ducking my head to say near her ear, "Because I found your sweet spot."

I heard her breath hitch when I pressed my lips below her ear, but she'd already told me this wasn't the right time or place, so one kiss was all I gave. Her mouth was hanging open a little when I looked at her again, and after a few moments she let out an embarrassed laugh, rubbing her

hands over her face to work away what I liked to assume was arousal.

"My sweet spot," Genevieve copied, raising a hand to touch her fingers to the place beneath her ear. She must've still been able to feel it, because as a slow smile turned up her lips she shook with a pleased shiver. "I know yours," she mused, dropping her hand to run a finger along the zipper of my cargo pants.

"That's for damn sure," I laughed in agreement.

I loved how adorable it was when that made her blush again. I loved the way she was acting, and the things she was letting me do. What I didn't love was that it didn't feel concrete. No matter how nice she was being, or how much she let me kiss her or touch her, we weren't together. Which meant at any moment if she decided to, she could tell me this wasn't real. I needed so badly to hear her say how she felt. I needed to be told. There could've been a million reasons why she wouldn't say it. Maybe she truly didn't feel anything for me. Maybe she didn't want to say it until she knew for sure. Maybe she wouldn't say it because deep down there was a part of her that still blamed me for her dad. Whatever it was, I couldn't ask. It was the one rule that I knew was implicit in her being so affectionate.

"What are you thinking about?" Genevieve asked, leaning back on her hands.

I took a step back and dropped into the cushioned chair, letting my arms dangle over the armrests while I shifted my thoughts somewhere else. "I just hope letting those people in doesn't go horribly wrong."

"We outnumber them. We've got everything in the armory," she paused to point to the key hanging around her neck, "And there's only one way to get in it."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe it's a good thing it's happening this way," I mused with a shrug. "They have tanks, and God knows how much ammunition. I don't know what they would've done if we turned them away. This way we can play it smart."

"Guess we aren't cynics after all," Genevieve chuckled.

I hummed a soft laugh, nodding. "So… what did Micah want to talk about?"

"He apologized," she said in disbelief, like she was still surprised about it.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, adding sarcastically, "Did it sound like he meant it?"

Genevieve knew exactly what I was referring to. "More than when he apologized to you." She chewed the inside of her lip thoughtfully for a minute before speaking again. "I don't know. He basically said he wants to spend time with me, but he just doesn't want to hear about…" she paused, glancing away uncomfortably, "Us."

I could tell she was expecting me to ask about 'us', and I knew then she'd tell me not to ask questions. Instead, I teasingly groaned as though I'd said it a million times and was tired of having to say it again, "But there *is no us*."

Genevieve grabbed a paperclip off the desk and chucked it at me, laughing, "You're *such* a smartass."

There was a knock from the door, and Blake's voice prompted, "Gen?"

"Yeah, we're in here," she confirmed, still chuckling, and turned on the desk to look toward the entrance.

"You have your clothes on?" asked his muffled voice.

"Blake," Genevieve scolded, but while her voice sounded anything but amused, she had a poorly concealed smile, "Open the door." He opened it, snickering to himself while he leaned against the doorframe. "What's up?"

"I was just wondering where you guys went," he answered simply.

"Is everyone still lingering out there?" I asked, nodding toward the outside world.

Blake shook his head. "I had some of the guys break them up. Everyone's back to business as usual."

"Thank you," Genevieve told him gratefully, to which he nodded. "Should we wait outside?"

When Blake and I nodded the three of us trudged outside, and plopped down on the curb to wait and see if the group ever returned. It didn't take nearly as long as I thought before we could hear the rumble of tanks down the road. We'd only been sitting outside another hour until Jed and his group pulled up to the gates. He jumped out of a tank, and made his way through the fences with a black vest in his hands.

"This the one you wanted?" he asked Genevieve, unfolding it so she could see the whole thing. When she nodded he slung it over his shoulder, "Mind if I keep it?"

"That's fine," she answered, and waved to the soldiers guarding the gates, "Open them up!" While the tanks and truck rolled through and into the base, Genevieve's eyes scanned over the men and women perched on the outsides of the vehicles. "Anyone get hurt?"

"Nope." Jed shook his head, and I wondered how they'd managed to take care of the raiders without any injuries. No doubt those machine guns played a part. "Where should we park these?"

"Me and Echo will take you to where you guys can stay," Genevieve told him, nodding toward his vehicles, "If you got the room."

"Sure," he motioned for us to follow, and led the way to the truck. Opening the passenger door, he barked harshly to the two passengers, "Get out."

"I'll sit in the back," I told him before the second person could climb out of the cab. I wanted a clear visual of the men around us, a visual I wouldn't have from inside the truck.

He moved a few feet to the bed, and scowled at the nearest guy, "You heard her. Out!"

The man groaned, but Jed ignored it, saying as he started back to a tank, "We'll follow you."

Genevieve got into the cab while I climbed into the bed. There were three other guys sitting around the perimeter of the truck bed, pushed to the edges to avoid the large cage in the center. It took me a minute into the drive to even realize there was something in the cage because it was so still. It was a large dog – an emaciated, wolf-looking thing, curled up into a ball at the very middle of the crate. At first glance it appeared to be sleeping, but when I looked closer I could see that its eyes were open. It was looking right at me, its nostrils twitching in the subtlest way like it was observing that I was a new scent.

"Hey there," I said softly, extending the back of my hand to the cage so it could get a better smell.

The moment I made a reach the previously languid animal sprang, snarling with its teeth bared, prepared to take a chunk out of me if I put my hand through the wires.

"Shut up!" one of the men shouted, ruthlessly kicking the heel of his foot into the side of the enclosure. The dog's ears fell flat against its head as it dropped obediently, and just over the sound of the truck's engine I could hear it continue to let out a throaty growl. The others had taken to laughing at the panic on my face, and when the man looked at me he smirked. "You trying to lose some fingers, lady?"

One corner of my mouth twitched with a forced smile, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the dog. Poor thing looked like it was starving, and I was almost positive the only reason it would've taken some of my fingers is because of the way these assholes treated it. It didn't appear to trust people, and the almost human sadness I could so clearly see in its golden eyes broke my heart.

We stopped in front of our destination a minute later – an old indoor shopping center, with just a small department store and a few other tiny shops. After the truck parked Genevieve got out, and I hopped down from the bed and followed her to Jed

the bed and followed her to Jed.

"We've scavenged a lot of the useful stuff already," Genevieve told him, "But if you find anything you want in there you can have it." Then she pointed to the smaller building right beside the mall. "Might be more comfortable to sleep in there. It's got more rooms if your people like to spread out."

"You're too kind," Jed grinned.

His tone was patronizing, but Genevieve did a good job of ignoring it. The only hint of a reaction I saw was the barest clenching of her jaw. "You can take the day, get your people settled," she said flatly, and I could detect in her tone that she was ready to be away from here. "Tomorrow morning meet us at the gate, and we'll get everyone jobs to earn their meals."

He nodded understandingly. "We do appreciate it." Genevieve turned to head away, and I began to follow, more unnerved now than I had been when they first arrived. As we left I heard Jed yell at his followers, "Unload your shit! Let's go!"

I turned for only a moment to watch, to see his people work in response. A few seconds after I turned I caught Jed's gaze. He was leaned back against the side of the truck bed, admiring the black and red vest he'd taken from the raider. But even from this distance I could tell he'd caught me looking, and his eyes lingered on me with fascination. Gradually a smug smirk spread behind his auburn facial hair, and one of his eyes dropped in a chillingly sinister wink.

Peace of Mind

**** You all officially have permission to kick my ass cuz I know this took forever. Instead of giving you excuses I'll just say here, have some chapters :) lol.*

Also, for those of you who aren't on Tumblr. I was talking to a friend about an AU for this story where the outbreak never happened. And basically I couldn't stop thinking about it and so I wrote some connected one shots for Gen and Hayden where they get to be normal high schoolers and go on real dates. So I'll post those on fictionpress as a separate story if you're interested.

Fortune Soul by Blackmill

Peace of Mind

Dugan

I woke up coughing. Deep, guttural hacks so loud and phlegmy that it scared Mal out of sleep. She bolted upright on the hospital bed, her arm shooting toward the bow she'd stored on a bedside table while she kicked her legs over the side. It wasn't the first time I'd woken up coughing, and seeing her instincts kick in like that so successfully even after the four or five times previous was admittedly amusing.

I chuckled my cough away, watching her shoulders slump as she took in a deep breath to calm herself down. "Sorry," I apologized sincerely, clearing my throat.

Mal nodded, pulling the navy blue bandana off her head to run a hand first through her short, dark brown hair, and then down over her tired eyes. Kara had been up keeping watch, and I'd taken the shift before that so Mal could get some sleep. It was as though now that she wasn't alone, all the sleep she hadn't been getting because of her fear of the stalker Ferals had caught up with her. Her brown eyes had grown darker by the baggy circles beneath them. The lines from those circles

descended to the top of her freckled cheeks, making them look sunken and thin. She looked years older, making me feel guilty I'd ever considered leaving her behind.

While Mal tossed a greeting smile over at Kara she untied the bandana, and then reapplied it to her head, tying it at the back. It plastered the bangs of her short hair to her forehead, and if her hair weren't a little curly it probably would've pushed the tips into her eyes.

"You should probably take some of those antibiotics," Mal told me, brushing aside one especially long bit of bangs. "Just in case."

I nodded, immediately reaching for the backpack of medicine to show her how much I valued her advice. Maybe she only knew how to cure me because she used to be some kind of couch potato, and maybe it was risky. But she'd saved my life. I wasn't going to forget that.

"You sleep okay?" I asked, dumping a pill into my hand and washing it down with some water.

Mal hopped off the tall bed, saying teasingly, "When I wasn't being scared shitless."

"Payback for stabbing me with a needle," I chuckled, lying back down on my own bed. I could breathe again, but my ribs were still cracked, and my chest a little sore.

There was a shuffling around, and I heard Kara hum an affirmative to some unspoken question. A moment later Mal prompted lightheartedly, "Hey, asshole." Knowing she was talking to me, I lifted my head up. She was holding a bag of meat she'd pulled from her backpack. "You hungry?"

"You can call me Dugan, you know," I told her with feigned offence, but smiled gratefully when she tossed me the food.

Instead of responding she simply smirked, taking another bag from her pack. "This is the last of it. I'm going to have to hunt soon."

"Do you use the bow?" Kara asked through a full mouth, throwing in

"Do you use the bow?" Kara asked through a full mouth, throwing in some more meat before she'd even swallowed her last bite.

"To hunt?" Mal clarified, and closed the top of her leather backpack. Kara nodded. "Yeah."

Kara's eyes lit up, darting over to the weapon. "Can you show me?"

Mal checked her large wristwatch, prompting me to glance at my own. The sun was just going down, so we'd still have to wait an hour or two before leaving the hospital. "You know what, I'll teach you right now."

That was enough to make Kara forget all about the food. She tossed it aside and jumped up happily. There might even be something *I* could learn simply by watching, so I sat all the way up and leaned back against the wall behind the bed to observe.

Mal led Kara to the end of the long hallway with her bow and arrows. "Alright, first thing is you take an arrow. See this notch at the end here?" I couldn't see from the distance I was at, but Kara leaned in a little closer, nodding. "This is a compound bow, so you line up the last bowstring with this notch. This is the grip, right here," Mal held up her arm to show where she was holding it, "Hold it firm. Aim. Release."

Kara grinned eagerly as Mal handed her the bow, but Mal told her to wait a second and jogged down to the opposite end of the hall. There, she flipped the mattress off a hospital bed, setting it against the wall as a target.

"Try to hit that," Mal said, jogging back to Kara's side. Kara raised the bow and pulled back on the string. "Wait, keep your elbow high," Mal instructed, nudging up the elbow of Kara's string arm. "Look through the sight, accuracy is more important than speed."

Kara took in a visibly deep breath, squinting one eye to peer through the sight. As she let that breath out she released the string, and the arrow went flying down the hall, hitting the mattress so hard it struck through to the wall behind it.

"Nice!" Mal praised, but she squinted thoughtfully, turning to look around

"Nice!" Mal praised, but she squinted thoughtfully, turning to look around the area.

She hurried to a cabinet, and searched around a few moments before taking out a bottle of iodine. Next she felt around the counters, eventually settling on a tongue depressor. Carrying the two items to the mattress, she used the depressor as a paintbrush, and smeared the iodine onto the mattress in the shape of a large target.

"See if you can get the target," Mal said, once more posted at Kara's side. Kara raised the bow and aimed, once more releasing an arrow down the hall. It didn't strike the center of the circle, but it landed well within its diameter. "Look at you!" Mal exclaimed through an impressed laugh. "You're a natural! We'll get you better practice when we can go hunting."

"Cool," Kara grinned, handing the weapon back to its owner. "Who taught you?"

"I taught myself, after the outbreak," Mal answered. She put the bow onto the nearest bed, and then strode down the hall to retrieve the arrows stuck in the mattress. "I've found guns over the years, but I prefer silent weapons."

"You don't happen to have any of those guns stashed somewhere, do you?" I asked hopefully. While Mal was clearly an expert with her bow, I would've felt a lot more comfortable continuing toward Pittsburgh with another firearm.

"Sorry," Mal said. When she reached her backpack again she took off her jean jacket, stuffing it into the bag so she was in a dark gray t-shirt. "You're not the only survivors I've met."

My eyebrows converged with surprise. "You gave them away?"

"I've got what I need." She nodded toward the bow indicatively while hopping onto a bed, and pulled her knees up to her chest as she shrugged. "Figured others should have the same."

For a few moments I kind of just stared at her, in shock that she didn't

For a few moments I kind of just stared at her, in shock that she didn't even say she'd traded the weapons. Rather, she'd given them freely, simply because people needed them. The survivor in me wanted to call that crazy. Weapons were one of the most valuable things left in the world. But at the same time it spoke to the man in me. To the father, and the husband. To the human being. It spoke to a part of me that wanted to call it beautiful.

Not sure what to say, all I had to offer was a small smile. Mal seemed to catch my train of thought, because she mirrored the smile awkwardly and fell onto her back, folding her hands behind her head. "Wake me up when it's time to continue your suicide mission."

I glanced over at Kara, who was beaming at me, appearing beyond fascinated by our new companion. I held back a laugh, but gave her a brief wink to let her know that I liked Mal too. We hung around the emergency wing for a couple hours, staying quiet enough that Mal could get a little more sleep. When the time came to leave, Kara nudged her awake, and after we'd gathered our things we started for the entrance of the hospital.

It had felt like so long since I'd been able to breathe properly that finally being outside was quite literally a breath of fresh air. The weather was getting warm enough that it wasn't cold, but there was a slight breeze that carried to my nose the scent of the trees surrounding town. It caused me to take in as much air as I could with each inhale, cherishing every full expansion of my lungs.

It was the first time in a long time that I felt hopeful. Not since rescuing Namiko and Wolf had I felt this comfortable. Even though they were gone now, things were almost back to normal. I was nearly healthy, Kara seemed happier, and with Mal around it didn't seem like we'd have to worry so much about being stalked by a Feral. All that was lacking were reliable weapons – something we might actually need to find before getting any nearer to Jed's destination.

The trek back to the Hummer was simple, if quiet, and it was right where we left it, looking completely untouched. The walk was so carefree, in fact, that when the vehicle came into sight Mal asked, "That the golden

chariot?"

"Yup," Kara answered, lips pulled into a proud smile.

Mal nudged Kara with her elbow, practically shoving the bow into her hands. "Hold this." Kara took the weapon, glancing from it to Mal in confusion. Mal smirked. "Shotgun." And took off running for the Hummer.

"Cheater!" Kara laughed, instantly taking off as fast as she could, trying to beat Mal to the car.

Mal already had too much of a head start, and her legs were longer seeing as she was a good five inches taller than Kara. She got to the passenger side first, plastering herself against the door so no matter how hard Kara tried she couldn't reach the handle. Both of them were laughing, trying to wrestle each other away from the door when I reached them. I wasn't so old that I'd forgotten the rules of shotgun, so I strode to the driver's side and unlocked the car. Mal turned rapidly, grabbing the handle while blocking Kara with her hips.

Kara gave up, still giggling when she gave Mal a playful push. "I wanted to stretch my legs out anyway."

I waited for Mal to climb into the front and Kara in the back, and then started up the engine so we could get on our way. Mal didn't even wait for me to put it in drive before she started digging through the compartments. First she flipped on the overhead light so she could see, and then opened the center console, digging a hand through it. Not finding what she was after she popped open the glove compartment, while Kara leaned forward curiously to see what she was after.

"Ah ha!" Mal's hand clamped down on something in the glove box, and a moment later she pulled it out with a small CD carrier. "You ever seen one of these?" she asked Kara, flipping through to choose one.

"Yeah," Kara laughed, rolling her eyes, "I know what a CD is."

"Just checking, Sporty Spice." She threw up her hands in surrender, but then squinted thoughtfully. "Or was it Baby Spice?" She glanced back at

Kara. "Shit I can't remember."

"What are you talking about?" Kara asked, and through the rearview mirror I could see her face was scrunched with confusion, successfully making me laugh.

"Here we go." Mal removed a CD, clicking off the overhead light because she'd found what she needed, and shoved it into the car stereo.

I waited for the first song to come through the speakers, interested in whether or not I'd recognize it. "Lynyrd Skynyrd," I identified readily.

Mal snapped her fingers at me, praising, "Good ear." Then she pointed backwards at Kara. "Pay attention, Sporty. You're about to get an important lesson in culture. Or… history…"

However, both Mal and I turned around in complete shock when Kara sang right along with the first lines. She looked at the two of us, hazel eyes darting back and forth. "Free bird," she stated, sounding completely baffled as to why we were looking at her like this.

"How old are you?" Mal inquired in astonishment.

I turned back around to keep watching the road while Kara answered unconfidently, "Fifteen."

Mal turned sideways in her seat to face me and ask sarcastically, "Where did you find this kid?"

"She's an old soul," I offered, passing Kara an amused smile through the rearview mirror. "How do you know about them?" I asked curiously, seeing as Mal was nearly twenty years my junior. She was really a lot closer to Kara's age than mine.

"Um, 'cause I wasn't born in a cave," Mal chuckled. "And there was this channel on TV that used to play a bunch of filmed concerts from old bands. I liked to be well rounded, so I watched them every once in a while."

"Uh huh," I mumbled. A moment later I huffed with amusement, and Mal squinted at me suspiciously. "Did you seriously watch *that* much TV?"

Mal laughed. "Name a good show, I've probably seen every season."

"I would test you on that," I joked, a somewhat reminiscent tone in my voice, "But all I really know are kid's shows. My daughter always had control of the remote."

Mal was quiet for a moment – a stealthy glance sideways let me see her sympathetic smile – but she replied lightheartedly, "Cartoons are amongst those seasons."

That made me laugh, and I shook my head at her. "You lived at home?" I guessed, to which she nodded. "If I was your parent I probably wouldn't have let you watch that much TV."

"Ah," Mal nodded again, casually pointing at me, "But that would've meant you were around."

"What did your parents do?" I asked. "For a living."

"To be honest I don't really know." Mal shrugged, kicking her boots up against the dashboard. "My dad did something confusing with money, which he made a butt-load of, so they were always off on vacations without me."

"What about when you were a kid?"

"Nannies," she answered simply.

"No siblings?"

"Nope." Mal looked over at me when I let out a sympathetic sigh. No wonder she'd been so comfortable being alone all these years. She'd been doing it her whole life, and probably would've continued if it weren't for the stalker Ferals.

"How come you never," I began to ask, reaching for the map on the dashboard so I could make sure we were heading the right direction

dashboard so I could make sure we were heading the right direction, "Moved into the college dorms or anything? To be around people your age."

"Well first of all," she said, clicking on the overhead light again and holding a hand out for the map, offering to give me directions. "Voluntarily sharing personal space with someone else sounds like a nightmare. Second, crime rates on college campuses were a lot higher than you might think." She paused to study the map for a moment, and then folded it up. "You're going the right way. And third, I wanted to stick it to the man."

"The man being…" I started thoughtfully. "Your parents?"

She hummed the affirmative. "Mooching seemed like the easiest way to do that. I added a year for every interesting vacation they took without me. I was up to living with them until age thirty-two."

"Fair enough," I laughed, more entertained than I'd like to admit. "So you literally just watched TV all day?"

"No," she answered, jutting her chin at me like that was the dumbest question she'd ever heard. "I tested out junk food recipes. Read shit loads of fanfiction. Played video games with or without my ex-boyfriend, or my internet friends. Oh, and did homework, of course."

Noticing that we hadn't heard a peep from Kara, I glanced backward to find that she'd fallen asleep. She was sprawled out across the back seat, one arm across her stomach while the other dangled over to the floor.

"What's fanfiction?"

"Seriously?" Mal choked in disbelief. "You're joking, right?" I shook my head. "Okay, say you're watching a show, and you want character A to get with character B, but they're really with character C."

"Okay," I consented, following the explanation so far.

"Chances are there's a writer out there who wants A to get with B too," she continued. "So they'll write their own story about it."

she continued, "So they'll write their own story about it."

"I see," I said, chuckling and trying not to let Mal see that I might've thought she was a little crazy. "It's always about romance, then?"

"Not always," she answered, shaking her head, "But the best ones were."

I nodded understandingly, and we both fell quiet for a while, just listening to the music. The headlights were bright, illuminating the stretch of highway a good distance ahead of us. Every once in a while I had to maneuver around a dead vehicle on the road. It kept me from driving as fast as I'd have liked, especially because we were only a night's drive from Pittsburgh, but it was better to be safe than to crash our fastest mode of transportation.

Eventually Mal rolled down the window, taking in a deep breath of fresh air and letting it out in a sigh. "It feels good to be going somewhere." After a moment she huffed amusedly. "It would feel better if we weren't chasing raiders."

"We're close," I informed her. "I'm hoping we'll make it in time."

"To warn the people there?" she clarified, and while I hummed in confirmation she glanced over her shoulder at a sleeping Kara. "Can I ask you a serious question?"

"Sure."

"Why are you taking her there?" She looked at Kara again, and then at me, one corner of her mouth turned down with concern. "If these raiders are as dangerous as you say, why aren't you heading the opposite direction?"

My eyes wandered out the windshield, and I stared at the road ahead of us for a minute in thought. "After they attacked us, killed our friend," I began to explain, "Kara was angry. To be honest, I was angry too. They took Kara's dog." I took a slow gander in Mal's direction and shrugged. "I guess, besides wanting to take out that anger on the people who deserved it, I wanted to get the dog back. I'd never seen her so happy as when he was around, you know?" Mal nodded, leaning back sideways to

When he was around, you know?" Mal nodded, leaning back sideways to rest an elbow out the open window.

"Now…" I mumbled, attempting to collect my thoughts before saying them out loud. "Well, you've been alone a long time, right?" She gave a soft 'mhm.' "But you've still managed to do some good, like giving away weapons you didn't need." She hummed once more, listening intently. "I was alone for a long time too. It was always about survival, and when I found Kara it became about protecting her. But I need to prove to her, to myself, that I'm still capable of doing the right thing, even when it's hard or risky."

"Meaning," she stated perceptively. "You want to give her purpose."

"I'm not going to be around forever," I agreed. "I don't want her living the kind of empty life I had been for the last six years. If we make it in time, and there's people there," I paused, stealing a look at the teen sleeping in the back seat. "She could be a part of something real. Maybe even something important."

"Huh," Mal breathed, leaning the seat back and kicking her feet further up the dashboard. "You're less of an asshole than I gave you credit for."

"Thanks?" I laughed.

Out the corner of my eye I could see the smirk on her face as she folded her arms across her chest and settled deeper into the seat. "Let's just try not to get killed."

I readily agreed to that, and then went silent again to let her doze off. It was only a few minutes she got to rest before a deafening screeching sound started from the engine. It was so loud and unexpected that both Mal and Kara shot up, looking terrified and confused. Hell, even *I* jumped in my seat.

"What *is* that?" Kara groaned against the noise, throwing her hands over her ears.

A glimpse at the dials on the dashboard let me know the engine was overheating. Something was seriously wrong with the car.

overheating. Something was seriously wrong with the car.

"Pull over, turn it off," Mal instructed hastily. "Before we attract every Feral in the area."

Just as I began to slow enough to put the Hummer in park there was a loud pop, a thud against the underside of the hood, and the screeching suddenly stopped. It wouldn't have mattered if I slowed down more, because after that the car cruised to a halt. I shut the engine down and turned off the lights so we wouldn't attract any more attention. Then we waited, silent and listening.

For minutes we sat there, nothing but the screaming buzz of cicadas meeting our ears. When it felt safe all three of us got out of the car, and both Mal and I unclipped the hood while Kara stepped onto a front tire so she could hold a flashlight for us. I leaned over the engine, peering down and trying to discern through the dark shadows of the insufficient light what the problem was.

"Over here," I motioned to Kara, and she adjusted the beam so it was pointing where I wanted it.

"Oh," Mal mumbled, moving to my side to get a better look. "The V belt." I furrowed my eyebrows at her, wondering if she'd learned that on TV too. She knew exactly what the look meant, because she shrugged nonchalantly, "My ex was a mechanic."

The old engine belt was completely shredded, stuck in the gears and impossible to repair without a replacement. There was nothing we could do for it. And we were *so* close to Pittsburgh. I let out a sigh and trudged a few feet away from the vehicle. My arms went up so I could fold my hands behind my head while I tried to think of a solution, but stretching like that hurt my still healing ribs, and they dropped back down.

"Without a new part we're going to have to walk," I grumbled, striding back over to close the hood, and then resting my arms over it.

"That sucks," Mal griped. "You know how long it'd been since I'd heard music?"

Noticing how dark it'd grown, I peered around to look for the light, seeing that Kara had wandered a short distance down the road. "Hey," I called worriedly, "Stay close."

"Look," she said, ignoring me to shine the beam at something on the roadside. It was so dark that I had to walk closer just to see what it was, and Mal followed at my side. "A mailbox."

I went to the start of the dirt road beside the mailbox, squinting to try and get a glimpse of what was at the end. Even with the aid of Kara's flashlight, the house was too far to see.

"If there's a house," Kara suggested, "Maybe there's a car with the spare part you need?"

"It's worth checking out," I consented, giving her a praising pat on the shoulder.

We made a hasty trip back to the Hummer to grab our backpacks and weapons, and then started down the long driveway. While Kara and I were equipped with our gardening tools and flashlights, Mal had her bow gripped casually in one hand, an arrow pulled out and gripped in the other, ready to aim if need be. There was a bow light attached to her weapon, but for now she was marching along by the beams of mine and Kara's.

The road on either side was lined by sparse forest, and so narrow that we couldn't tell how close we were to the end until we come upon it. It was an old two-story farmhouse, eerily pale against the dark night all except for the windows. The windows appeared boarded up, allowing no light into or out of the home. Adjacent to that was a small barn, or a large garage. Though it was impossible to tell which from the outside, there was an old truck on cinder blocks sitting right outside the structure.

"Keep your bow ready," I told Mal.

Now she clicked on the small light attached to the weapon, and fitted the arrow onto the string, keeping it loose but prepared in her hands. Her and Kara followed me beyond the gravel driveway, and through the

overgrown lawn to the truck outside the barn. Mal leaned back against the bumper to watch our surroundings, and Kara held her flashlight at the vehicle while I popped the hood. I lifted the hood with the arm of my good side, taking a hopeful peek inside. I immediately let out a disappointed breath. There was nothing underneath the hood but the ground below, not even an engine.

"Should we check the barn?" Kara whispered.

I was in the process of nodding when the forest around us went quiet. The sound of the cicadas and the soft breeze in the trees had become background noise, completely unheeded until it all stopped, the hush falling around us like a heavy blanket. Its absence was louder.

"That's never a good sign." Mal raised her bow, directing the beam of her light around our immediate surroundings. There was nothing but darkness. "Watch my back, I'll go into the barn first."

Kara and I gripped our garden tools tight, staying right on Mal's heels as we crept to the entrance of the barn. The hinges squealed into the silent night when Mal pushed aside the large sliding door with her boot, and she froze at the opening, prepared to release an arrow if anything came rushing out at her. Moments ticked by before she took her first step into the barn. We followed, tense with preparedness to strike at anything and everything.

Mal moved swiftly around the perimeter of the inside, going around until she reached us back at the entrance. "Looks clear."

I smiled gratefully, my lips curling even more now that I could address the good news. Parked right at the center of the barn were two large trucks, both a lot newer than the old one outside from the seventies. I scurried to the closest one, motioning for Kara to direct her light while I opened the cab to pop the hood. Closing the door of the truck, I moved back around to the front and pushed up the hood, letting out a relieved breath at the full engine on the inside.

"This is the part we need," I told Kara, pointing to the rubber belt, trying to teach her in case it ever came in handy in the future. "We got to find

teach her in case it ever came in handy in the future. "We got to find where to loosen the tension, so we can take it off." She watched my finger as I traced the belt, eventually reaching the alternator. "This bolt here," I indicated, and then sighed, "And we need a wrench."

Mal still had her bow ready, keeping watch while Kara and I worked. Kara turned, moving her flashlight around the inside of the barn, eventually stopping on a toolbox on the ground just inside the door. She accompanied me over to it, providing light while I knelt down to search through it for the correct tool. I was digging through the disorganized box as quietly as I could when Kara jumped back, taking a terrified, sharp breath loud enough that it scared me into falling over.

"What?" I asked in a panic, scrambling to my feet while Mal hurried over, bowstring flexed with an arrow.

"There was a face," Kara whispered rapidly. "Outside the door. Something was watching us."

I squinted outside, trying to catch a glimpse of who or what Kara had seen, but the figure must've run off.

"Dugan," Mal prompted impatiently.

"I'm on it," I said, kneeling down and rushing through the toolbox, not caring so much how noisy it was because we'd already been spotted.

Finally finding a wrench, I stood and paced back to the truck, immediately putting it to the bolt. Mal stood near the door, tensely keeping watch while Kara held the light for me at my side. I almost had the bolt loose enough when there was a soft creak from the small loft on the opposite end of the barn. Mal swiveled away from the door, shining her beam upward toward the source. But there was nothing visible.

"Hurry," Kara murmured next to me, tearing my focus from the loft.

"Are you robbing us?" asked a deep, southern voice from the entrance of the barn. It scared me so bad that I dropped the wrench as we all pivoted back toward the door.

"Drop it," Mal commanded, aiming her bow at the old man armed with a shotgun.

"You're on my property," the man responded gruffly, squinting through the light Mal was shining at his face. "I'm going to ask again: Are you robbing us?"

"We didn't know anyone was here," I said, my voice placating as I held up my empty hands and took a step forward.

"You stop right there," the man growled.

"Look, we don't want any trouble." I froze compliantly, but when there was another creak from the loft behind us I turned, trying to see if he had someone else posted there, another weapon aimed at us. "Our car broke down, we needed a part."

The man's eyebrows furrowed. "We use that truck."

This time a soft scrape came from the loft above, like the delicate dragging of a foot across the wood. "Who's 'we'?" I asked cautiously, stealing another glance at the loft. "Is there someone up there?"

"There's no one up there," he answered. All the denial did was send chills down my spine. "I got family in the house."

"Alright," I began soothingly, pointing at the second vehicle. "Do you use that truck?" The man shook his head, glaring at me suspiciously. "Would you let us take a part from it."

"I might need the part." His eyes shifted between the three of us for a moment before he lowered his gun just slightly, still skeptical. In response Mal loosened the tension on her bow, and when he saw that he gradually removed his aim, until both of them had lowered their weapons. "I might trade."

"We don't…" I said haltingly, simultaneously wracking my brain for useful items, "We don't have anything to trade."

The man was silent for a minute, mouth twitching thoughtfully behind his long white beard. "We had a smokehouse, it burned down last week," he informed us, leaning the shotgun over his shoulder. "My son's leg is broken, and I got a bad back. Only half a day's work building a new one. You do that, I'll let you take whatever part you need."

Building something meant working by daylight, which required staying the night here. An extra day doing labor for a car part was nothing compared to the extra days it would take to walk the rest of the way to Pittsburgh.

"You don't get Ferals around here?" I asked him.

It was subtle, but I could've sworn his eyes flickered momentarily toward the loft. "It's safe enough."

The man seemed decently friendly, but I was still in no shape to be building anything. Mal appeared to be thinking the same thing, because after looking over at me she agreed. "I'll do it."

"I can help," Kara volunteered.

The man's chin dropped with satisfaction. "I'm Joseph." We all introduced ourselves. "Come on," he said, waving for us to follow as he turned to head back outside. "Ya'll can sleep in the house tonight." It almost seemed too easy.

"Stay alert," I mouthed silently to Mal, and then looked at Kara to see if she'd caught it. Both of them nodded.

Before I left the barn after the others I took one last look up into the loft, even though I didn't have my flashlight on. Something wasn't sitting well with me, but I just couldn't put a cause to that fleeting sense of paranoia, so I shook it off and went with the others into the house.

The front door of the home opened to a kitchen, and though it appeared every window of the house was blacked out, the kitchen was the only room with any light in it. A few lit candles sat on different surfaces, illuminating a younger, middle-aged man at the table in the center. When we came in he stood, casting a quizzical look at Joseph while reaching

for the crutches leaned against the table.

"They're going to fix the smokehouse," Joseph told him, closing the door behind us and securing it with a thick plank of wood after he'd twisted the deadbolt into place.

"I'm Junior." The man hobbled over on the crutches, avoiding touching his injured foot, wrapped in a makeshift splint, to the ground. He offered his hand to each of us. "The help is appreciated."

"Labor ain't free," Joseph grumbled.

Junior sighed, appearing to catch an undertone of blame in his father's remark. "I didn't break my foot on purpose, Pop."

Joseph waved him off while he made his way to a chair, and when someone else appeared in the doorway to the kitchen he motioned toward the newcomer. "My grandson, Matthew."

The boy looked about Kara's age, and I nearly rolled my eyes when as his gaze landed on her his mouth simultaneously curled into a grin. "Hi," he beamed. He set down the candle he'd been holding and paced over, going straight past Mal to shake Kara's hand. "I'm Matt." Mal didn't care to hold back a chuckle when Kara introduced herself, clearly put off by the boy's fervor.

"Matthew," Joseph prompted while the teen shook hands with Mal and I. "Take them upstairs, show them to a room."

"Follow me," Matt said, waving for us to go with him. "Why are you guys out here?" he asked as he led the way, glancing back to direct his question at Kara. "Been a long time since anybody's passed through seeing as we're off the road a bit."

There was a pause, and then Kara answered, "Our car broke down."

Matt mouthed 'oh' in understanding, asking enthusiastically while he continued sideways up the stairs, "You folks headed anywhere particular?"

This time Kara looked at me hesitantly, though it didn't appear she was seeking permission to tell him. There was a clear distrust in her eyes. "Not really," she told him. "How come *you* haven't rebuilt the smokehouse?" I'd almost forgotten how good Kara's instincts were.

Matt watched Kara's face for a short-lived moment, and then he finally looked at Mal and I before saying, "I got other chores to tend to."

Directly after that he fired off another trivial question, and then another, bombarding Kara with inquiries until we reached the room he was taking us to. I couldn't blame him entirely for his excitement. Kara likely wasn't just the only girl he'd seen in a long time, or if ever since the outbreak, but probably the only other person his own age.

"Here we are." He stopped at the door, patting a shy hand against the doorframe.

All three of us told him 'thanks,' and after responding with a small smile he disappeared from the door. With the candlelight retreating down the hall, the room grew dark enough that we had to pull out our flashlights. There was a single bed at the far end of the room, and the only other piece of furniture on the old wood floors was a vanity dresser, with a tarnished mirror and a cushioned seat. The window behind the bed was boarded up, but not as thoroughly as the ones downstairs, so there were slats between boards through which the outside world was visible.

"Dibs," Kara called, purposefully pushing Mal's arm to put her off balance while she rushed over to the bed, jumping onto it with such zeal she bounced a couple times.

She'd plopped onto her back with the lower half of her legs hanging off the side, but Mal dropped all her own stuff to the floor. It was clearly to tease Kara that she strode over to the bed, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "This looks comfy."

Without another word she hopped sideways, landing perpendicular over Kara's torso. Kara let out an audible 'oomph,' but Mal unconcernedly folded her hands behind her head, and kicked one foot over the other.

"Yep," she sighed with exaggerated joy, "Real comfy."

"Ugh," Kara groaned, clearly trying to hold back a laugh as she shoved against Mal, "You weigh a ton." Mal wiggled, causing Kara to cough at the weight over her stomach.

Matt reappeared in the doorway, illuminating the room again and with a blanket under his other arm. "Here, Kara, I brought this for you." He held out the blanket, so unsubtle that I nearly snorted.

Kara reached out from under Mal, indicating that she couldn't really get up to grab it from him. "Thanks," she forced out, waving instead as she gave up trying to get out from Mal's weight.

"I'll take it," I told Matt.

He handed me the blanket, and stood at the door for a hesitating moment as though he wanted to say more. He must not have been able to think of anything, because he gave shy smile. "Goodnight."

When his light disappeared down the hall once more, Mal pointed out teasingly, "I think he likes you, Sporty."

Kara grunted giving Mal another useless push, and then scoffed in response, "That's awkward."

I dropped the blanket onto the foot of the bed, and then sat down at the vanity seat while Mal chuckled, "If I was you I'd be jumping at the chance to get some smooching in while I could. He's okay looking."

"Ew." Kara gave up trying to shove Mal off of her, and tossed her arms out to either side in defeat. "No thank you."

"We need to feed you more," Mal mused, finally getting off Kara, feigning back pain while she adjusted to lay down at Kara's side, copying her position. "You're bony." After she'd gotten comfortable, kicking her own long legs off the side of the bed, she returned to their conversation. "You know, I've thought about kissing girls before. Never *actually* considered it, but I thought about it."

It took Kara a few seconds to catch on to what Mal was implying. "No, you nerd," she snorted, "I don't want to kiss girls either." Mal's stomach shook with amused laughter. "I don't want to kiss anybody." I couldn't help chuckling at their conversation, but when neither Mal nor I said anything in response Kara lifted her head, glancing between us. "Is that weird?" she asked self-consciously.

I was glad Mal was around, because I wouldn't have known how to address the topic of boys, or girls, or anything like that without making Kara feel uncomfortable. I'd been dreading those types of conversations with my own daughter, and it seemed to feel more natural coming from someone closer to Kara's age.

"Nah," Mal said nonchalantly, "It's overrated anyway."

Kara hummed in acknowledgement, and I sat there with my flashlight pointed at them while they both quietly stared up at the ceiling. Eventually Kara asked, "Who's keeping first watch?"

Mal sat up to look at me. "Seriously?" I nodded. "You're worried about a teenager, an old guy, and a dude with a broken foot?"

"There's something about this place," Kara put in before I could answer, pushing herself up too.

"Agreed," I said, but Mal still looked skeptical. "We might be in the middle of nowhere, but Ferals could be anywhere. You don't think they seem a little too comfortable?"

"I mean, I guess," Mal mumbled unsurely.

"You know what happened last time we met people," Kara told her knowingly. "And the guy before that?" She paused, waiting for Mal's eyebrows to rise curiously. "He was a cannibal. And the people before that? More raiders."

Mal's face scrunched with disbelief. "You guys are bad luck." All Kara and I could do was shrug. "I guess I can do first watch. I'm caught up on sleep."

"I'm not tired either," Kara said.

I sighed. "Me either."

All of our shoulders fell, already completely bored. We'd been so close to getting to Pittsburgh, and now we were stuck here.

"You know," Kara said quietly, her eyes wandering toward the door suspiciously. "The face I saw in the barn, before Joseph came…" I nodded her on, and Mal was listening intently. "It wasn't any of them."

"What do you mean?" Mal asked, and as a tension fell over us she glanced at the door too.

"I mean it wasn't Joseph, or Junior, or Matt." Kara's hands twisted uncomfortably in her lap. "It looked Feral."

"A stalker?" I murmured, leaning forward with interest. Kara shrugged, but it wasn't uncertainty. It was reluctant concurrence, and I just couldn't help but groan at the fact that we couldn't catch a break. "Alright, tomorrow we'll fix the smokehouse, get the part we need, and then we'll get the hell out of here."

At least we were all caught up on sleep. After everything we'd been through, I doubted if I could've even shut my eyes with all the doubts now floating around my mind.

Still Unseen

The Tide Pulls From The Moon by William Fitzsimmons

Still Unseen

Echo

"They're coming," I said, tapping Genevieve's arm with the back of my hand, and straightened up from leaning back against the gate.

Genevieve had been absentmindedly staring up at the clouds, but when I nudged her she stiffened. Jed and his crew were approaching the main gate, where we'd told them to meet us for their job assignments. Part of me hadn't expected them to show up. I'd hardly slept last night – worried we'd find out just what Jed truly wanted before morning even came. Worried he already had some plan for taking over, or stealing everything we had, or just killing all of us. We'd survived the night, but I still didn't trust him.

"Morning," Genevieve greeted indifferently when they reached us. She didn't trust him either.

Jed simply nodded. He looked fresh, and alert. His brown eyes were as sharp as they had been yesterday, but I couldn't say the same for some of his followers. A few of them looked exhausted, the rest almost as tired. I counted bodies, finding there were only twelve of the seventeen present.

"Where's the rest?" I asked Jed, deliberately tilting my chin toward the group behind him.

He turned to follow my gaze, and after he'd looked back at me his eyes dropped momentarily to my wrist. I crossed my arms over my chest to hide the tattoo from view. It was already too hot for a long-sleeved shirt again, or else I'd have cloaked the damn mark for good. "Keeping an eye on things," he answered.

Genevieve met my eyes, and even though it appeared she understood my reservations, she avoided addressing it. "There's two options for everyone," she told him. "You can assign or let them pick for themselves." Jed nodded again, waiting to hear the options. "We need another hunting party – meat is always scarce – and we could use some help with farming. Hunting party can bring anything back to the cafeteria. Farmers can go with Conrad." She pointed at a large man waiting nearby to take some workers to the fields.

"Okay," Jed replied casually.

It looked like he was about to turn and start instructing people on where to go, but before he could get a word out Genevieve said, "You and him." She pointed to Jed, and then to the tall, lanky man with the bite mark on his neck. "You can come with me and Echo first."

Jed's eyes moved between Genevieve and I, and then to his companion before asking, "What for?"

"One of our doctors wants to talk to you," I said.

Jed let out a knowing and reluctant sigh, but motioned for the man to step forward. "Murph." Murph shuffled to Jed's side, and then Jed looked at Mia. "Make sure they do what they're supposed to."

Mia nodded, and Genevieve began to lead the way to the medical complex. I trudged along at her side, Jed and Murph silent on our heels. Dr. Issa wanted to examine the bite scar, and find out if it really was from a Feral. If so, he was hoping he could take some blood samples to start finding out more about the parasite.

As we walked I took a stealthy glance backward, uncomfortable with having either of them behind me. When I did I caught Jed's focus locked on my wrist again. It was hard to read what he was thinking about it. His eyebrows weren't tensed with thought, and he wasn't squinting for a better look or trying to get a better angle. He was sort of just lazily looking at it, with a blank curiosity in the absent curve of his lips. It wasn't until he saw he'd been caught that his mouth twitched, holding back a smile.

Every time he smirked it made my blood freeze, and if it was possible at the same time boil. Like my body couldn't decide between a fight or flight response to the threat I instinctively knew he was. When we reached the urgent care I held the door open for Genevieve, and then Murph.

Jed was heading in last, and as he passed me I murmured in irritation, "You know what it is. You can stop staring at it."

He hesitated for a moment in the doorway, looking down at me with an amused glimmer in his eyes. He leaned over just enough so he could whisper and no one else would hear, "You shouldn't be so ashamed of it," and then he continued in.

I let the door swing shut behind me, following him inside with a glare. Casey was sitting in the cushioned chair behind the reception desk, while Samuel leaned his elbows against the front and Micah was perched on the surface of the desk. Since Micah was around I stayed standing on the outskirts of the group, but Genevieve continued around to the other side, ruffling the teen's hair and sitting down next to him.

Jed and Murph strode all the way to the counter, but Jed's head turned back, taking note of my distance. He glanced around curiously, no doubt catching the subtle glare Micah was tossing my direction. This time his eyebrows did furrow with concentration, as he took in Micah, and then me, and then Genevieve. I didn't like how observant he was, even if he didn't exactly know what the situation was. I didn't like that he was watching.

"I'm Samuel Issa," the doctor interrupted Jed's focus, sticking out a hand to the newcomer.

Jed shook with him, saying his own name and then pointing to the tall man. "My brother, Murph." I was surprised to hear the relation, and I could tell Genevieve was too, because I caught the glance she gave me from across the room. Jed then put on a charming smile, extending his hand to Casey.

"Casey," she introduced herself.

Micah did the same when he was greeted.

Not a moment later April came shuffling out of the small office behind the desk. "Casey," she was saying, holding a small bottle in her hands, "I found the vitamins." She looked up from the bottle, appearing surprised at all the people standing around. "Oh, hello," she said to Jed and Murph, handing the bottle to Casey. "I'm April."

Jed repeated his introductions, but all the while he'd been focusing on the pills given to Casey. "You're pregnant?" he asked with enthusiastic curiosity. Casey couldn't keep from beaming, and nodded. "Congratulations. Who's the lucky guy?"

Every word out of Jed's mouth irked me. I didn't want him knowing anything about anyone. Didn't want him finding weakness, or attachments, or leverage. Didn't want him gaining an edge over anyone he could hurt. "We're here for a reason," I interrupted pointedly, and hoping Casey wouldn't take offense, I added, "Sorry."

"Some other time, then," Jed told Casey, passing me a perceptive smirk.

"Right to it," Dr. Issa mused, taking a bold step forward so he could get a close look at the scar on Murph's neck.

It put him only inches away, and Murph instantly began leaning back while his hand went to a pocket of his jeans, like he was reaching for a weapon. My own hand immediately brushed the grip of my pistol, but Jed must've seen it too, or knew it was coming, because he subtly pushed Murph's hand away from the pocket.

"I wanted to ask you guys about this," Samuel continued, straightening away from Murph, completely unaware of the exchange I'd witnessed. It seemed I was the only one in the room who'd caught it. "Was it a Feral bite?"

Jed's voice dropped in pitch as he said deliberately, "We don't talk about that."

"Right," Samuel murmured, put off by his tone. "It's just, you see, we're

trying to develop a cure. If he survived a bite, then he could be the only one that-"

"Does he look like he survived the bite!" Jed asked fiercely, and I watched Murph's hand go toward his pocket again.

Everyone was still for a few moments, most of us startled at Jed's loss of temper, but then April stammered in disbelief, "He… he's infected?"

Jed's jaw clenched, and after shooting a ferocious stare at Genevieve he glared at me, clearly not happy about the position we'd put him in. If they wanted to stay, we wanted answers, and he knew it.

"All I know is he hasn't been the same since," Jed answered lowly.

"How so?" Dr. Issa asked, and he pulled a pad of paper and a pencil from his pocket. But Jed just stared a defiantly cold, angry glower.

"Is he dangerous?" Genevieve put in.

"Not if I'm watching him," Jed answered, and his eyes narrowed as he threatened, "You even think about putting him in some kind of cage-"

"No, no," Samuel interrupted urgently, shooting a pleading glance at Genevieve. "We just have questions."

"Murph," Jed instructed in a much softer tone, pointing at the chairs to the left of the entrance, "Go sit."

Murph trudged over to the seats obediently, but instead of sitting down in one he stepped onto it, turned so he was facing forward again, and then squatted down and folded his arms over his knees.

"How long ago did it happen?" Dr. Issa asked, watching Murph studiously even though he was speaking to Jed.

"Years," was the terse response.

"Is that as specific as you can remember?" Samuel inquired. When after a few moments there was no answer, he finally pulled his gaze away

a few moments there was no answer, he finally pulled his gaze away from Murph. At seeing the aggravated scowl on Jed's face the doctor nearly flinched. "Okay… Can you tell me anything about the Feral that did it?"

Jed crossed his arms over his chest, sighing, "It was smarter than the rest." The doctor's eyes lit up, and I saw recognition on everyone's face. The Hunters. But Jed must've come into contact with Hunters too, because he immediately added, "Not as smart as some are now."

Samuel hummed, thoughtfully tapping his pencil against his notepad.

"One of the first to evolve?" April suggested.

"That's what I'm thinking," Dr. Issa agreed. Then to Jed, "What were the symptoms like? Fever? Loss of consciousness?"

"How many more questions you got?" Jed asked impatiently.

Once again, Samuel appeared put off, and he looked over at Genevieve as if to see whether he was out of line asking our guests all these questions. Genevieve gave him an encouraging nod. "I'd like to get a small blood sample…"

"No," Jed said instantly.

"Perhaps some saliva?" Samuel requested in the politest voice he could. "It's less invasive."

"You're not poking him," Jed growled, unexpectedly furious again, "You're not touching him. We're done here." He turned, waving for Murph to follow him. "Let's go." But on his way out the door he stopped in front of me, and I felt myself tense under his dark scowl. "You ever corner me or my brother like this again," he whispered hotly, "We're going to have a real fucking problem."

He stormed out the door with Murph, and while everyone else was looking around at each other in shock, I was still standing there anxiously. It wasn't just Jed that worried me, but it seemed Murph's first reaction to any event was to reach for whatever weapon he had in his

pocket.

Genevieve was the first to speak again as she hopped off the desk. "You guys need anything else?"

Samuel let out a dejected breath, shaking his head. "Thanks anyway."

"I'll come back in a bit," Genevieve told Micah, and then she came around the desk, stopping when she reached me. "Hey," she murmured so the others wouldn't hear, "You can take your hand off your gun now."

I blinked at her, and it took a few seconds to finally feel the grip of the pistol in my fingers. I loosened and eventually removed my hand, giving her a small smile. She passed me, and as I turned to follow her out I waved over my shoulder at everyone inside.

"What do you think his problem was?" she asked about Jed, slowing until I caught up. I shrugged, but since she wasn't looking at me she hadn't seen it. She glanced over at me for a response, and when I completed the motion again she chuckled. "You still on edge?"

She reached over with one hand, pressing her fingers into the muscles of my shoulder while we walked. "They're up to something," I told her, and at seeing her massage wasn't getting the stress off my mind she rolled her eyes and pulled her hand away. "I don't know what they want – food, medical supplies, ammo – but they're here for something."

"Maybe they just want a place to rest," she replied, "Like they said."

"I thought you trusted me," I sighed. I wanted to tell her about Murph and his pocket, but there was a small part of me that felt I was overreacting. I also wanted to tell her about Jed's fascination with my tattoo, but I didn't want to remind her about that part of me. Not even if she said she forgave me, because there was no reason yet for me to believe affectionate Genevieve was permanent.

"I do," she reassured me instantly, but I was too worried to give much response. "Hey," she said, stopping and taking my face in her hands to make me look at her. "I do. Okay? But we've been trying to find a cure for

forever. Murph survived a bite." I furrowed my eyebrows at that. It wasn't worth it to me. "Let's not start freaking out until we have a real reason to." I pushed another sigh through my pursed lips and nodded. "Now come on." Still holding my face, she gave it a playful shake. "Just because we aren't making out right now doesn't mean you get to be all tense and mopey." I shot her a lighthearted glare, which she mimicked just to tease me. "Get. Rid. Of. That. Frown," she grumbled, but it was a happy grumble, and she punctuated each word with a shake of my face.

"Alright," I laughed, shrugging her off so she couldn't rattle me anymore. I set my teeth in an exaggerated grin, though I was still laughing. "Better?"

Her eyes went straight to the corner of my mouth with that line, and her lips followed for a quick peck. "Much."

Every time she kissed me like that it sent me reeling in the most innocent of ways. Now was no different. My grin faded to a genuine smile, and I blinked at her with the instant inability to form words. It had only been a full day, but I doubted if I'd ever get used to her being like this. The effect it had on me caused her lips to curl into an almost bashful smirk, and without saying anything else she turned to head into the cafeteria.

I followed her in, and after we'd both filled a bowl with stew we went to a table. It was just Genevieve and I, and we were the only two people in here besides the group working in the kitchen, since we'd gotten such a late start waiting for Jed's crew. Everyone else was already working.

Flopping onto the bench across the table from Genevieve, I shoveled a bite of the stew into my mouth and hummed contentedly. "Anything they make by hand is so much better than those MREs."

Genevieve took a slow slurp of her own, shrugging. "The MREs aren't so bad."

"I guess they add variety." The tables weren't very wide, so I stretched my feet across to kick them up onto the bench next to Genevieve and get more comfortable. "But I'll take this over mushy, ninety-percent-preservative spaghetti any day."

Genevieve nodded in agreement while the hand she wasn't using to eat disappeared beneath the table. It seemed thoughtless, instinct almost when that hand set on my shin. It just rested there, and I'd noticed lately that she took every chance she had to touch me. Whether it was sitting close, or grabbing my face, or setting a hand on my leg, the last couple days she'd been taking advantage of every opportunity. She might've even slipped that hand under the leg of my pants, to touch my bare skin, if the edges weren't tucked into my boots. Even now, as the mindless affection made me stare at her with surprise, she didn't seem to know why.

"Genevieve," I prompted quietly, afraid what I was going to say next would send her back to being cold. She raised her eyebrows at me. "I like you."

She didn't glare at me, or look upset, or even remove her hand, but her cheeks tinted, and she continued slurping stew for a minute as though she hadn't heard me. "You haven't said that in a while," she murmured eventually.

I let go of the small hope I'd had that she might say it back, somewhat relieved she at least accepted it. "Wanted you to know it's still true."

Her hand ran up to my knee, her grip comfortingly stronger by the time she reached my calf again, and she gave a small smile. "I haven't forgotten."

Out of sheer curiosity, my head cocked. She didn't dismiss it by saying she knew, or that I shouldn't have even said it. She said she hadn't forgotten. Like she'd been thinking about it, like she hadn't forgotten because it'd been on her mind. "Sometimes you make it really hard not to ask questions."

She huffed in amusement, her eyes meeting mine with a thoughtful spark. "Okay," she said, straightening up and dropping her spoon so she could hold her index finger into the air, "I'll give you one question."

My eyes widened. "*Any* question?" It was so easy to pick.

Genevieve must've known the exact thing I'd ask, because one side of her mouth tensed reluctantly. "Choose wisely. I can refuse to answer."

That complicated things, because surely asking if she had feelings for me was something she wouldn't answer. I was torn between what I wanted to know and wanting her to know I wouldn't push. Putting her in a good mood was always the best way to get her talking, so I asked teasingly, "You ever kiss a girl before me?"

Genevieve snorted with laughter, and smacked my leg with the hand on my shin. "You can ask me pretty much anything, and *that's* what you want to know."

"Okay for real, the real question," I chuckled, and she rolled her eyes at me. I waited until her laughter tapered off to ask, "Do you want me?" It was simpler than asking about her feelings, safer for her to answer because she was always so reluctant, and maybe it would hold me over for a while.

"Bummer," she sighed with playful exaggeration, "You already asked your question."

"No, no, come on," I pleaded, trying not to laugh at the knowing grin on her face. "I was just-"

"Yes."

I stopped. "Yes?" I repeated. "Yes to which one?" All she did was turn her head to look sideways at me. "That is *so* not fair."

"You're the one who asked two questions," she laughed, clearly amused at my reaction. "You knew you only had one."

"Genevieve," I groaned loudly, dramatically dropping my face onto the table.

A moment later I heard through her snickering, "Both."

My head shot up, and I asked in shock, "Yes to both?" Her face

scrunched with pitying entertainment as she nodded. I drew in a deep breath, not sure which part of that to address first.

"Nope," she interjected before I could get anything else out. "You already asked two questions, and I answered them both."

"But-" I began to plead. She shook her head at me. "But-" This time she shot me a playfully scolding glare. "You're evil."

Genevieve smirked. "And you have a big fat crush on me."

I narrowed my eyes at her, and like she had earlier, she mimicked it just to pick on me. "Well you want me," I mumbled defiantly, "So there."

Genevieve deliberately ignored that except for the hint of a smile on her face, and leaned over the table to look into my dish. "You going vegetarian all of a sudden or what?"

I looked down. She was talking about the fact that I'd been pushing aside every chunk of meat in my stew. Now that the rest was gone, the meat was all that remained. "I'm saving it," I answered vaguely.

"We have enough food," she told me, forehead creasing curiously, "You don't have to ration out your meals."

"I know," I said, picking out the smallest piece and eating it just to satisfy her. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay, crazy," she chuckled, standing because we were both finished.

"You hanging out with Micah today?" I asked, scooping the meat into my napkin so I could put it in my bag, ignoring the weird look Genevieve was giving me.

"Yeah." She shook her head at me for the meat, and I could practically hear her teasingly think the word 'crazy' again as she turned to leave. "I'll see you at dinner."

"I want to know who that girl was," I called after her.

She turned around so I could catch the mischievous smile on her face, and raised her hands to her sides in veto. "I don't kiss and tell."

"Evil," I muttered under my breath, but Genevieve caught the word on my lips, and I could see her laughing all the way out the door.

After I shoved the food into my backpack I wandered out of the DFAC. The only job I could think to do was the one I always did when Genevieve didn't have anything for me – farming. It would also give me a chance to keep an eye on some of Jed's people, which I definitely couldn't complain about.

When I reached the field I dropped my backpack near the edge, making sure to clip my handheld radio at my hip so I could hear if anyone needed me. And I worked. It was just like every other day, even with Jed's crew around. They were loud, and rowdy, and didn't get as much work done as everyone else with how much they goofed off. They even distracted some of the civilians, who were interested in the exciting newcomers. Other than that, there wasn't much I could say about them. I still didn't trust a single one of them, but they seemed more concerned with having fun than with whatever they'd truly come to our base for.

It wasn't until the end of the day that I finally remembered the meat in my backpack. I'd been waiting until dinner because I thought that was when the fewest of Jed's people would be around the mini mall they were staying at. Hopefully almost all of them would be eating, and I could sneak in and out without being noticed.

I made sure nobody was watching me while I grabbed my backpack off the ground, and checked that all of Jed's crew were heading toward the cafeteria before veering the opposite direction. I turned down the closest alley, intent on getting to the shopping mall the back way. Instead of going in through the front when I got there, I crept around the building, testing a side door to see if I could get in. It was locked, so as I pulled my bobby pins out of my bracelet I pressed an ear to the door, listening for any voices immediately inside.

It only took me a minute to pick the lock, and then I eased the door open only a little, peeking through the crack. There was nobody visible, so I

only a little, peeking through the crack. There was nobody visible, so I opened it just enough to slip in, guiding it silently shut behind me. I stuck to the walls, using the shadows from the fading sunlight to hide in. There were only four shops on either side before reaching the center, where a big lobby led to the main supermarket. It was in the last shop on the left, just before the supermarket entrance, that I found what I was looking for.

I peered around the corner, and strained my ears for any voices before I crept in. On my tiptoes I crossed to the middle of the store, and quietly dropped to my knees beside the cage. The dog inside it picked its head up to look at me. Maybe it still associated me with the way the man kicked its cage in the truck, because it immediately let out a low growl.

"Shh, it's okay," I whispered, pulling my backpack off my shoulders as slow as I could.

The animal's growling intensified with my every movement, each time making my heart pound just a little harder – I didn't know what any of Jed's people would do if they found me here. It wasn't until I pulled that napkin of meat from my bag that the dog stopped. Its nose twitched, golden eyes locked onto the food in my hands as I unwrapped the napkin.

"Please don't bite me," I begged quietly, taking the first piece of meat between my index finger and thumb.

With gradual progress, I extended the piece through the wires of the cage, holding it out to see if the dog would take it from my hand. It stared for a few moments, its nose twitching more eagerly with every second that ticked by. Eventually it started inching its muzzle forward, watching me with evident distrust until its nose was only a mere inch from the morsel. Its upper lip curled, as if warning me not to try anything now that it was close, and a moment later it snatched the meat from my fingers. The swiftness of it scared me so bad I fell backward onto my butt, but the dog hadn't so much as brushed a finger with its teeth. Nor did it so much as chew. The piece of meat was gone before I could even blink.

"Want another one?" I asked, taking a second piece from the napkin.

The whole process was repeated. I extended the food, it inched forward, curled its lip, and snatched. Though I didn't get as scared as the first time, I still flinched when the meat disappeared from my fingers in a flash. I did it again and again until I'd fed the dog every piece of meat I'd saved. Then I stuffed the empty napkin into my pocket and slung my bag over my shoulders. Out of curiosity, I extended the back of my hand to the cage, wanting to see if the dog would sniff me more closely or even let me pet it. Instead it let out a menacing growl, and I pulled away.

"Maybe next time then," I breathed, patting my hand over my rushing heart.

It was as easy sneaking back out of the building as it had been getting in. I don't even think anybody was in it. Once outside I wasn't worried about being seen, so I started down the main road in the direction of the DFAC. It was because I was on the main road that I passed by the armory, and what I saw set my teeth on edge. Jed was skulking around. I watched him long enough to see him look around the corner at the label on the building, examine the thick steel doors, and flick the sturdy lock with his hand.

"Looking for something?" I asked when I reached him, automatically crossing my arms over my chest so he couldn't stare at my tattoo.

He seemed to wince at being caught, but when he recognized my voice he turned toward me with a smile on his face. "Just exploring."

"There's nothing in there for you," I told him bitterly. Weapons had been one of my guesses as to what Jed wanted from us, and the fact that he was investigating the armory further confirmed that.

He reached out to give the lock another nudge. "But there *is* something in there?"

Just like I knew they would, when he glanced back at me his eyes searched for the mark on my arm. "I told you to stop looking at it."

"I'm curious is all," he explained. "What's a raider doing in a place like this?"

"You tell me," I retorted flatly.

Jed chuckled, taking a single step toward me. I didn't know why he came forward, but out of instinct my arms dropped, my hand falling toward my pistol. He immediately stopped, throwing up his own hands with a smirk. "You're aggressive."

He sounded so amused, and he made every muscle in my body so tense it was hard not to let him know he was already getting to me. "If you think I'm aggressive, then you should let Genevieve catch you snooping around."

"Genevieve doesn't scare me," he said, casually leaning back against the door of the armory.

"But I do?"

Once more his eyes dropped to the tattoo. "You interest me."

"I'm flattered," I mumbled with spiteful sarcasm.

"You know," he began, his lips curling behind his facial hair into another of those smug grins, "It's amazing the things people will tell you when you get them started on the right topic." *Apparently you're about to show me,* I thought grumpily, but didn't get a chance to say it out loud. "For example, I learned a lot today about you, and your girlfriend, and her baby brother… what's his name… Michael."

I wasn't about to correct him on Micah's name, but I told him bitterly, "She's not my girlfriend."

He ignored my comment. "Some might say attachments like that are dangerous these days."

My eyes narrowed in a fierce glare. "Are you threatening me, or her?"

"Threaten?" Jed repeated in feigned shock. "No, no. I like to think of it as friendly advice."

"Funny," I mused humorlessly, "I wouldn't say a single word out of your mouth is friendly."

"Yeah?" he asked curiously. "What makes you so sure?"

"Experience," I answered.

Jed grinned. "Let's talk about that."

"Sure," I agreed with clear acidity, "And then we'll talk about how your brother survived the bite… shouldn't you be watching him?"

His jaw set for only a moment in an uncontrolled scowl, then he managed to recover his look of amusement. "The more you say the more interested I get."

"Damn," I breathed in exaggerated disappointment, "I was just thinking the opposite about you."

"Echo, Echo, Echo," Jed laughed, shaking his head, but when he looked at me again I could see a new malice in his eyes. "You feel like you fit in here?" My lips pursed with instant irritation. "Are the people here comfortable knowing where you came from? What about Genevieve?" When I glared at him, his eyebrows rose with intrigue. "I heard she used to hate you something fierce. Your own girlfriend."

"She's not my-"

"Your girlfriend," Jed interrupted. "Yeah, I got that part. And why not?"

"My relationships are none of your business," I sneered. Jed's endgame was unclear, but I was figuring out real fast how we planned to get there. He was a talker. He'd been here one day and already he'd figured out how to get under my skin. He was pro.

"I just want you to be happy," he said in the most aggravatingly sincere voice I'd ever heard. "If you think she'll ever really be able to let it go… Well, my educated guess is you're kidding yourself. And I think we both know you're smarter than that." All I could do was glare at him. My

comebacks, my snark, and my confidence were completely gone. Shattered in a matter of minutes. "Come on, kid!" he whined loudly, in exasperation like I was missing something big. "It's age-old manipulative bullshit!" He was so inconsistent. I couldn't prepare myself for what would come out of his mouth next because I had no idea, but everything he said had the exact effect he wanted it to. "She's never going to accept you. Not the way you are."

My eyebrows furrowed with confusion and an underlying twinge of pain.

"Tell me she hasn't tried changing you," he challenged, eyes lapping up the hurt on my face. "Molding you into something different. Something *better*." The only thing that crossed my mind was Hayden. Genevieve was desperate for Hayden. She had been since the beginning. "She'll try to tame you, and you know what? No matter how hard you try it's never going to be good enough, and that's how she'll keep control. How she'll keep you in line. By keeping you on your toes. Keep you walking on eggshells, and the moment you fuck up it's because you 'used to be' a raider."

"That's not her," I protested weakly, swallowing back the sickened panic rising in my chest.

"Okay," he consented, shrugging indifferently like he couldn't care less. "But one more piece of advice – you ever start to think I'm right, run. You try too hard, too long to prove yourself to her, and I promise you, it'll get you killed."

I didn't know if he was masking another threat, or if he was actually offering advice this time, but he'd gotten so deep under my skin that even though I tried to stay strong, my voice came out a hollow question, "What do you care?"

"I like you, Echo," he said, pulling himself from the wall, and added with a knowing hint of finality as he passed me, "You get tired of pretending to be someone you're not, come find me."

I just watched him walk away, an overwhelming anxiety steadily forming in my gut. When he disappeared I started in a hurry for the cafeteria. Jed

had already figured out how to play on my fears. How to manipulate them. How to make me panic. And I was panicking. I'd always be a raider. I'd never escape it, and some part of Genevieve would always hate me for it. She'd never want to be with me, never be my girlfriend because I'd always be the raider. Always Echo, always something she could never truly love.

When I got to the cafeteria I rushed in, doing a brief scan for Jed just to make sure he wouldn't see the frantic look on my face. He was nowhere in sight, so as I paced past the table Genevieve was sitting at with the others, I grabbed the shoulder of her shirt and dragged her out of her seat. She made a startled noise, but let me haul her all the way out the rear of the kitchen, to the alley behind the building. I didn't know what I was thinking, or even what I intended on doing, only that I needed to do something.

The moment the back door shut behind us I asked in a rushed breath, "What's my name?"

Genevieve's face twisted with confusion while her eyes rapidly took me in. "Is this a trick question?"

"Say it!" I hollered frantically, wanting her to spit it out, to prove Jed right and get it over with. "Just say it!"

"Echo!" she blurted hastily, watching me worriedly, scanning me as if to see whether that had been the correct answer or not.

It wasn't the answer I'd expected to hear. Not after that conversation with Jed. Without thinking why or slowing down to make it gentle, I pushed Genevieve into the wall of the building, pressing my body and lips hard against hers. I didn't kiss her long, but they were deep, wet, open kisses that would've left my head swimming if I hadn't been in such a panic. That seemed to be the effect it had on Genevieve, because when I suddenly pulled away her eyes were still shut, and her head weakly dropped back against the wall.

"So," she barely managed to croak as her eyes cracked open, "I answered right?"

answered right?

"You're not mad," I sighed, immediately flooded with relief at the expression on her face. At the fact that I'd had this effect on her. That *Echo* had this effect on her.

"I'm a little…" She cleared her throat, still looking dazed. "Flustered."

"But you're not mad," I repeated, and I couldn't help it, I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her into a suffocating hug.

"Should I be?" she eked, managing a small laugh through the strength of my embrace. But when I didn't respond or let her go her voice gained an edge of worry. "Echo? Are you okay?"

I took in a calming breath, letting it out again while I released her. "Yeah. I'm sorry." She still looked a little disoriented, because she leaned back against the wall again. "It's Jed. He got in my head, that's all."

"What? Did he threaten you?" Genevieve asked, instantly distressed. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," I reassured her, shaking my head to try and work off the last of the anxiety. "No, he's too smart for that. He just said things."

"What things?"

"Just random shit," I groaned, leaning my palms against the wall a foot away and letting my head droop. "I'm fine. I'm sorry. He figured out how to exaggerate my fears. It's not a big deal. I'm okay."

Genevieve ducked under one of my arms, positioning herself once more between me and the wall. She stood there for a few moments, waiting for me to look at her, and when I finally met her soft gaze she asked, "What are you afraid of?"

Finding the words to even know myself was too difficult. I couldn't explain. Couldn't tell her I thought her forgiveness would be enough, and that I was finding out it wasn't. Couldn't tell her I was afraid she'd stop being sweet, and playful, and happy. Or that I needed her feelings in

words because a kiss, or a touch, didn't feel concrete. She was Genevieve Moretti. The girl I thought never even noticed me. The girl whose father I killed. The girl who'd hated me and played with my emotions for months.

Genevieve was honest, if she said how she felt I could believe it. I could know she meant it. I couldn't tell her that every time she refused to say how she felt about me, it tugged at a deep-seated fear that she was still playing games. That there truly was a part of her that still didn't forgive me. Because buried even deeper was the belief that I didn't deserve that forgiveness, and Jed had just shoveled it up.

All I could do was shake my head, and I let out a sigh and leaned my forehead against Genevieve's. She didn't ask any more questions. She just let me stand there for a minute in silence, gathering my composure.

Eventually she whispered, "Hannah Lutz."

It took me a few moments to figure out what she was even saying, but when I finally realized she was telling me the girl she'd kissed, I couldn't keep myself from snorting with laughter. With two measly words she flipped my mood completely, and she was smiling proudly at herself for having done it.

"Hannah Lutz?" I repeated in disbelief. "As in our high school's All Star soccer player, Hannah Lutz." Genevieve laughed, nodding with a confused look on her face. "Go big or go home, I guess," I chuckled.

She snickered even harder, shrugging. "I mean, it wasn't that big a deal."

"Um, kind of," I corrected sarcastically. "She was really hot."

Genevieve rolled her eyes. "Well I was really drunk, so…"

"Wow," I mumbled, huffing with amusement. Genevieve raised one eyebrow at me for explanation. "Don't laugh," I ordered before telling her what I was thinking. She nodded eagerly. "You're out of my league." Despite her agreement not to laugh, she laughed right in my face. "Hey!"

"High school was forever ago!" she cackled.

"So?" I asked expectantly.

"So it's not even-" She stopped to continue snickering. "That's not-" She didn't seem to know what she wanted to say, so instead she tilted her head forward to give me a short kiss. "Can we eat now?"

I smirked, telling her, "I want to hear more about Hannah Lutz."

"Oh my God," she groaned, but there was an entertained smile on her face while she ducked out from between my arms to head back inside.

"Was she a better kisser than me?" I asked teasingly, following after her.

"Echo," she whined, "I don't remember."

"Then say no," I told her, more than amused by the fact that she was blushing.

"Fine, no," she said, and when I pumped my fist happily she gave me a playful push. "You're so obnoxious!"

Wrapped Up Full

Broke The Surface by Jay Rodger

Wrapped Up Full

Genevieve

Arriving at the medical complex I expected to see the lights on, but I was a little surprised to find Casey was there. I'd been heading to Echo's room in the barracks to turn in for the night when Micah came by, telling me that Dr. Issa had a quick question. Even Micah had gone to his room after letting me know, but Casey was still here doing something.

I smiled at her in greeting, striding over to the reception desk where she was sitting. "Samuel's here, right?"

"He's waiting for you," Casey confirmed, pointing down the hall toward the rooms.

I craned my neck to try and get a look into the office behind the desk, where April had established her sleeping quarters. "Is April with him?" Casey shook her head, so I smiled once more thankfully and started for the exam rooms to find the doctor. He was pouring over some writing in a notebook when I walked in, so engrossed in it he didn't even see me. "Evening, Doc."

"Genevieve," he said, glancing up, "Hello."

"Micah said you needed me?"

Samuel closed the notebook, straightening up and setting his hand on the cover, appearing almost reluctant to speak. "I have um… a request. To be taken entirely at your own comfort."

"Okay…" I mumbled unsurely, his reluctance making me a little nervous to hear it.

"In regards to the Hunters," he began, "I've theorized that the parasite is evolving within its host." He paused as if to make sure I understood. I nodded. "Murph was bitten by one of the earliest. Now, Jed says he hasn't been the same since the bite, but Murph appears to show limited signs of infection."

The doctor paused again, so I urged him on with, "I'm following so far."

"I believe there may be a direct connection between evolution of the parasite and transmission of the infection."

My eyebrows furrowed. He'd lost me. "Meaning?"

Samuel took a deep breath to explain in one wind, "I don't know if it's something in the blood, or the offspring in the hosts bodily fluids, or if it's the parasite itself, but the Hunters might not be as contagious."

My bottom lip jutted out with approval. "That's an interesting theory."

"Thank you," he said, giving a small smile. It faded quickly though, as he added hesitantly, "Jed won't let us take any samples from Murph, and I can't explore that theory without samples."

He stopped, watching me to see if his request would sink in without having to actually say it. It took almost a minute for me to fully grasp what he was asking, and then the only word out of my mouth was a breathed, "Oh." He wanted us to bring him a Hunter.

"I know it's a big request," he said apologetically.

"It's logical," I told him with a shrug. My mind was going a mile a minute. Aside from the fear of trying to catch one was the excitement that we might be on the verge of a breakthrough. If we could somehow manage to bring a Hunter back, it could change everything. "But I wouldn't even know where to find one. Or how to get it back."

"It doesn't need to be alive," Samuel said hastily. "All I need is blood, saliva, and…" My eyebrows rose curiously. "At least the head… I'd like to examine the parasite first hand." I let out a heavy sigh, letting it all sink in.

"Someone mentioned the attack on your old camp was a group of Hunters, but if it helps, in my experience they usually hunt alone."

That made it a little better, but I needed time to think about it, and maybe to see what Echo thought. "Let me sleep on it. I'll do everything I can."

He gave a genuinely grateful smile. "Thanks."

I nodded and turned to leave, but something stopped me before I could set foot out of the room. I swiveled back around, striding to the table where Samuel had reopened his notebook. "Can I ask you something?" He nodded, closing the book once more. "Is Micah okay?" The doctor's tanned forehead creased unsurely, accentuating the crow's feet on either side of his sunken eyes, and his head cocked as if for clarification. "I mean, he's a little anxious around me, but for the most part he seems over what happened… you know, um, with Echo." Samuel nodded knowingly. "I just can't tell if he's, I don't know, acting. I thought he might be more honest with you."

"He's okay," Samuel assured me softly. "He *was* upset, after Echo, but I think even if he doesn't like her, in some ways he gets it." I couldn't help letting on a small, relieved smile. "He used to talk about you all the time, just reminiscing, not thinking he'd ever see you again."

"Really?" I asked almost happily.

Samuel nodded. "He might not admit it to you because he's ashamed, but he knows what he tried with Echo was a mistake. He won't risk losing you again, and I say that with utmost confidence."

"Thank you, Samuel."

His chin dropped in acknowledgement. "Have a good night."

I left the exam room and trudged back out to the reception area, where Casey was still sitting at the desk. Curious what she was doing here at this hour, I went over, leaning my arms against the tall surface opposite her. "You're here late."

"Yeah…"

¨Yeah,¨ she agreed knowingly, and held up a book she was reading. "One of the women found some books she wanted to give me. I just came by to pick them up."

The one she was reading right now was a pregnancy book, but I pushed onto my tiptoes to get a better look at the stack of others on the desk beside her. One of them in particular caught my eye, and I reached over to pick it up. "Wow," I laughed, reading the title. It was an old children's book. "Could I maybe borrow this one?" One of Casey's eyebrows rose with intrigue, but she shrugged nonchalantly. "I think Echo would want to see it," I explained, pulling my backpack around to put the book in.

By the time I glanced back at Casey she was collecting her things. "I'll walk back with you, if you're going to the barracks."

"Yeah, great," I agreed encouragingly, glad she'd suggested it.

It wasn't comforting that she was here late and might've walked back on her own. Not with Jed and his crew lurking around. I didn't trust a single one of them, especially with how on edge Echo had been about it.

"How is it being pregnant?" I asked while she came around the desk, and we started for the doors.

"It's fine," she chuckled. "I haven't been too sick or tired."

"That's good," I said. "How far along are you?"

Casey shrugged, shifting the books she was holding to one hand so she could rub the other over her stomach. "I'm not even showing yet."

I didn't know what the timeline was supposed to be like, so I simply nodded. "Have you and Blake talked about names?" Before she could respond I reached over, offering to carry the books for her. She handed them over with a grateful smile.

This time she shook her head, giving an anxious laugh. "I'm trying not to overwhelm him with it all."

I couldn't help that the corners of my lips turned up, and I waved that off

I couldn't help that the corners of my lips turned up, and I waved that off with little concern. "Don't worry about him. He's excited even if he's too nervous to show it."

Casey huffed with amusement. It was quiet for a few moments afterward, so she changed the subject by saying thoughtfully, "You and Echo seem good." Once more I couldn't keep from smiling, but this time it was a broad grin, and Casey noticed. "That's a *big* smile," she chuckled.

I hadn't talked to anyone about Echo in a long time, and especially not since I'd chosen her over Micah. Casey had been around for all the developments of our relationship, and now I felt an intense desire to get it all off my chest. I think a lot of that was due to excitement. "We are good," I agreed happily. "I don't know, it… it was like once I forgave her, and really admitted to myself how I felt about her, all those feelings just hit me full force."

"It was about time," Casey giggled teasingly, and I adjusted the books to nudge her with my elbow.

"I was fighting it," I admitted, sheepishly ducking my head. "You know what it feels like though?" Casey hummed curiously. "It's like no matter what happened, I would've felt this way eventually. It's kind of like," I shrugged, suddenly growing shy, "It's always been her."

"Like fate!" Casey suggested joyfully. I laughed, shrugging once more with timid agreement. After that I couldn't help but take in a deep breath, letting it out in one heavy rush. "Why the sigh?"

"She told me again that she likes me," I answered, almost feeling myself freeze up just thinking about it, "And I can tell she wants me to say it so bad."

"Well," Casey started hesitantly, "Why haven't you?"

"I don't want to tell her I like her," I said. My heart was pounding at the mere thought, and I let out another sigh. This is the first time I was ever going to say it out loud, and it was terrifying, and exciting, and overwhelming all at once. "I want to tell her that I love her."

Casey practically bounced at my side, and despite my nerves, I chuckled. But her enthusiasm tapered off after a few seconds, and she asked seriously, "What's stopping you then?"

"I just," I started, taking an encouraging breath, "I haven't let anyone in like this since…"

It took me so long to supply the end of that sentence that Casey guessed, "Since you lost your dad?"

I met her gaze, and my eyebrows furrowed with a twinge of emotion. "Since my mom died. So… never." Casey's lips pursed with a sympathetic smile. "Falling in love has always been once and forever for me," I continued. "I never thought it'd be so scary."

Casey nodded in understanding. "At least you know, and when you're ready you can say it."

"I'm almost ready, and I know she needs to hear it." We both fell silent for a bit, almost at the barracks by now. Suddenly my cheeks tinted, and I let out an embarrassed laugh. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to unload all that on you."

"It's fine," Casey told me, waving it off reassuringly. "I mean, thanks for trusting me with it."

I smiled at her gratefully, reaching for the door of the barracks to hold it for her. As I pulled it open I caught movement in my peripherals, and my eyes wandered toward the source. It took some squinting through the dark before I could see Jed, walking back from the direction of the main gate. I didn't like one bit that he was skulking around at night.

"Go ahead," I told Casey, motioning her inside and giving her books back, "I'll see you later." We parted ways, and I let the door swing shut behind her, reaching a hand up to the radio at my shoulder. "Front gate, check in. What's your status?"

"Everything's golden, ma'am," replied the soldier's voice.

Jed was passing by, appearing not to have seen me yet because I was so near the shadow of the building. "Going somewhere?" I called to him.

He stopped, his head turning my direction to watch me for a moment before casually striding over. "Just exploring."

I squinted at him suspiciously, his relaxed attitude doing nothing to put me at ease. "Don't do it at night."

"You guys have curfew?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest almost defiantly.

"*You guys* have curfew," I stated flatly.

His brown eyes scanned my face, taking me in thoughtfully before they fell to the key around my neck. "Is that the key to the armory?" He pointed, taking a small step toward me. My hand instantly fell to the knife at my thigh. All the warning did was cause him to chuckle. "Well aren't you two peas in a pod." I didn't know what he was talking about, but a moment later he asked, "Have I done something to offend you?"

"You're creepy," I told him bluntly, and he laughed at that. "And Echo doesn't like you. That's enough for me."

"I'm familiar to her," he mused, running his fingers down his short beard, "Of course your girlfriend doesn't like me." I knew he meant because she used to be a raider, but I was a little surprised he wasn't trying to be evasive about it. I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stood there, scowling at him. "Interesting," he murmured when I failed to respond, and I tilted my head at him for explanation. "Echo corrected me when I said 'girlfriend'."

"So?"

"So it doesn't sound like you two are on the same page." He watched me closely after that, like he was trying to judge my reaction. Echo had said he played mind games. It appeared I was about to get a taste. Though he'd really gotten to Echo when he pulled it on her, I was actually a little curious how he'd try to get to me. "Which one of you doesn't want the

relationship?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't say that's any concern of yours."

He ignored my dismissal. "Is it you?" he asked. "Because she killed your dad?"

I was caught between a smirk and a glare. The glare because I wanted to punch him for bringing that up, especially just to try and get under my skin. The smirk because it was such an obvious dig, and he thought he was so clever.

"If it was me," I said coyly, "I would've corrected you too."

"It's not her," he said surely, "What I've heard, she's put up with too much bullshit from you to be anything but serious."

I gave another shrug, unable to contain the smirk anymore. "Maybe you're not as smart as you think you are."

He stared at me, that spark of confident deduction in his eyes dwindling. "You ever feel guilty?" he asked, changing tactics, and I braced myself for what was coming next. "That's kind of fucked up isn't it? Sleeping with her after what she did." I stayed calm, doing everything I could not to react. "Kind of makes you a hypocrite, doesn't it? Standing there, judging me for things you *think* I've done, and she *literally* gets away with murder."

He wasn't changing how I felt, and he wasn't getting inside my head. At least not in the way he wanted. But I sure as hell wasn't going to stand here and take it. "Let me make something real clear to you, Jed," I started angrily. "You know nothing about me and Echo, and you know nothing about how I feel or what I want. So stop trying." His eyes narrowed. I couldn't tell if it was curiosity or aggravation, or both, but I wasn't done. "And while I'm at it, this base, these people, it's not a game. You understand? We have a zero tolerance policy with raiders. You make one mistake and I will not hesitate to put a bullet in each and every one of you if it means keeping my civilians safe. Do *not* fuck with me."

He blinked at me for a few moments, seemingly in shock, and then his lips curled. "Echo was right," he chuckled. "You *are* aggressive."

"One more thing," I nearly growled, annoyed that he found humor in my seriousness. "One of the only reasons I let you guys in here in the first place was because of that bite mark on your brother's neck." This time it was very clearly aggravation with which his eyes narrowed, but I didn't let it deter me. "You plan on sticking around then you're going to take him to the medical complex first thing in the morning and give Dr. Issa whatever tests, samples, or answers he needs. If not, pack your bags."

He'd done nothing to earn my trust in the small amount of time he'd been here. On the contrary, the more he spoke the more I realized that Echo had been absolutely right about him. He was sarcastic, and manipulative, but more than that there was a darkness behind his brown eyes that sent alarms blaring in the most primitive parts of my mind. Watch his hands. Don't get too close. Stand your ground but don't push him too far. But I was being completely honest with him. The *only* reason I hadn't kicked them out yet was because of Murph. We'd been searching years for a breakthrough with the infection, and I wasn't the only one who didn't want to let this chance slip away. April wanted it. Samuel wanted it. Even Imogen wanted it, along with plenty other civilians who'd heard about it by now.

"You're done exploring for the night," I told Jed before he could come up with some snide remark, and without saying anything else I reached for the door and went inside.

In the safety of the building I finally let out a nervous sigh, trudging up the stairs toward Echo's room. She was sitting on her bed when I got there, and looked up at me when I came in, watching as I set my backpack down and took off my boots.

Always so in tune to my moods, she asked hesitantly, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I nodded, pushing myself off the couch. I wanted to be close, so I strode over to the bed, lying sideways across it and putting my head in her lap. "Jed was outside. He tried his head games with me."

Echo's eyebrows met with concern. "What'd he say? Did it work?"

"He tried making me feel guilty about you," I told her. At that her laugh line angled into a frown. She looked so worried it was on the verge of panic. Instantly feeling bad for it, I lifted myself enough to plant a kiss underneath her chin, then dropped back down. "And no, it didn't work."

She glanced down at me for a brief moment, and then to the opposite side of the room. She still appeared so distraught over it. Maybe Echo was the only one Jed was trying to play games with. Maybe he'd known I'd tell her, and this was his plan all along.

"Echo," I prompted soothingly. I grabbed her hand and brought it up to my lips, and after brushing her fingertips against my mouth I set the hand flat on the top of my chest, placing both of mine over it. "All of that is over, okay?" Her palm was so warm against my skin, and the weight and heat of it was comforting. I didn't want her to be afraid with me. Not when I felt so safe with her. "I'm sorry for everything I put you through, but I don't feel guilty about this. Not anymore." I squeezed her hand harder against me. "Jed's not going to change that. It's past."

Her gray eyes scanned my face, and after a few moments the downward curve turned up, and she nodded, though it still seemed somewhat hesitant. We were both silent for a couple minutes – the feel of Echo's hand over my heart was so sedating I probably could've fallen asleep right here. But then I remembered the book I'd brought, and I sat up excitedly.

"I brought you something," I told Echo, who was watching me curiously as I hopped off the bed. I hurried over to my backpack, pulled out the book, and rushed over to stand at Echo's side, putting it in her hands. "You remember?" I asked in anticipation, watching her stare down at it and trying to judge her reaction. "You brought it that one year in elementary school. For show and tell."

"I can't believe *you* remembered," she chuckled. I shrugged, not really sure what to say and thoroughly enjoying the nostalgic smile on her face. Eventually she looked up at me, noticing that I hadn't moved. "Well, come

on," she said, patting the bed beside her. "You have to let me read it to you." I happily threw myself over her, scooting back against the headboard at her side. "Three times," she added teasingly, and when I looked at her in shock she laughed, "It's tradition."

"Can't argue with tradition," I conceded sarcastically.

She opened it up to the first page, holding it out in front of her so she could read it. I listened the whole time, mainly just taking in her voice, but after a minute my neck got tired of craning to see the pictures. I'd begun leaning further into her in order to see better, but what I didn't realize was that my weight was pushing her sideways.

She managed to get to the last page before giggling, "You're going to knock me off the bed," and repeatedly nudged me over until we were sitting straight again.

"Move your arm then," I grumbled lightheartedly, lifting her arm over my head so I could scoot closer to her side, where I'd have a better view. "Now I can see."

After I scooted, her arm continued to hover in the air where I'd left it, and her head turned so she could look at me. It was completely obvious by the shy glimmer in her eyes that she wasn't sure if she could put it over my shoulders – we'd never *really* cuddled before. Usually she was bold with pushing boundaries, but it must've been the fact that I was staring back at her that she wasn't sure whether or not to go through with it. Maybe I should've been more encouraging, but the hesitation and adorable blush coloring her cheeks made it impossible not to just stare, waiting to see what she'd do.

It got so tense in the stillness, until eventually she whispered, "Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm curious how long until your arm gets tired," I answered, doing a poor job of holding back an amused smirk.

Echo squinted at me suspiciously. "You're being a tease right now, aren't you?" All I did was buoy my eyebrows, so with a laugh she gave in and

dropped her arm across my shoulders.

"Two more times to go," I reminded, wiggling into her even more.

She picked up reading, holding the book with one hand and letting me turn the pages for her because her other arm was around me. It was such a short book it didn't take long for her to finish, and when she was done she reached over to set it gently on the floor.

"It's a cute book," I told her.

She nodded with agreement. "It was my favorite when I was a kid."

Her arm was still draped across my shoulders, her hand dangling by my neck. It was so hard lately to stop touching her. Any time she was close it was the only thing I wanted. Now I reached up to her dangling hand, slipping my fingers through hers, and I was close enough to her side that when I did it I felt her take in a deep breath. Curious whether it was a good or bad one, I glanced up at her, finding that though she was trying to contain a smile her laugh line was contentedly deep. I liked making her smile, so even though I couldn't see it, I leaned my head on her shoulder, knowing she'd be even happier because of it.

A few more silent minutes passed. I was content just sitting here, feeling Echo breathe. Feeling her thumb run over my hand. Savoring the first time we ever just… were. She was the first to speak again.

"How, um," she started hesitantly, "How are you holding up?" She seemed to know I didn't understand what she was asking, because she added, "With being commander and stuff."

I shrugged, not entirely sure how to answer that. The anxiety wasn't as bad. I was adjusting. "I was only eight when my mom died. You knew that?" The response that came to mind wasn't a direct one, but it was the only one I had to fully explain, to tell Echo how I truly felt. And it was the first time in my life I felt comfortable enough to talk about it. She nodded. "Micah was just a toddler. My dad did the best he could, but I had to take care of him a lot." Still holding Echo's hand, I lifted her arm back over my

head, bringing it between us to set it in my lap. "I had to take care of *both* of them a lot. Back then, soccer was the only thing that was mine. It was the only time I really got to do something just for me. Usually I never wanted it to end, because when I went home I'd go back to being…"

"Mom," Echo supplied understandingly.

"Sometimes I felt like such an asshole for not wanting to go home. I felt so selfish." Echo's thumb was still stroking my hand, but to fidget mindlessly I unfolded our fingers so I could play with hers. "After the outbreak, when I lost my dad and Micah-" Echo tensed against me, as though she were afraid I'd get upset with her. "I was devastated. You know that too. But after that, that was the first time in my life I didn't have to worry about anyone but me. It was simple." I shrugged, lacing our fingers together again. "I've always been okay at this I guess, at leading, but it's not what I'd have chosen for myself." I didn't realize the weight of everything I'd said until a moment after I finished. When it sank in I shifted to look up at Echo. "I never told anyone that before."

She gave a soft smile, her hand tightening around mine. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Would you maybe," I began, hoping Echo wouldn't get defensive, "Tell me something about you?"

"You mean from before?" Echo said knowingly, and when I nodded her eyes took me in. She considered it for a long minute, hesitation etched in every curve of her face, before answering, "Okay. Like what?"

I couldn't help but grin, eager for whatever information I could get out of her. "I don't know. Anything."

She hummed thoughtfully, silent for another minute. "You want a memory? A funny one?"

I nodded instantly, and already thinking of the memory Echo chuckled to herself. It made me want to look at her, to see her smile and her laugh line while she was telling me. I pulled away, shifting on the bed to face her. The curve in her lips fell the moment I did.

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"Come back," she whined, patting the spot next to her.

"I want to see you," I told her, but she pouted at me, furrowing her eyebrows and blinking her soft gray eyes. I knew she was exaggerating it, but I couldn't resist the face she was making. Rolling my eyes, I threw one leg over hers so I was straddling her, and sat comfortably back in her lap. "Good?"

She gave a series of deeply satisfied nods while her hands set on my thighs. "Good."

"Tell me the memory," I pleaded impatiently, setting my hands on top of hers.

"It's stupid," she said with a self-conscious smile, "But here goes." I nodded eagerly. "When I was a kid I used to go into my sister Millie's room and take her fashion magazines. I liked looking at the pretty girls in them, and it annoyed her so that was a bonus." I snickered, already amused. "Sometimes, like this time in particular, I'd really want to be a little brat, so I'd take it right out of her hands."

"How old were you?" I interjected with a curious grin.

"Um, ten?" she answered unsurely, and I nodded again. "Okay," her voice picked up with recollection, "So this time I bust into her room, snatch the magazine out of her hands and book it for the hallway. Millie wasn't about to chase me all over the house, right? So she stops at the door and yells, 'Hayden, get back here!'" Echo was trying to tell the story through her own reminiscing laughter, and the smile on her face mixed with my own amusement already had me giggling. "My other sister, Becca, hears the commotion and cuts me off right by my getaway to the stairs. But she's seen this happen so many times she's tired of it."

Echo paused to take a breath, and I leaned forward with interest, waiting to hear what happened next. "Before Millie could catch up, Becca says to trade with her. I'm young, so I'm thinking I won't get caught red-handed if I trade magazines with Becca. So I give it to her." I nodded, humming with interest. "And Becca puts a Playboy in my hands." I had to purse my

with interest." And Becca puts a Playboy in my hands." I had to purse my lips to keep from cracking up before the story was even finished, but my shoulders were shaking with laughter. "Now remember, I'd never seen a girl's body before, not like that. So I just open it up to the easiest page, which happens to be the centerfold."

Echo's cheeks had already been rosy, but now they turned a bright red. "I look straight at this woman, completely unprepared for it, and I scream and throw the Playboy backwards over my head." I snorted, throwing a hand over my mouth to stop it because she wasn't done. "My dad's coming up the stairs to see what all the noise is about, and the magazine goes flying and the centerfold hits him square in the face. It falls into his hands and he looks from it to me, and I'm just standing there with this confused look on my face." Echo buried her face in her hands to hide the embarrassment as she finished, "And then he looks from Millie to Becca and goes, 'are you trying to scare the kid straight?'"

I fell sideways off of Echo because I was laughing so hard. It was so bad I had to slap my hand against the mattress, struggling just to breathe. "Oh my God," I wheezed, pushing myself back up into Echo's lap and grabbing her face. "They traumatized you!"

"I got over the shock," she said with laugh, "Obviously." I was still cackling, so I curled forward to laugh into her shoulder. "I'm glad you liked it."

It took a minute for my amusement to die down enough that I straightened up again. More than I'd liked the actual story, I liked how Echo looked while she was telling it, and how she'd even said her own name and didn't seem to notice.

"So they always knew?" I asked curiously, and for some way to touch her I reached behind her head, pulling her hair out of its messy bun so it would fall over her shoulder. "That you were into girls." She simply nodded, falling silent and watching me closely for a minute while I brushed my fingers through the ends of her hair. "You want to ask me something," I observed, noting the interested spark in her eyes.

"I want to ask you a lot of things," she answered, running her hands once

up my thighs, "But mostly I just want to stare at you."

"Stare at me?" I repeated with a chuckle. "Why?"

"Because you're beautiful," she said casually. She'd never said anything like that to me before. It made my heart flutter, and my cheeks colored instantly. Better believe Echo didn't miss it. "I just made you blush," she pointed out teasingly. "You're blushing!"

"Of course I am," I mumbled, taking my hands from her hair to bashfully cover my face.

"I want to see!" Echo was laughing now, and she took my wrists to try and pull my hands away. "You've never been called that before?"

"Not by you," I told her, giving in to my growing embarrassment and dropping my arms. "It's different coming from you."

"Why's it different?" she chuckled.

One corner of my mouth turned up in a small smile, and I gave a timid shrug. "Everything's different with you."

At that she sort of just stared at me, her eyes running back and forth over my face. It didn't appear she knew what to say, or that she was confident in what I was implying. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten that serious in the first place, because I didn't have the nerve to tell her how I felt tonight, and now she was clearly wondering.

"I want to ask *you* something," I said before she could ask any questions. She blinked away her intense focus to nod. "Can I sleep here?"

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "You already sleep here." In response my gaze dropped to the mattress beside us, and Echo followed my eyes. "You mean on the bed?" she asked in shock. When I nodded she added unsurely, "With… me?"

"Well you'll be here," I pointed out, "And I'll be here. So, yeah." She was astounded, once again just staring at me and not appearing to know what to say. So I quickly said, "Thanks," got off her to slip under the covers

to say. So I quickly said, "Thanks," got off her to slip under the covers, and leaned to plant a kiss on her mouth. "Night." I turned onto my side, facing away from her because I was blushing again, and pulled the sheet up to my chin.

After a few moments she huffed with amusement, the light clicked off, and I heard her slip farther under the blankets. There was a huge part of me that was hoping Echo would find the courage at some point in the night to hold me. I wanted her close, always, and I wanted her to have the confidence to initiate more intimate closeness. It was my fault she was unsure, because of all the times I'd gotten upset with her for trying to show affection, and I knew that. In order to make the choice simpler I scooted back a little, bringing myself nearer to her, and I fell asleep hoping she'd get the hint.

Caught in the Middle

**** I know it's been forever guys. I was working hard to publish Interference and now that it's here I have time again to work on Charon. We're actually nearing the end here. After this update there's probably about 6 chapters left until it's over, just to give ya'll a heads up.*

I'll be updating again soon with more. No more month-long waits. Promise!

Strong by London Grammar

Caught in the Middle

Genevieve

My eyes cracked open to the pale glow of light filtering through the window of Echo's room, and as I blinked away the tired blur my mind processed more of the world around me. I could sense that it was earlier than seven in the morning. Feel the slight chill from outside that hadn't been melted away yet with the sun. I could feel a warm arm wrapped tight around my waist, and the heat of a body not inches away from my back.

Echo had done it. She'd found the courage to hold me. And it was worlds more comforting and delightful than I ever imagined it'd be.

"You're awake," Echo stated in a soft whisper.

I hadn't moved or shifted since waking. I hadn't even made a sound. "How'd you know?"

I began to reach under me for her hand, and she must've assumed I was going to remove her arm, because she started pulling it away to unravel herself from me. But that wasn't what I wanted. So I caught her hand before her arm disappeared, that way I could hug it to my chest.

Though I wasn't looking at her, I could hear the smile in her voice as she

answered, "you breathe different when you're sleeping," and scooted even closer.

It pressed her right up on me while her arm tightened around my torso, so I could feel every contour of her front against my back, and every bend from her hips through her legs cradled each of mine. It felt so natural, so perfect that I don't think we could've fit better if I actually melted into her.

"Have you been awake a long time?" I asked, tracing the lengths of her fingers near my chest. She murmured a confirmation. "You could've woke me up."

She was so close that I felt the hard breath she let out against the back of my neck. "I was afraid to."

I didn't have to ask to know why. She thought I'd make her stop. Thought I'd put distance between us, and maybe even get mad about how close she'd been in the first place. I wanted to turn around to look at her, to kiss her while I put her mind at ease, but the way we were right now felt so good I couldn't bring myself to move.

"I wanted this."

She hummed knowingly. "But speculating about what you want has always gotten me into trouble."

"That's fair," I said through a light laugh, and felt her chest quiver with mirrored amusement while her lips touched down against the back of my neck.

It was the barest, briefest peck, but it was in a spot that fired off every nerve ending in my body, causing me to wiggle involuntarily. It must've amused her, because she did it again. The reaction was more intense this time, making me twitch forward spastically. But she followed, kissing the back of my neck repeatedly until I couldn't take anymore, and snorted with laughter.

"That tickles!" I shrieked, throwing a hand to the back of my neck to block

her, only for her to plant a final kiss against my knuckles.

She was so warm when I let her act the way she wanted, so playful and gentle. In not forcing her to hold back and be guarded I was finally getting what I'd been so desperate for – access to some parts of her that weren't created by the raider. This was *her*. Not the shell created as a defense, not the hardened heart essential for survival. It was her, Echo in her barest.

"You have the most amazing laugh," Echo justified, and when I removed my hand she nuzzled into the spot of my neck she'd been kissing.

My eyes fluttered closed at the feel of her, and while I answered I scooted into her a little more. "It's not like you've never heard me laugh before."

"I haven't," she whispered against my skin, "not like that."

In response to that I squeezed her arm to me. Of course I'd never laughed like that before. I'd never felt the way I felt now. I could've lay here forever with her, but outside the camp was stirring. There were voices, the rumbling sound of a nearby truck. Everyone was heading to do their part in keeping this place running, and I could be no different.

"Samuel has a job for us today," I said, shifting under Echo's arm to turn and face her.

Her eyes had been closed, and they opened slowly to look at me as if she'd almost fallen back asleep. "There should be a rule against commander talk before breakfast," she mumbled, narrowing her eyes in mock displeasure.

"I'm preparing you," I told her seriously, knowing how little faith she had in a cure. "I don't think you're going to like it." The depth of her laugh line faded, and she stayed quiet to let me continue. "He wants us to bring him samples. From a Hunter."

"Meaning," she began in a sigh, glancing away reluctantly, "we leave the gates hoping we can find one." I hummed the affirmative. "Then we hope

it's alone, and that we can kill it without making enough noise to bring every other Feral in the area."

"Yeah," I confirmed, tensing my bottom lip down. "That's not all…"

Echo's gray eyes scanned my face, taking in the hesitant pursing of my lips. She knew me well enough that it only took a moment of careful thought to read my mind. "You're not even going to send a whole squad."

"I can't," I answered, almost pleading with her to agree. I'd always believed in strength in numbers, so this wasn't an easy decision. "Not with Jed around. I don't trust them here if our soldiers are evenly matched."

"We *can* kill it, right?" she asked through a sigh. I nodded. "You know, we could just make Jed leave…"

"It's hardly been half a week," I pointed out. "But I gave him an ultimatum. He takes Murph and gives the doc whatever he needs, or they leave. As soon as Dr. Issa gets whatever samples he wants, I'll kick them out."

Echo's eyebrows furrowed with the slightest apprehension. "Did Jed look mad when you said that?"

"A little," I answered, squinting at her curiously.

"Please be careful with him," she begged. "You're stubborn as hell and he is not the kind of guy you want to piss off."

"I will." I nodded eagerly to reassure her. "I'll be careful." At least she looked a little relieved, so I couldn't help but chuckle. "You think I'm stubborn?"

"I *know* you're stubborn," she laughed. "Hands down, you take the cake for most stubborn person I've ever known."

While I giggled in amusement, I slid my hand up the arm she had around my waist, running it back to her shoulder. She was wearing a tank top, so when my hand got to the back of her shoulder I could feel the

inconsistency of a scar there. It was the one from the cabin fire, glossier to the touch than the rest of her skin. With everything that had been going on lately I'd all but forgotten about it, but now my fingers ran across it, thoughtlessly committing the mark to memory.

"It's just a scar," Echo murmured after a few moments, breaking my sudden concentration. "I have plenty."

There was an imploring look in her eyes, as though my silent focus on it had been making her uncomfortable. Some of the scars were a source of guilt for her, she'd made that clear, but she didn't have to feel self-conscious. Not with me. Not anymore.

"Do any of them still hurt?" I asked softly, shifting my hand to her face, tracing my thumb across the newest one in her cheek, from her fight with Kellan.

After a long pause she answered, "not physically," and tilted her face away from my hand. "But that one's still sensitive."

I didn't know if her last statement meant physically or not, but I removed my hand in compliance. "Sorry." She gave an almost grateful smile. "You ready for breakfast?"

When she nodded I rolled out from under her arm, getting off the bed and plopping onto the couch to pull my boots on. Echo did the same at the foot of the bed, but the whole time she tightened and tied her laces I could feel her eyes on me. I expected that when I looked up she'd glance away, either flirtatiously or shy at being caught. However, when I met her gaze she continued to watch me for a few long moments before staring down at her hands.

"What is it?" I asked, catching the deep concern behind her expression, and stood to make my way over. She straightened up from finishing her laces when I stopped between her legs, but instead of looking up at me she leaned her head forward against my stomach. "Is it the Hunter? I promise we'll be smart about it."

"No," she whispered.

"Something I did?" I took her face in my hands, lifting it so she'd look at me. "Or said?"

Her hands set on my hips, backing me up a step so she could stand while she shook her head. "You're fine."

"And stubborn," I teased, pleased when she cracked a real smile.

"*So stubborn*," she groaned in agreement. The smile faded for another brief second before she caught herself, and she nodded toward the door. "Let's eat."

Something was bothering her, and she was having a hard time ignoring it. It wasn't something I could ask either, unsure of how she'd react if I asked too many questions. Getting her to talk about home before the outbreak last night felt like a milestone, and the last thing I needed was to make her regret it. So I grabbed my backpack, and followed her silently out the door and to the cafeteria.

There was a small line for food when we got there, but the moment Aminah spotted me from behind the counter she waved me over. I tapped Echo with the back of my hand, and motioned for her to come with me to the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" I asked Aminah, who'd met us at the door with a disgruntled crease in her forehead.

She paced back into the kitchen and a few feet behind the line of grills and ovens, to the prep counters, pointing with both hands. "This is what's wrong."

Echo and I trailed her to the back of the kitchen so we could see what she was pointing to. There were a couple of Jed's men standing around, holding back snickering behind poorly concealed smiles. The men were part of the hunting group Jed had sent out as their deal for entering the gates. The dead deer sitting on the steel prep counter was the spoils of their hunt, perfect except for the fact that the entire carcass was littered with bullet holes.

"If they're going to use the animals as target practice," Aminah said angrily, "then we're better off not sending them at all. We can't eat this." When that caused the men to titter, Aminah glared. "It's not funny."

"It is kind of funny," Echo muttered under her breath, quiet enough that only I could hear.

I nudged her to shut her up, not wanting to make Aminah more aggravated. "Okay, get this out of here," I said, motioning to Jed's guys. "Next time you go hunting don't get carried away."

"Yeah…" one of the men said slowly.

"We take orders from Jed," the other finished.

"Did he tell you to waste ammunition and food?" I asked sarcastically. I didn't know much about Jed, but he seemed like the kind of guy who took supplies seriously. Both of their mouths snapped shut, smiles fading. "Didn't think so. Clean this up."

"Wait, Aminah," Echo cut in before the men could grab the carcass. "Is there any way you could salvage a few scraps from this? The heart, or maybe the liver?"

Aminah's face scrunched with confusion, but she shrugged. "I guess I could try."

Echo glanced over at me, and avoided doing it again when she caught my curious expression, knowing I'd ask what she wanted it for. "Thanks, I'll come back for it later."

Aminah nodded, and began to shoo the men out of the kitchen when it hit me what Echo was doing with the scraps. And with a portion of meat from every meal she'd eaten since Jed had arrived.

"Are you kidding me," I grumbled, grabbing her arm and dragging her away so nobody would hear. "You've been feeding that dog, haven't you?"

Her lips pursed reluctantly. "…No."

"Echo," I groaned, "You keep telling me that Jed is dangerous, and you've been sneaking over there alone?"

"I don't think they ever feed the poor thing," she replied quietly, glancing past me to make sure no one was listening. "He let me pet him yesterday. He's actually pretty sweet." She took in my concerned frown, and shrugged guiltily. "I have a weakness for dogs."

"Please don't go over there anymore," I begged. If she was right about how dangerous Jed was then I didn't want to begin to think about what they'd do if they caught her sneaking around. Tension was already high enough without that unnecessary conflict.

"But the dog," she whined.

"Promise me," I said sternly.

"How about this," she stated, "I'll take him the deer scraps, and then bring him back to the room with me."

I actually almost laughed. "You can't just steal someone's dog."

She pouted, jutting her bottom lip out and successfully looking so cute I almost couldn't stay upset. "They obviously don't care."

I dropped my chin, giving her a scolding scowl through my eyelashes. "Don't go over there anymore."

Before she could respond I turned, not wanting to hear whether or not she'd listen. Since we were behind the serving counter, I ducked in and filled two bowls with stew so Echo and I wouldn't have to get back in line. She smiled gratefully as I handed her a dish, and then we went out to the dining room. My eyes scanned the tables to see who was around, and I spotted Blake, sitting a few tables behind Jed and some of his crew.

As we strode over I told Echo, "go sit with Blake, I'll be right there." She noticed my gaze wander toward Jed, but when she opened her mouth to

protest I nodded her on. "Don't worry." I didn't want her interacting with him any more than she had to. He'd gotten to her the other day, and I had my suspicions that he was part of what was bothering her.

She continued on, sitting opposite of Blake so she could still see me at Jed's table. I dropped my bowl of stew onto the surface, roughly enough that the noise got Jed's attention, and plopped down across from him and Mia.

"Your hunting party isn't up to par," I told him, trying to ignore the cold, malignant stare I was getting from the woman at his side.

He'd been halfway to lifting his spoon to his lips, but when I said that he stopped, lowering it back to his bowl. "What's the problem?"

"The amount of bullets they think it takes to bring down a deer," I answered, glancing past him to see that Echo was watching intently. "Wouldn't be a problem if we liked eating lead for breakfast."

Mia's lips pulled into a smirk, but she didn't say anything, and all Jed responded with was, "okay." He'd been a lot more talkative last night. Even though I wasn't sure whether he'd taken me seriously, I was about to get up, seeing as he didn't seem like saying much. But just when I shifted to stand he said, "I think I figured it out," and swallowed a spoonful of stew.

My eyes wandered from him to Mia, taking in the differences of their attitudes. Mia was so much quieter than him. She didn't care to mask her coldness behind sarcastic, runaround conversation. Not like Jed did.

"What?" I asked.

"You both want the relationship," he stated, revisiting our conversation from last night. My jaw set with clear annoyance. "She just doesn't know it." It had been amusing last night, but now he'd actually guessed something right. "And you haven't told her because you're afraid."

It wasn't amusing anymore. I reached for my bowl, about to pick it up so I wouldn't hear what he was going to say, but the moment my hand set on

if his own massive hand shot across the table, landing hard on my wrist to hold me in place. It was a shock, and I felt a flicker of panic cross my face. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Echo move, but I rapidly looked at her and shook my head, knowing what she was capable of and reluctant for this to escalate.

"Get your hand off me," I said firmly, staring him dead in the eyes so he knew I was serious. "And don't ever touch me again."

"You're afraid," he continued, unconcernedly releasing his grip on my arm, "because you know exactly what haunts her dreams at night." My eyes wandered past him to Echo. "You don't come back from the things she's done. Ever."

I glared at him, not sure what to say. I didn't know exactly how deep Echo's internal wounds went. I didn't know if she ever still thought about it, or how often, or if it scared her. She'd only ever talked about it once. Maybe he was right about Echo, but he was wrong about my fear.

"Deep down you know she'll never be good enough for you-"

"Fuck you, Jed," I interrupted in a whisper.

"Because," he continued, undeterred and with a fresh, smug light in his eyes, "guilt like that sticks, and lingers, and consumes, and no matter how well she pretends to be what you want, she'll always be a killer."

"I won't sit here for this," I mumbled angrily, and began to lift myself out of my seat again.

"Sit down," Jed growled in a quiet command, "you'll want to hear this." Despite my fury and the fact that I knew I should just walk away, I lowered myself back into my seat. He hadn't been this aggressive since arriving, and it was bewitchingly terrifying. "I'm going to make Echo an offer," he said, taking another collected slurp of stew. "And when we leave here, she'll leave with us."

My fist clenched furiously. "If you lay one finger on her, I'll kill you."

This time Mia chuckled, leaning forward to set her elbows on the surface

This time Mia chuckled, leaning forward to set her elbows on the surface of the table. "Careful, Genevieve," she stated in her smug accent, "your cards are showing."

"She'll come willingly," Jed put in calmly, as though he hadn't heard the disguised threat. "Enthusiastically, even. And there's a part of you that knows that because there's a part of you that knows she's keeping things from you."

"I know all about her past," I grumbled, unable to lift myself from this spot despite how irritated I was.

"Do you?" he asked unsurely. "Maybe you know things. But you ever kill someone in cold blood? You ever see the look in someone's eyes when they know they're about to die for something worth so much less than their life?" He leaned forward, getting closer to me and saying more quietly, "have you ever been begged for life? Because I guarantee you she has, and if you knew what it took to kill like that, then you'd know exactly what she knows." All I could do was stare at him wide-eyed, at the same time both desperate and afraid to hear what both he and Echo knew. "Atonement is a dead end."

"Tomorrow," I growled in an irate murmur, shooting out of my seat. "I want you guys gone." He wouldn't take Echo from me. I wouldn't let him get to her anymore than he already had.

"You know," Jed sighed, his tone portraying reluctance to disappoint me while his eyes reveled in it, "I took Murph to your doctor this morning. Old man said he wants us around tomorrow." His brown eyes scanned my face, squinting with pompous satisfaction. "In case he needs more blood or anything like that."

I knew exactly what he was doing, and I *hated* that it worked. But the cure. The cure was everything. "Two days," I muttered through clenched teeth. "You have two more days for you to give the doctor whatever he needs from your brother, and you guys are out." I scowled from him to Mia, my face hot with fury. "You're going to pack your shit and leave, and if not then we're going to have a real fucking problem."

Jed's lips curled into a smirk, and he raised a hand to his forehead in a sarcastic salute. "Aye, aye, Captain."

I couldn't stand looking at his goddamn face for another second, so I grabbed my bowl and practically stomped to Blake's table. I threw myself into the seat at Echo's side, feeling all eyes at the table on me. At least Jed and Mia had their backs to me, and appeared to have no interest in follow up gazing.

"He got in your head," Echo said worriedly.

"No," I grumbled, gripping my spoon hard in my hand. "He just pissed me off."

My jaw was still clenched, teeth grinding loud enough that nobody dared say anything else to me the rest of the meal. The fury fogging my head, the anger boiling hotter and hotter in my chest the longer I glared at Jed's back, it was all secondary to a more troubling emotion. It was all defensiveness for the irrational but albeit subtle doubt in the pit of my stomach. Echo had tried leaving before. Though she'd been furious with me at the time, the potential was there. Her anger at me for almost letting her get bit had been a catalyst, and that might be all she needed now. What if Jed was that catalyst? What if he could convince her to resent me for everything I'd put her through? Or what if he could convince her that life would be better with them? That she wasn't meant for stasis.

It plagued me the whole time we were eating, until after leaving the cafeteria to head to the medical complex I had to voice it in some way. It ended up leaving my lips a hollow question, audibly rattled. "Do you ever miss being with the raiders?"

Echo glanced sideways at me while her eyebrows knitted, and she let out an amused huff. It only took a few extra seconds before she realized I wasn't joking, and then she stopped, putting a hand on my arm to stop me too. "Are you serious?" This time the huff she let out was offended.

"Would you ever go back?" I asked quietly, unsure of if I didn't want her to be upset and offended or if I wanted her to get so offended that it alone would reassure me. "Don't look at me like that," I begged in response to

the look in her eyes. She didn't seem offended. She was hurt.

Her gray eyes took me in. "He got to you."

"No," I replied defensively, but we both knew it wasn't entirely true. I raised one hand to my head, massaging my fingertips into my temple. "Shit. I don't know."

"It's because I'm a raider," she breathed, leaning back against the nearest building, unpredictably struck. "He used it because it's always going to be the blemish between us."

"No, no, no." I moved hastily into her line of sight. "It's not what you think."

She shook her head in disbelief. "You don't trust me."

"Echo, listen to me," I said firmly, "the only person in the world I trust as much as you is Blake. Do you understand how important that is?" She watched me for a few long, tense seconds before nodding. "Jed did get to me," I admitted, laughing at my own stupidity, "and now I feel like a dumbass."

Echo was silent a few moments more, recovering from whatever panic I'd caused. "Genevieve," she said seriously, pushing herself off the wall, "I'd *never* go back."

I nodded, telling her sincerely, "I believe you."

One corner of her mouth pursed in a grateful smile, and even though we both started again for the medical complex, she remained silent at my side. Whether or not she accepted that I truly believed her, the damage was clearly done. I'd hurt her feelings, and the only way I knew to try and remedy that was the same way I always tried. Physically. We'd hardly got halfway to the medical complex before I reached for her hand, slipping my fingers between hers. It didn't matter anymore if people saw, not even Micah, because what was going through Echo's head was more important to me. While we walked we passed by a group of soldiers, a mixed group of Jed's men and my own. At seeing Echo and I coming

they disbanded, but I was too concerned with Echo to think much about it.

"I'm sorry," I offered, when the only response I got from holding her hand was that her fingers folded around mine. "I shouldn't have even asked."

Her lips parted and she took in a breath, as though preparing to say something. She let it out while her gaze dropped to our intertwined hands, and she inhaled another. Those gray eyes traveled up my arm to my own eyes, studying me for only a brief moment. "It's fine," she sighed.

It wasn't fine. I could see that in her eyes, feel it in the tense grip of her fingers. Not knowing what was bothering her so much was starting to worry me, but there was no more time to ask. We'd reached the urgent care, and she dropped my hand to hold the door open for me.

Micah was lounging in the waiting seats next to the door, sitting sideways with his legs thrown over the arms of the adjacent chairs, reading a book. After smiling hello at him I waved at Casey, who was sitting behind the front desk and talking to Imogen.

"Hey," I greeted, reaching them and leaning my elbows against the counter. My gaze fell on Imogen, and curious why she was here I asked, "what's going on?"

Imogen's brown eyes didn't meet mine once while she answered, "Ty sliced his hand open." She turned away, muttering under her breath as she headed toward the exam rooms, "I should check on him."

"She's still pissed at me," I said when she was out of sight.

Casey gave a sympathetic smile. "The loss is fresh," she said, "give it time."

I nodded, about to ask where Samuel was when I heard Echo inquire in a whisper, "what are you reading?" She was talking to Micah. She'd inched herself closer to him, and was leaning forward a bit to try and see the front of the novel. He glanced up at her, and hesitated for a moment before tilting the book so she could see the front. "How do you like it?"

I was shocked at the interaction I was witnessing, and even though it was strained and a bit awkward to watch the last thing I was about to do was interrupt.

"A lot," Micah answered simply, not appearing entirely enthusiastic about the exchange.

At least, not until Echo asked, "did you reach the plot twist yet?"

Then Micah's lips twitched with a smile. "A few pages ago."

"Did it completely blow your mind or what?" Echo said knowingly.

"Yeah," Micah answered with the smallest of friendly chuckles. "I had to reread it like four times."

Echo laughed, her head bobbing like she understood. "If you can find a copy you should read the sequel. It's even better."

"Okay," Micah agreed, and his gaze finally wandered over to me. "I'll try to look," he paused when he realized that Casey and I were watching them, and finished awkwardly at having been caught, "for… one…" He cleared his throat, shifting in his seat and resuming deliberate focus on the book in his hands.

Echo looked at me too, giving a smile almost as awkward as the look on Micah's face while she strode over to the counter. "Where's Dr. Issa?" she asked distractedly.

"Right here," Samuel answered, coming out of the hallway and stopping when he reached us. "Good morning." He set a small medical pouch on the counter, pushing it toward me. "To gather samples from the Hunter." Then he stuck his hand into his pocket, pulling out a black, folded up trash bag.

I didn't have to ask to know what the bag was for. Samuel still wanted the head. "Any idea where we should search?" I asked.

"I know." Micah jumped out of his seat, tossing the book down where he'd been sitting as he hurried over. "I studied a map of the area all morning." I watched him expectantly, waiting for him to explain the location. "There's a really small town a bit to the west. Hunters we've seen are smart enough to know people like buildings. They'll probably be around there."

"Can you mark it on the map?" I suggested, that way we'd know exactly where to go.

Instead he glanced back and forth between Samuel and I, as though asking for permission. "I'll take you there."

I shook my head instantly. "That's not a good idea."

"Why?" he protested readily. "I know exactly where to go, and I have experience with this. I've done it with Samuel."

When I looked at Samuel for confirmation he gave a timid nod, but I still wasn't sold. "I don't know what you're capable of in the field. And I'd have to give you a gun."

Micah knew exactly what I meant by that last statement, as he looked directly at Echo. "I won't try anything. I promise."

I met Echo's gaze, searching for how she felt about it. After a few moments she shrugged. "As long as he doesn't try to shoot me."

"I won't," he assured us both eagerly, already pulling a county map out of his back pocket. "I swear." Since it seemed like he had a plan, I let him spread the map out over the counter. "It's simple. There's a building here," he pointed to a pink outline on the map, "at the edge of the town. Someone has to be bait, and lure a Hunter to the roof where the other two can be back up from the woods. It won't attack if there's more than one of us."

"Okay," I said, not entirely fond of using one of us as bait. "You've done this before?"

Micah nodded. "With Samuel."

Micah nodded. "With Samuel."

"Alright." I thought about it a little more, studying the map. "Then once I'm on the roof I'll need to draw some attention. Maybe shoot some Ferals so a Hunter knows I'm there."

At the same exact time Micah said, "you're not being the bait," Echo said, "like hell you're going on that roof."

I looked at both of them, and while it was nice they agreed on something, I couldn't live without either of them. "Well I'm not risking either of you two, so."

"I have to do it," Echo said.

I shook my head. "I'm faster than you."

"And I'm faster than you," Micah told me.

"A lot of good that does on a roof," Echo argued. "Listen Genevieve, you're a dead eye with a rifle. I don't trust my aim enough to fire when you're close by." She looked at Micah, "no offense, kid, but I don't trust yours enough either." He shrugged in agreement, so she turned to me again. "Worst comes to worst, I can defend myself long enough for you to get a shot off. You might not even need to if I can shoot it before it gets close. It makes the most sense."

I let out a heavy sigh, and when my gaze wandered to Samuel he offered an apologetic smile for the position he was putting me in. "Fine." This cure was starting to cause more trouble than it might be worth. "Let's go catch a Hunter."

Warm Shadow

Warm Shadow by Fink

Warm Shadow

Echo

Walking into the cafeteria for lunch, I squinted through the thick crowd of soldiers and civilians. Everyone from camp was here to celebrate what Dr. Issa had discovered with the sample we'd brought him yesterday. For years I hadn't believed in a cure, but all his research had been proving again and again was that Hunter's weren't as contagious. The more a parasite evolved, the less capable it was of transmitting the infection. It was it's own cure, and Genevieve had allotted an extra camp-wide meal in dedication of the discovery.

Only, Genevieve was nowhere to be found.

I exited the cafeteria and brought my radio to my lips. "Genevieve?"

There was a moment of static before, "I hear you. Over."

"Where are you?" I asked.

All she responded with was 'the house,' but I knew what she meant. I headed away from the DFAC, walking down empty streets until I reached the housing tract. I opened the blue front door slowly, barely sticking my head through so it wouldn't disturb her if she was in a bad mood. That was the only reason I could think of that she wouldn't want to celebrate. But there she was, at the island in the kitchen, her rifle spread out in pieces on the counter in front of her, looking perfectly calm.

"What are you doing?" I asked, closing the door behind me.

"Cleaning my rifle." She held up a part in her dirty, oil-covered hands, smiling at me in greeting while I dropped my backpack near the door.

"Why aren't you at lunch?"

Instead of answering she waved me over. "Come here."

I strode to her side, and when I got there she took my hand, directing me behind her and then pulling my arms to wrap them around her waist. After securing them at her stomach she resumed cleaning the barrel of her gun, still without answering my question. I almost forgot I'd even asked one over the thudding of my heart. I thought my feelings for her couldn't get any stronger, but then she kept doing things like this, and I kept finding out I was wrong. It felt so good that I nuzzled my face into the back of her neck, losing myself in her warmth.

"Genevieve," I prompted after a minute. She hummed in acknowledgment. "Why don't you want to celebrate?"

Her torso lifted beneath my arms with a deep breath, and her hands halted their brushing against the metal. "It's... it's not the cure I expected."

"You're disappointed," I realized, shocked.

"I know," she whined, resuming scrubbing more furiously than she had been, "it's terrible."

I reached out to stop her hand, to calm her down because this was me. The same me who'd never even believed in a cure, and the same me who'd never judge her for it. "What's disappointing about it?"

She set down the barrel, slowly turning her hand over to slip her fingers between mine. "We've all lost so much," she answered, and her chin dropped with discouragement. "It could take decades before there are no more contagious Ferals. I guess, I don't know, I wanted something immediate. I can't lose any more."

Genevieve was always so resilient it was hard to remember sometimes that the loss of camp, and of Cap, was so fresh. She put on a strong front for the people here, for her soldiers, but she'd been letting me see sides of her that she didn't show anyone else.

"Hey," I said soothingly, bringing my arm back to her stomach so I could squeeze her tight. "We built a home here. It's safe, and you have me, and Micah, Blake, Casey, and April. When Jed leaves things can go back to normal." I was glad she couldn't see me, afraid she'd get upset when I added, "*we* can be normal." She didn't say a word in protest. "You're going to get so bored."

"Bored sounds nice," Genevieve chuckled.

"It really does," I agreed. "Do you want to go celebrate?"

She picked up the oil brush and another part of her rifle. "Let's stay here."

I couldn't help but smile, feeling like she wanted to stay because of how close we were. She put us like this. She wanted us like this, even if she was focusing on something else.

But I could only focus on watching her hands work for a few minutes before I started getting distracted by the way she felt in my arms. I held her like this while we were sleeping again, but it was completely different now that we were both wide-awake. The way her back was pressed into my front, how her perfectly round backside curved into my hips. It wasn't comforting. It was stirring, and my hands were itching with impulses that would've landed me in a world of trouble a week ago.

I wanted to touch her, kiss her. I wanted to run my groping hands over every curve and feel her quiver beneath my palms. I wanted to make her pant, and moan, and most of all when it was over I wanted her to stay. But I was terrified that she wouldn't, so I loosened my arms and set my hands on her hips, nervously testing her reaction to the touch.

She continued working on a rifle part, unconcerned with my first simple motion, so this time my hands ran up her waist, tracing the arch I knew by memory. When I brought them back down I planted a kiss against the back of her neck, and her work on the part finally slowed with recognition. She could feel the motive in each touch, but still she let me move them back up, so far that I reached the base of her breasts. I went down again, dragging my fingers from her ribs to her hips, holding my breath with anticipation as I drew her deeper into me.

anticipation as I drew her deeper into me.

I released that satisfied breath when she let me, and she stopped working completely, turning her head just enough to nudge the side of her face against my nose. That was all the consent I needed to pull her hips even harder while I pressed my open lips to that spot beneath her ear, and she was so close that I felt her back rise with a deep breath against my chest. Even more, she leaned into me, tilting her head to the side so I could kiss her favorite spot uninhibited. This time my hands didn't stop at her ribs. They continued straight up to her chest, and every time my lips closed against her skin she pulsed into their grip, filling my hands with herself like she wanted more. Eventually she slid a hand up my arm, grabbing one of mine encouragingly while the other reached back for my neck, eagerly approving of what my mouth was doing. But I wanted more too, and my mouth moved lower at the same time my hands did.

"Echo," Genevieve whispered when my fingers tightened over the button of her jeans. "What are we doing?"

I lifted my lips from her skin and froze, afraid she'd stop me even though we were finally alone, finally free of any interfering tasks. "It seemed like the perfect time."

"It is," she agreed. "But my hands are filthy." She lifted one to show me.

I almost laughed. "How about," I said, undoing the button with a flick of my wrist, "you don't worry about me. Let me worry about you." She turned her head a little more, and her dark brown eyes locked on mine, watching me without protest while I slipped my hand past her waist, beneath the lining of her underwear and deep into the front of them. "Oh my God, Genevieve," I breathed, feeling the pit of my stomach lurch at the state they were in. I'd hardly touched her yet.

She let out a huff of amusement. "What did you expect?"

"Well," I said hesitantly, "that you'd make me work for it."

She slid her hand down over mine, impatiently pressing my fingers into the soaked flesh, and I felt it so hard between my own legs that I almost

the soaked flesh, and I felt it so hard between my own legs that I almost whined with need. "You've been working at it for months." Her eyes fluttered closed when I ran a finger flat up the length of her, and she leaned her forehead against my cheek. "I'm done saying no to you."

Fuck she was *so wet*. I couldn't have held back if I wanted to. My fingers set to work against her, and I'd barely completed my first motion when she collapsed forward, leaning her arms and head down against the counter. I'd never seen her like this, so yielding. She set her head against a forearm while her other hand twisted through her hair, and with each stroke I made a fist twitched with pleasure. Her free one clenched or splayed, or the one in her hair mussed a handful from a spasm beneath my finger.

I loved seeing the curve of her from behind, bent over like she was. Even with a shirt on I could follow up the muscled lines of her spine and lower back, all features I knew by heart, and when my other hand pressed into those features she arched against it. Reaching around her like I was I had to lean a little, so I pushed her shirt up her back to give my lips a destination, to give my fingers the skin they were craving, but…

"You're *so* sexy."

I ended up leaning back just to admire the shape of her. The way her hips curved into her waist, the smooth and delicate texture of her flesh, the dip her shoulder blades made at the top of her back.

Out of every moment I'd ever looked at her, this was my favorite. It wasn't just the physical reaction it stirred in me. It was the emotional one. This was the first time she'd ever let me really *look* at her without protest, knowing full well *why* I was doing the looking. And she wanted it. The evidence was between her thighs, in the silk against my fingers. It was in the way I was in such awe that my hand stopped its motion, and for a minute she let it happen. She let me *look*. She let me touch, and trace, and caress. She let my lips land open and wet on her shoulder blade. Genevieve was giving herself to me, compliant and melting into my every gesture.

"Echo," she prompted, my name escaping just two desperate syllables

from her throat. Her hand left her hair to reach down for mine, nudging it back into motion. "And don't be so gentle."

The way she said my name. I felt it in my groin and at the same time my stomach fluttered and my cheeks flared. For a moment I lost myself in the intense reception my body had to hearing it, and this time it was all physical.

"Turn," I instructed on an excited breath, giving her hip an indicative nudge.

She straightened, turning fast and when she spun her lips found mine. Her mouth crashed on my own, her arms wrapping around my neck while I pushed her backward into the counter. I trapped my hand between her hips and mine, using them as leverage to satisfy her plea, to press my fingers more roughly against her. She let out a hard breath on my lips at the achievement between her legs, and it barreled through the excited pounding in my chest.

This time Genevieve tangled her hands in *my* hair, but she couldn't decide about leaving them there. They snaked through a handful, cupped my face to kiss me deeper, flew up my shirt just to scrape down my back, or grabbed my hips to force them more strongly against hers. I could feel the grimy oil trails she was leaving on my face and neck and back as her hands clawed, anywhere and everywhere all at once and mixing with the excited heat rushing from my pores.

In her desperation it was clear she wasn't getting all she wanted, and she finally pulled away from the kiss just long enough to beg, "*harder*."

With months of owed payback I would've loved to tease her. I would've loved to ease back on my touch instead, to make her so desperate that she'd *really* beg. But I was so eager to give her what she wanted that I did something she'd done so many times to me. I pushed two fingers deep inside her. She exhaled a whimpered sigh of relief into my mouth as she went slack-jawed, grabbing my face in her hands to lean her forehead against mine, and her body praised me for it by tightening around me.

I curled my fingers just enough that she'd feel the extra pressure and eased into her again. The next time I did it her hips met my hand, and it wasn't just her jaw that stayed limp at the feeling. Her head dropped against my shoulder, both hands falling weakly to my lower back. Like always she was still so quiet. She didn't moan. The only sounds she made was her breathing, heavier with every passing second. But even though she'd gone weak she was *so* responsive. It didn't take long before she'd recovered enough to do as much of the work as I was. Every thrust of my hand was met with the grinding of her hips, each more eager than the last. She even lowered her hands to my hips, guiding me against her to match her rhythm. It was such a turn on to feel her moving against me and on me and around me, and I could imagine vividly what she was experiencing.

Though she tried, she was breathing too hard to kiss me. Each exhale landed hot and brief on my tongue, but I wanted to please her with any part of me that I could. I lowered my mouth to the stimulated salt at her neck, and for a moment I breathed her in. Every bit of her was wet. Her scent was damp in my nose and the air between my lips and her flesh was humid, thick and intoxicating. I got completely lost in the smell of her, in the motion of her hips against mine, in the way her heat felt around my fingers, and I forgot to work my mouth over her pulse.

Until she raised a hand to my head, guiding my lips onto her. My tongue pressed deep into her neck, I sucked and nipped so hard at her pulse and I knew that it hurt. Her fingers tangled in my hair, clenching every time I got rough to *tell* me that it hurt. But she wouldn't let me stop. Instead of trying to pull my mouth away she pushed harder. It's what she wanted and so it's what I wanted. I wanted *so much* of her, and I would've felt greedy if she weren't just as desperate for it.

I had a free hand wrapped around the small of her back, holding her to me. Now I created just enough space between Genevieve and I to slip it under her shirt. Her ribs and stomach expanded repeatedly beneath my palm, fast and hard and frenzied. I was too excited, too consumed to try being gentle, and I knew she didn't care. I forced her bra higher up her chest, and when I took her breast in my hand her fingers squeezed hard at my hips. It was a gesture of consent, but her motion against the hand

between her legs was getting desperate in an entirely different way. She wasn't grinding into me with the same pleased rhythm as before. It was erratic, a movement in urgent need of a release.

When I pulled out of her she took in a calculated breath, and I knew she was going to remind me not to be gentle. I said 'I know' before she could get anything out, and when I made a powerful stroke against her she *finally* let out a soft moan.

To give her even more I raised her shirt up her chest, taking only a moment to look at the perfection of this part of her body before lowering my mouth to the breast my hand had been touching. Her fingers tangled in my hair again while I worked my lips and swirled my tongue. She arched into it, taking in a stunted breath when I flicked my tongue over her nipple. There was no rhythm to anything anymore. Her breathing contrasted with the clutch of her fingers at my head and hip, the grinding of her hips couldn't cooperate with the stroke of my hand. She was *so* close, and her hips bucked harder when I teased the firm flesh of her breast between my teeth. I'd never let go so completely, never been so careless and untamed, but the harsher Genevieve's breathing got the more I wanted to lose myself to her plea of harder.

Eventually she grabbed me by the shirt collar, yanking me up so she could kiss me. But she only kissed me for a moment before whipping us around. She pinned me so roughly against the counter I felt a sharp sting in the back of my hip, and she set her forehead against mine once more while she trapped my hand between the two of us. She was pressed too tight against me for me to move it, for me to continue touching her, but I didn't need to. Her grungy fingers dug deep into my back, and she curled into me as her jaw dropped, her eyes squeezing shut with the euphoria she was feeling against my hand. All I could do was watch her in complete awe at the silent release of tension, at the way her hips throbbed against me, or how her lips kept brushing against my own, trying to kiss me but entirely breathless.

When it was over she sighed the breath she'd been holding and slid her arms around my neck, leaning weak against me so I could support her weight. I pulled my hand out from between us, and wrapped my own

arms around her waist to hold her up.

"You are *so* aggressive," I chuckled. I never would've thought I'd be into giving it like that, but I was such an unpredictable combination of aroused and amused that all I could do was laugh.

Genevieve pressed her lips to mine in a slow, tired kiss. "Sorry," she said, however the smirk in her mouth said she was anything but sorry. "You don't know how bad I needed that." She untangled her arms from my neck to kiss me again, and as her tongue slid over my bottom lip her fingers tugged at the button of my cargos.

"I thought your hands were filthy," I teased, but it wasn't protest I felt when she lowered the zipper.

Her brown eyes met mine while she got close like she was going to kiss me again, but instead she whispered against my lips, "I decided I don't need them."

I blinked at her with surprise, "are you going to-" and stopped short when she began to ease down my pants and underwear, sliding herself down my body while she lowered them to my boots. It put her face *right there*, and she appeared so pleased with herself at my expression. Then she pressed her mouth to my inner thigh, and it was open and I could see the tip of her tongue touch my skin, and it was *so damn close*. "Oh my God," I groaned, feeling my face flush as she lifted herself back up, "that's such a turn on."

"Good," she smiled, and after pushing all the rifle parts to the side of the island she patted the surface. "Up."

I inched myself onto the counter, still gawking at her in shock. I'd lost so much brain function that I just sat there for a few seconds, stiff until she stepped between my legs to give me long, deep kiss. She gave my shoulder a push to lie me down, and once I was on my back she pulled at my hips to get me at the edge of the counter. Then nothing happened at first, and I lifted my head to look at her, suddenly afraid. This wasn't my first time, but I was fairly sure Genevieve had never done this before. Plus she'd set her hands on my knees, and now she was just staring

straight between my legs. I couldn't tell if it's what she expected. Or if she could tell exactly how turned on I was, and if she found that intimidating or not.

"You don't have to do this," I told her. Her eyes moved past my torso to look at me, but she didn't say anything while she slid her hands up my thighs, to my hips where she pushed the bottom of my shirt up out of the way. It exposed that stab wound scar on my hip, and now her eyes locked onto it, unwavering and transfixed, but unreadable. "Genevieve?" I prompted timidly, terrified that this was the part where she starts to regret it, and tells me she hates me before storming away. "We can stop." She traced the length of the scar with her fingertip, so thoughtfully I wasn't even sure if she could hear me. "I'm perfectly fine ending it where w-"

Her mouth lowered to the scar, where she planted the softest kiss I'd ever felt leave her lips. It was the last thing I ever expected her to do. She hated that scar. But it made my heart and stomach flutter so bad my breathing stopped. "Echo," her mouth lingered over the mark for a few moments while she whispered gently, "stop talking."

I nodded, watching her hands return to my knees. She pushed them farther apart, and once she'd exposed her destination she stared again, her expression completely impossible to read.

"Are you nervous?" I asked, concerned she felt obligated to do this. At the question her gaze was pulled to mine once more, and she didn't look away while she lowered her mouth, making a slow, responsive stroke with her tongue. I threw my hands to my head at the hard clench between my legs, biting my bottom lip to stifle an expletive.

"No," Genevieve finally answered, and when I managed to move my hands I caught the pleased smirk on her face.

She didn't give me another chance to say anything before burying her lips against that tender part of me. But it wasn't just her lips. It was her lips, and her chin, and her tongue. God, her tongue. Fuck if she hadn't figured out a long time ago exactly how I like it, and for how rough she enjoyed it herself, she knew how to tone things down for me. She could

be so gentle. If I focused past her mouth I could feel her hands. One was reached up to my waist, her fingers making delicate lines over my ribs and naval and hips. The other was at my knee, keeping it apart from my other so she could easily keep doing what she was with her mouth.

And her ability to be subdued without sacrificing technique translated *so well* in her tongue. That soft, hot, strong muscle working perfectly scribed circles into my core. The push of it moving in brilliant partnership with the pull of her lips. There was so much pressure building so fast between my hips. It made me weak, drawing out each shaky breath in a barely managed moan. Like she knew it she applied varying degrees with her tongue, and so skillfully. Her mouth swelled and surged, soft and softer. Higher here, lower there. She knew me so goddamn well.

I lifted my head to look at her. I wanted to see just what she was doing to make it feel *this* amazing. I could only keep it up long enough to groan, "you're so fucking gorgeous," before dropping it again.

But that brief look had been enough. I could still see her looking up at me. The smile in her eyes because she knew exactly what she was doing to me. It was Genevieve doing this to me. No matter how many times we'd been together, never in a million years did I think I'd ever have her face between my thighs. But she *was* doing it. And it was amazing, and fucking sexy, and it was *Genevieve*.

I took in one deep breath to fuel the peak of pressure that went crashing through me. My back flexed away from the counter and my hands shot down, grabbing Genevieve's head while I rolled my hips against her mouth. And she didn't stop. She let me drive myself over her tongue. The hand at my hip gripped to hold me to her, and the one at my knee pushed harder so my unruly tightening couldn't force her away. Not until that pulsing feeling left me and my back met the surface again did she cease her movements.

Then I realized I was still holding her between my legs, and I released my hands in a panic. I'd never done that before. I couldn't control myself with her and I really hoped she wouldn't be offended by it. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." She stretched her neck a bit, though the action seemed a little

playful by the way she chuckled. "…I actually kind of like it."

I dropped my head back to recover more fully, but I'd hardly laid it down when I felt her tongue return, causing me to gasp with thrilled surprise. "Okay," I consented as I let that breath out, already lacking oxygen because the pressure was building so much faster this time. "Genevieve," I moaned, not bothering to keep my hands from running through her hair because she liked it. "You're way too good at-" I swallowed hard. "I'm going to-" I glanced down at her, seeing the question 'already?' flash in her eyes, and I couldn't even finish what I'd been about to say.

I let out another loud moan, feeling my body tense as every muscle seized. Her tongue continued through the entire climax, but unlike last time she didn't stop once I relaxed. She kept going even after it ended.

"Again?" I panted, feeling the answer in a series of strokes between my legs, and only seconds later I was already back on the edge. "Holy shit."

I pursed my lips to keep from screaming with pleasure, and released a muffled hum instead, rocking myself against the glorious source of euphoria. It didn't last quite as long, but I was still exhausted and out of breath. I couldn't even lift my head, at least for a minute, but I felt Genevieve's arms fold over my stomach, and an additional weight as I imagined she set her chin on top.

"That's amazing," she mused. I didn't have to look to hear the entertained smile in her voice.

"You have no idea," I laughed.

We were both silent and still for a minute. I could feel Genevieve watching me, but I was too weak to move just yet. She was the first to shift, unfolding her arms, and it wasn't until she traced the scar in my hip again that I lifted myself onto my elbows. I don't know what her fascination was with my scars lately, but I was afraid it would upset her if she paid too much attention to them.

"Sorry," she said when she caught me watching her

"Sorry," she said when she caught me watching her.

She backed up a couple steps so I could slide off the island, and while she fixed the part of her shirt I'd misplaced I pulled my pants back up, too lazy still to completely button them. Hell, I was too lazy to even stand.

"Couch," I murmured, trudging over and dropping onto my back.

Genevieve followed, and after lowering herself directly on top of me she wedged her arms beneath me, squeezing my torso tight. It almost felt too good to be true that she hadn't started to regret it yet. I was afraid to say anymore, afraid that my voice would be the thing to snap her out of it, so instead of saying anything I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, waiting for her to speak first.

It took a few minutes before she planted a kiss against my neck and lifted enough to look at me. "Echo?"

"Hm?"

"I want to tell you something," she said. I nodded, reaching up to push a bit of hair behind her ear, but she side-glanced at my hand and pulled away. "Which hand is that?" she asked suspiciously.

I couldn't help but smirk. "Exactly the hand you think it is." She lifted up farther, grabbing my wrist when I teasingly followed her with my hand.

"Stop!" she shrieked with laughter, trying to push it away. "Get out of here!" she giggled. "I'm trying to tell you something important!"

I was still chuckling, but I stopped and complied by dropping my hands to her waist. "Okay, what?"

She got so serious in less than an instant. "Um." And I don't know if she was shy or uncomfortable, but she wouldn't look me in the eyes for more than a brief second at a time. "I've never said it in this context before, okay, so take it seriously."

"Alright…"

She so rarely blushed, but her cheeks colored while she sat up between my legs. "I love you."

I sat up slowly, and for a whole minute I just stared at her, completely dumfounded and speechless. I'd waited my whole life to hear her say that, but now that she had something about it caused a spark of panic.

"Why do you look freaked out?" she asked.

I cleared my throat to rid the growing lump. "Genevieve, I just…" I couldn't figure out how to say it. Wasn't sure how she'd react to it, or how I'd react to even saying it. But I had to. "It won't bring Hayden back."

She sighed. "Okay, look," she began thoughtfully, setting her hands in her lap and staring straight down at them. "I know I've been relentless about that. Sometimes I look at you, and I see her. I cling to the past, you know it, and I can't help it. And I'm sorry." She took my hand, holding it between both her own. "I can't figure out which parts of you come from where, but I don't care anymore. You're just *you*. And you, Echo, have been there for me, and proven yourself time and time again." She took a nervous breath, and I could feel a light sweat against her palms. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want you to know I didn't fall in love with Hayden. I fell in love with Echo."

I felt a smile tug at my lips, but Genevieve couldn't tell because she was still too shy to look at me. "I was fighting it so hard," she continued. "I've been such a bitch. I've done things to you that don't deserve forgiving." She met my gaze, her eyebrows furrowing with emotion. "But please believe me when I say that I've never loved anything in my life as much as I love you. And I know I can make it up to you if you let me try."

I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her back down with me, unable to contain a grin. "You don't need to. That's all I've ever wanted to hear."

She returned it eagerly when I kissed her, but only for a moment before lifting away. "You probably don't want to kiss me."

I knew what she meant, but I was too happy for it to matter how she

tasted. "I don't care," I said, returning my lips to hers.

Genevieve kissed me a little longer this time, and then prompted again, "Echo?" I raised my eyebrows at her. "Do you… feel that way about me?"

"Genevieve," I said, leaning my head forward against hers, "I've always loved you." She smiled the biggest smile I'd ever seen, and I could say without hesitation that I hadn't been this happy since before the outbreak. "Now will you please just be my fucking girlfriend already?"

She laughed, burying her face against my neck. "Yes."

I squeezed her to me, enjoying a feeling a stability for the first time in years. Things could be better now. She didn't just forgive me, she accepted me. In spite of everything I'd done she *loved* me, and maybe that love was what I needed to finally forgive myself.

Skip a Hit

*** Here it is, hope it was fast enough! If you're one of those people who reads reviews before you read the update, I'm going to suggest you don't do that from here on out. Reviews contain spoilers, and you don't want that. Alrighty, carry on.*

Biting Down by Lorde

Skip a Hit

Dugan

Kara held a hand out, so I did what I'd been doing for the last couple hours and handed her a nail. She lined it up against the wooden frame of the smokehouse her and Mal were building, and let Mal tap it into the wood with a hammer enough that it'd stand on its own before removing her hand. Mal pounded it in, finishing the last of the frame. The thing was pretty small, only the size of an outhouse, but with a single hammer it was taking longer than we anticipated. The fact that none of us had experience building much of anything might have had something to do with it too, but Joseph had seemed a bit grumpy about us asking for instructions.

They'd been working on the frame with it lying on its side, since neither of them was tall enough to hammer the top of it. Now that it was finished they both grabbed a single end, hauling it off the ground and pushing it upright. They were struggling a bit against the weight of it, so once they were finished, panting and shaking out their tired arms, I couldn't resist teasing.

"It's upside down."

Mal groaned, stepping back to examine the structure. Seeing as it was only a frame, it didn't matter what way they'd set it, which she realized. "Asshole," she laughed, grabbing a twig off the ground and flinging it at me.

"Let's do the rest," Kara prompted impatiently, grabbing a long plank of wood to start covering the skeleton.

Mal watched her line up the plank and then looked at me, reading the concern on my face and giving me a sympathetic smile. Kara was still so eager to get to Pittsburgh. I was too, but the closer we got the more real it began to feel that we were walking into something potentially dangerous. What if we *were* too late? I'd never forget the threat Jed had made. If he ever saw us again I'd be begging him to put us out of our misery. I couldn't let anything happen to Kara, but I knew she'd never forgive me if I changed my mind.

While Mal and Kara continued working I continued to pass them nails. After a few minutes Matthew appeared in the woods, heading our direction. He smiled when he reached us, particularly at Kara, who gave him an awkward but distracted smile in return, and then walked past us to a dirty table against the side of the house. He'd been carrying a couple rabbits he must've caught in the woods. He flung them up on the table, reaching for a knife in a rusty can on the surface.

"Dugan," Kara said, holding her hand out.

I tore my gaze away from Matthew as he began to skin the rabbits, and sat down on the log used for splitting wood, tossing Kara a nail. This place was actually a lot more peaceful during the daytime. It was secluded, giving me a better picture of why the house's owners were so comfortable. I looked beyond Kara and Mal toward the woods, taking in the beauty of how green it all was. There was a soft summer wind blowing through the trees, rustling the leaves and creating a ripple of light in the shaded air beneath the canopy. There were even squirrels chattering at each other from the branches, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually stopped to appreciate that the wild world was still thriving.

While I was scanning the woods my eyes landed on something in the distance. It really only stood out because of the color. It was gray in comparison to the brown of the tree trunks and the green of their leaves. But it wasn't a stone type of gray, or a muddy type either. It was pale

enough to almost be off-white. I squinted, leaning forward on my seat to get a better look. It didn't register what I was looking at until it *blinked*. The lids of its eyes shut slowly, and when they opened again I would've sworn the Stalker was looking right at me.

"Yoo-hoo," Kara sang, waving a hand in front of my face.

It startled me so bad I dropped the jar of nails, and they spilled out on the grass at my feet. I bent over to scoop them back in, and then extended one to Kara while my eyes searched the woods for the Feral. It was gone.

Kara watched me for a moment, taking in the intensity of my gaze before following it to the trees. "What?"

I shook my head, straightening up to rid the paranoia. "Nothing."

But when she resumed working on the shack I turned to look at Matthew. He was dropping scraps of rabbit meat into a metal pail on the ground with absolutely no method to how he cut it. Some were strips that could've been smoked once we were done building the smoke house, but others were sloppy cubes that would rot before they cured. Not to mention the complete lack of concern for sanitation. The knife was dirty, and by the looks of it the bucket hadn't been cleaned recently either.

I was about to whisper to Mal and Kara, to ask them what they made of it, when Matthew finished what he was doing. He wiped his bloody hands on a stained rag on the table, picked up the bucket, and passed us another smile before heading back into the woods with the meat. I watched after him for a minute, beyond intrigued and even more freaked out.

"I'll be right back," I said, standing and trudging past Kara and Mal.

They both gave me curious looks, but I ignored it and strode into the trees, squinting in the distance to keep Matthew in sight. I ducked behind trunks along the way in case he'd look back and see me. I crouched behind bushes, doing my best not to snap any foliage beneath my feet and not to let my breathing get too loud. It was difficult considering I

hadn't regained complete strength in my lung yet, but eventually Matthew came to a stop in a small clearing.

I knelt down, creeping closer behind the cover of plants, until I'd reached the edge of the meadow. Matthew set the bucket down at his feet, doing a searching turn that made me nearly lie flat so as not to be seen, and when he didn't see anything he whistled a short, eerie tune into the woods. At first the entire forest seemed to grow silent around us. The chatter of squirrels and birds ceased. The air grew thick with anticipation.

A twig cracked in the distance, and as something drew closer I could hear the soft crunch of leaves beneath footsteps. A pale figure emerged from the trees on the opposite end of the clearing, and this time I did drop to my stomach to make sure I was completely hidden. It was the Stalker I'd seen in the trees, I'd bet my life on that, but even though Matthew appeared alone, and there was no reason for the Feral not to attack him, he wasn't running. He just stood there, letting the female Stalker stride right up to him.

He did look tense as he used his foot to nudge the bucket forward, putting it halfway between him and the Feral. "Hey, Ma."

My eyebrows furrowed. *What the hell*. For a moment in the silence that passed I almost expected the stalker to say something in return, but then it dropped over the bucket with a starving snort, snatching up a handful of raw meat to scarf down. It swallowed pieces whole, tinting its fingers and mouth and chin red with fresh blood. But Matthew just stood there, watching with a disjointed amount of complacence.

"Pop's foot is doing better," he told the Stalker even though the creature didn't seem to hear him. "Don't hurt him anymore." I lifted myself up to try and get a better look over the bushes. "He'll come see you soon. I think he misses you." The Stalker pulled the bucket closer, hunching over it and peering up stealthily as if it suspected Matthew would steal some of the food. "Grandpa's been grumpier than ever." Matthew chuckled. I straightened a little more, leaning forward over the bush and blinking hard, trying to convince myself that I wasn't seeing this right. "He thinks Pop broke his foot on purpose."

I leaned over just a bit farther, and the action was met by an angry hiss somewhere beneath me. I glanced down the moment before the snake struck, and fell backwards out of instinct to avoid its massive fangs. But as I crashed down it threw up foliage and made a raucous in the debris, and while I landed on my ass I saw the Stalker bolt upright. Its cold stare landed right on me. I barely had time to think before it roared.

It sprinted immediately toward me, getting halfway there by the time I managed to scramble to my feet. I took off running, the crashing of feet hot on my heels and hearing Matthew shouting 'Pa' as he bolted in the direction of the house. My lung was still weak. There was no way I could keep up running like I was. My speed was already dwindling, the footsteps were gaining on me, and I was unarmed and completely unable to keep myself from getting bit.

Scanning the trees flying by me it was mostly instinct that caused me to jump. I shot upward, grabbing a low hanging branch and ignoring the stabbing pain in my ribs while I pulled myself up. There was a ferocious snarl from beneath me, and right as I got my feet up the Stalker hurled itself into the air. It missed my legs, but I still scrambled higher up into the branches. It retreated a few paces and ran at the tree, and this time when it jumped it managed to catch the lowest branch.

"Mal!" I yelled into the woods, breaking a thick stick from a limb of the tree and swiping at the Stalker. In the distance I could still hear Matthew shouting for help. "Mal!" The Stalker reached for me, and as I simultaneously stepped back and made a jab at it I nearly slipped out of the tree.

I took a deep breath, preparing to scream at the top of my lungs for Mal, when an arrow plunged into the Feral's back with a sickening thud. The creature screeched, plummeting to the ground where it fell completely lifeless.

"Are you okay?" Mal skidded to a halt beneath the tree, and Kara came up behind her.

But there were more crashing footsteps getting closer, and I hurried to climb down. "Load another arrow," I said hastily. I had no idea how these

climb down. "Load another arrow," I said hastily. I had no idea how these people would react to us killing the Stalker. Mal squinted at me unsurely. "Load another arrow!" She pulled an arrow out of the quiver at her back right as Matthew and Joseph ran up.

"You killed her!" Matthew hollered, aiming at me with the rifle in his hands.

Mal raised her bow at the kid, but she'd no sooner pointed it than Joseph pitched forward and grabbed Kara. "Drop it!" he commanded, cocking the pistol he had against Kara's temple when Mal adjusted her aim to point the arrow at him.

I threw my hands up to try and keep Matthew from shooting at me, but his eyes were so full of tears I wasn't even sure if he could hit me. It didn't matter anyway, because he sobbed and ran to the lifeless Stalker, kneeling down to check for a pulse. My jaw clenched, the pit of my stomach filling with a sickening amount of fury. I'd had it up to my neck with all these psychos constantly pointing weapons at Kara. I was done with her life being risked for nothing. Something inside me snapped.

Without moving my lips I whispered to Mal, "can you make the shot?"

"Drop your weapon or I'll shoot the girl!" Joseph said again.

Mal hummed an affirmative.

"Take it," I said, and the next second her arrow was sailing through the air. It pierced through its target, and when Joseph dropped Matthew threw his hands to his head, face twisting with a range of emotion. "I'm sorry," I told him, and before he could react I smashed my foot against his face to knock him unconscious.

"Dugan!" Kara exclaimed in shock. "Mal. What?" She couldn't keep her eyes from darting back and forth between Joseph and Matthew. "What did you do? What happened?"

I couldn't answer her. I didn't know how to explain what I'd seen, or how I felt right now. So instead I knelt at Matthew, grunting through the pain while I pulled the upper half of his body over my shoulder. Mal picked up

while I pulled the upper half of his body over my shoulder. Mal picked up Joseph's pistol and Matthew's rifle, putting them both into Kara's arms. I let out a pained breath as I straightened with the kid over my shoulder, straining under his limp weight. Kara looked so terrified about how quickly things had escalated that if I'd felt any less frustrated there would've been guilt.

"Come on," I said, ignoring Kara's questions to carry the unconscious teen back to the house.

Mal and Kara were silent at my side. When we reached the property line the front door of the house burst open, and Junior hobbled out on his crutches. Mal raised her bow immediately, even though it didn't appear Junior was armed.

"Sit," she ordered.

He began to lower himself on the porch while his eyes narrowed at the boy over my shoulder. "Where's my father?" Mal strode right up to him, keeping the arrow on him while I scuttled past to put Matthew down in the kitchen. "What did you do to my son?"

"Kara," I said, motioning to the pistol she was holding. She gave it to me. "Matthew will be fine. I only knocked him out."

Junior's upper lip curled menacingly. "My father?"

I swallowed, trying to hold on to that fury I'd been feeling so the guilt and pity wouldn't sink in yet. "Look," I sighed, "we're taking this pistol and the," I pulled out the clip to check the ammunition, "ten bullets in it. And we're getting that car part we came for. Then you'll never see us again." Junior glared defiantly, but I could see the soggy grief in his eyes. "You sit here until we're gone. We'll leave the rifle in the barn." I shook my head, running a remorseful hand over my short hair. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Without saying anything else I turned and started for the barn. Kara and Mal followed silently, and once we'd reached the vehicles Mal guarded the door. I made quick work of the V-belt we'd come for, and once I had it

in my backpack we headed back down the road. Our Hummer was sitting right where we'd left it, and I popped the hood to replace the belt while Kara climbed into the back seat of the car.

It was quiet for a minute until I heard Mal get in next to Kara. "You know we did what we had to?" she offered.

"I know," Kara answered after a few moments. "But I still feel bad."

Neither of them said anything, and my hands froze over the tension bolt as my eyes flooded. I never wanted to put Kara in a situation like that again. It had always been so easy in the past to know we were doing the right thing. Those raiders had robbed us, and Van and Jed were killers. But these people were as much victims of this world as we were. This wasn't the *right* thing. It was the only thing, and I hated it.

I heard Mal get out and close the door behind her, so I hurried to sniffle away the blur before she reached me. When she did she leaned against the front bumper, watching me thoughtfully.

"I don't want this life for her." I let out a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I don't want these to be her choices. All this… it needs to end."

Mal's lips pursed sympathetically as she set a hand on my arm. She left it there for a couple seconds before dropping it and motioning to the engine. "Then finish this up, and hope that base is still standing, and that it's a place where she won't have to make these choices."

I gave a discouraged nod and finished putting on the new belt. After closing the hood we both got in the car, holding our breath as I turned the key in the ignition. The Hummer fired right up, and it was almost enough of a relief to brighten my mood. Almost.

We were still about five hours away from Pittsburgh, and there was only a couple hours left of daylight. The only time anyone spoke during the drive was when Mal studied the map and gave me directions. By the time we got close it was long dark, and we stopped a couple miles away from where the base was in case they saw us and weren't friendly.

With the Hummer parked a little off the road, we all [illegible]

With the Hummer parked a little off the road, we grabbed all our gear and locked it up. There was no way of knowing whether or not there was anyone on the base, but if there were they'd probably have lookouts around it, maybe even patrols. So we kept our flashlights off. It slowed us down considerably. In order to move through the dark without tripping over branches or making too much noise we had to tread carefully. Every once in a while there'd be a noise that wasn't made by us, and we'd stop for a few minutes, me with the pistol raised and Mal with an arrow tensed on her bowstring, waiting to see if it'd been a Feral.

That couple miles took us just as many hours, but eventually we could see lights in the distance, and the night was quiet enough that voices carried from the same location. We crouched behind the peak of a small hill, over which we could see the fence of the base. We'd made it. Now all we had to do was figure out if we beat Jed.

"Can you see anyone familiar?" I asked, squinting through the dark. It looked like we were facing the main entrance, where a couple people were standing guard under the soft glow of a lantern.

"I can't tell," Kara answered, "we need to get closer."

I considered it for a moment, glancing up and down the length of the fences. "Okay, stay low."

I led the way, ducking behind trees as we skirted nearer to the gate. When we got close enough to make out the soldiers' faces I looked at Kara, and she shook her head to let me know they weren't any of Jed's. There was still a whole lot of area of base to cover, so with a nod for them to follow I started around the perimeter. It was just as slow going, and it took us at least another hour before we reached an area where there were more people.

There were two, specifically, who appeared to be walking the perimeter just like we were doing. We flattened ourselves against tree trunks to make ourselves invisible. I heard a voice before I could see any facial features, but the man said, "there's another one here," and pointed to some kind of electrical box on our side of the fence.

It didn't matter what he was pointing to, because his voice made my teeth clench, and Kara let out an angry breath. It was Jed's voice, and peering out from behind the tree I could finally see his face. He was with Mia.

"Why didn't you just kill her?" Mia asked, raising a crossbow toward the box.

Jed waited until she'd shot a small arrow at the electrical box, sending sparks flying into the night. "She's our ticket out of here."

There was a rope attached to the arrow, and after they'd damaged the box beyond repair they yanked it out. I didn't need any background information to know what they were doing. They were destroying the power sources for these electric fences and removing the arrow so there was no evidence.

Mia tugged the rope until she'd reclaimed the arrow. "How do you even know she'll play into your plan like you want?"

"I just know," Jed stated, and they resumed walking along the fence.

My hand tightened around the grip of my pistol. We were too late to warn whoever had let him in there, but that didn't mean I couldn't make sure he never hurt anyone again. I could make sure he never went through with whatever plan he had. It was too dark for them to see me lean out from around the tree and raise my gun.

They were quiet for a second before Mia said, "you're fond of her."

"Jealous?" Jed asked, and the hint of amusement in his voice made me seethe.

I looked at Kara, and she nodded at where I was aiming.

"Please," Mia laughed sarcastically. "If you wanted her like that you'd have had her earlier." Mia shook her head. "No, you're fascinated."

"*Was* fascinated." This time Jed laughed. "I thought it would've been more of a challenge to crush the light in her. Now she's only good for

distracting Genevieve."

I didn't even know who they were talking about, but I hated it. I hated Jed. We weren't just too late. It already sounded like he'd hurt someone. I squinted into the sights of the pistol, lining them up with Jed's head. My focus was so intense that I didn't hear the engine or register the lights coming closer until Jed and Mia picked up running. They disappeared deeper into the base, and I growled at my missed opportunity. But there was no time to sulk. A small off-road vehicle was approaching on our side of the fence, so we slunk farther behind the trees to remain hidden.

"Ho!" one of the men on the vehicle shouted, and they came to a stop directly in front of us.

My grip tightened again. We couldn't get caught. Whether or not these people were friendly with Jed, Jed would recognize us if they took us inside the gates.

"Got another one," the man said, and two of them hopped out to grab something on the ground near the fence.

It was the dead body of a Feral, no doubt killed by that electric wire. I wanted to warn these patrollers. I wanted to tell them to check the power box, but I couldn't risk it.

They loaded the body onto the back of the vehicle and drove off.

"Dugan," Kara prompted the moment they were gone. "What are we going to do? We're too late." I slid my back down the tree trunk until I was sitting in the dirt, still fuming about not taking that shot. "Dugan?"

"I don't know," I grumbled. "I need to think."

Mal leaned back against a nearby tree while Kara squatted down at my side.

"We should go to the gate and tell them," Kara said plainly.

I shook my head. "Jed knows us. He'd find a way to kill us before we

could warn them. Or maybe they're just as bad as he is."

"We can't let them hurt anybody," Kara argued, but her defiance was pleading.

I buried my face in my hands, trying to block out the stress. "I can't let them hurt you."

A blanket of silence fell over us, but I could feel Kara thinking, trying to come up with some solution. Before she could find one Mal said, "I'll go."

I glanced up at her in shock. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't," she said, kneeling down beside Kara and I. "I volunteered. Jed doesn't know me. I'll go to the gate, ask to speak to their leader, and if it feels like they aren't sided with Jed then I'll tell them he's bad news."

"It's risky, Mal." Just thinking about her going alone made me sick to my stomach. "You don't know what Jed is capable of."

"But you do," she answered, letting out a bleak chuckle as she looked from me to Kara. "And it's obviously a severe source of anxiety." I groaned reluctantly. "Dugan," she prompted, giving me a knowing look, "these are the choices."

I knew what that meant. She wasn't volunteering for the sake of the people here, or because she knew how dangerous Jed was. She was volunteering because she cared about Kara.

"Wait til morning," I sighed. "Then we can at least find a vantage point and try to keep an eye on you." Mal nodded, and when we looked at Kara she gave a reluctant nod of agreement. Maybe there was still hope.

Dark Star

Dark Star by Jaymes Young

Dark Star

Echo

We hadn't moved from the couch, and despite the fact that it was hot with Genevieve lying on top of me and I was sweating beneath her, she'd fallen asleep and I couldn't bring myself to get up. It was a wonder how she wasn't too warm to be sleeping, especially with her face buried against my neck where it must've been harder to breathe. Aside from the heat, I was comfortable enough to have taken a nap too. The only reason I hadn't was because I didn't want to miss any of this. I loved it all – each foggy breath on skin, how one of her hands was set comfortably against the other side of my neck, and yes, the drops of sweat adhering my shirt to my back and stomach.

She might have even been drooling a little bit, as I was fairly sure I wasn't sweating bad enough to feel a drop sliding down neck. This wasn't a Genevieve who had zero tolerance for raiders, Ferals, and bullshit. This was a Genevieve who actually showed emotion without having to bulldoze through layers of stoic leadership. This was a Genevieve who'd completely let her guard down two hours ago, and instead of freaking out about it had fallen asleep on me.

The next inhale Genevieve made was a deep one, and with it she lifted her head. She looked so groggy, for a moment she simply glanced around, eyes barely open enough to see anything and blinking fast to try and remedy that. One corner of her mouth was pulled down too, like she wasn't happy that something had woken her. She appeared such a mixture of confused and tired and content that I couldn't help but laugh. When she heard that she turned her tired stare on me.

"Make that face again," I said. Instead she narrowed her eyes a little more at me. "Did you forget where you were?" I poked at the corner of

her mouth, which had flattened out and she was now trying to keep from tugging into a smile. "Do it again." I pinched at her cheek. "So *sleepy*."

She made the face again just to humor me, and when I snorted with laughter she dropped her head back down, chuckling, "shut up."

"Make me," I challenged playfully.

At first she didn't say anything, but then in one single movement she bounced up, out from between my legs so she was straddling my hips and making a reach for my wrists with a grin on her face. "I'll make you," she giggled, going after it when I yanked my arm away.

She tried to grab it, but I was attempting to dodge and get a grip on her at the same time, so we were both struggling through laughter to catch the other. And laughing made it infinitely harder, because my eyes kept closing through it and after a minute they teared up and my stomach started hurting. And Genevieve looked *so* determined. She was trying so hard, but she'd always been terrible at getting the upper hand on me.

"I'm still waiting," I sang, purposefully shoving my hand in her face to tease her about not being able to grab it.

She snickered, snatching for my hand so fast she almost smacked herself in the face. "I'm taking it easy on you."

"You're so full of it!" Just to prove my point I sat up and grabbed her, fully prepared to flip us over and pin her.

I hadn't expected her to make it difficult for me, but she wiggled so hard when I did that we both toppled over the side of couch. I landed flat on my back with all the extra weight of her right on top of me, letting out a loud 'oomph.' It hurt and I was trying to groan, but I was still laughing too, so the mix just kept pouring out of me while I silently clutched my elbow.

"Are you okay?" Genevieve sat up. I was regaining some of my breath and probably could've answered, but she looked so concerned that an idea formed at the back of my mind, and I kept cackling. "Echo?"

Before she could say anything else I shot up, grabbed her like I'd intended to the first time, and switched our positions, dropping her on her back. "Got you," I grinned. She made a reach for my waist as if to try and flip us back over, which was completely the wrong place to try and grab me. "Ah, ah!" I caught her hands and pinned them at the sides of her shoulders. "I already won." I pursed my mouth to the side and stared down at her. "Now what am *I* going to make you do?"

She rolled her eyes at that. "You forget who you're talking to? I'm stubborn, remember?"

I shifted to bring one leg between both of hers, and pressed my knee hard up against the center of her. Despite the effect it had on her, and the sharp intake of breath she gave and the fact that I would've loved to just go for it, I said flatly, "quiet, I'm thinking."

"I hate you sometimes," she grumbled lightheartedly, but a moment later her amusement shifted to a mischievous smirk. She didn't say anything to indicate what idea she had, but she didn't need to, because then she ground herself against my knee. At the look on my face she pursed her lips to hold back a pleased smile. "You just keep thinking. I don't need you for this."

I tried to keep a straight face, but I couldn't get over the way it felt to have her rocking against my thigh, and knowing exactly what she was getting out of it. "Stop that," I attempted to scowl.

Her eyebrows rose smugly, and just because she could see what it was doing to me, she made the next roll of her hips more exaggerated than the rest. "Make me." God, *that grin*.

My curse of 'damn you' was broken by a breathy laugh. I'd never be the real winner, but as I lowered my lips to hers, I didn't care. She slipped her hands out from under mine in order to wrap her arms around my neck, and opened her mouth against mine to kiss me more deeply. She was still rocking herself against my knee, and as much as I wanted to replace that knee with my hand, I was enjoying too much the way this felt.

Of course, this wouldn't be an intimate moment with Genevieve unless

Of course, this wouldn't be an intimate moment with Genevieve unless we were interrupted by something. There were voices at the front door, getting louder and louder by the second. Genevieve and I darted up. Upon reaching my feet I realized I still hadn't buttoned my cargos, so I rushed to do them, finishing right as the handle clicked. The door swung open, and Jed and Mia strolled through. I should've locked the damn thing.

At seeing us they stopped. Jed's eyes took us in, studying each of us up and down while a grin widened beneath his facial hair. "Looks like we missed some action," he said to Mia, laughing.

"What are you doing here?" I asked brusquely.

"Were you two in the middle of something?" He ignored my question. "Don't stop on our account."

"What are you doing here, Jed?" Genevieve growled, pacing to the island to reassemble her rifle.

It was intimidating how fast she put the thing back together, but Jed never seemed to care. He wasn't scared of anything. "You said we could scavenge for whatever we needed," he shrugged, glancing around the house. "Seeing as we're leaving tomorrow morning, I thought we'd look for some last minute supplies."

"Not here," Genevieve told him, putting on her backpack and then slinging the rifle over her shoulder. "This house is off-limits."

Jed smirked. "I can see why."

I followed Genevieve to the door, where I put my own backpack on. "Out," she told Jed and Mia, motioning outside.

Instead of moving Jed looked straight at my wrist. "How's my favorite raider doing today?"

I glared at him, but before I could say something snarky Genevieve repeated angrily, "out!"

Jed's shoulders shook with laughter while he and Mia finally trudged out of the house. We followed, and as they strode away for the next home he called over his shoulder, "you're a wolf in a cage, Echo."

I groaned in frustration, my fist clenching at my side. "That smug fuck."

"Hey," Genevieve said after making sure the house was locked, and took my face in her hands to get me to look at her. "Ignore him. He doesn't know you." I nodded because that's what she wanted, and because I couldn't tell her that he knew me better than I was comfortable to admit. "Want to go to the barracks? Or the DFAC?"

I stared after Jed and Mia while I thought about it. There were some scraps of meat in my backpack from this morning. Now that I knew Jed and Mia were out, and all his men had been invited to the special lunch that was probably still going on, I was pretty sure there wouldn't be anyone around. It was the perfect time for me to go and feed that dog. I knew Genevieve didn't like it. It was risky. But this would be the last time, because they were leaving tomorrow and I had so many sins to atone for. Any life I could save was a precious one.

"No, I told Imogen I'd meet up with her." I didn't want Genevieve to worry. Nor did I want to upset her.

"Okay." She gave me a lingering kiss, her lips curling with a modest smile when she pulled away. "I'll see you later."

I watched her disappear, making sure she wouldn't see me head off in the direction of the stores Jed's group was staying at. I snuck in through the same side door I always did, checking for anyone inside before creeping to the cage in the middle of an empty venue. The dog's ears pricked forward when he heard me coming, and he sat up, immediately sniffing the air for the hint of food.

"Hey there," I whispered, pulling my backpack around to take the meat out.

He didn't growl at me anymore, no matter how comfortable and unmonitored my movements were. Still, I extended my hand to the bars

cautiously, letting him sniff me for a moment before sticking it all the way in. It was obvious that before Jed got a hold of him he'd been such a sweet dog. No longer afraid of my touch he let me scratch behind his ears, and even leaned into it with enjoyment. Of course I still rewarded him with food, letting him take the pieces of meat from my hand one by one.

After he'd eaten it all I petted him a little more. "Okay," I said, running my fingers through his fur, "I'm going to let you out now, but you have to promise not to attack me." I leaned over to look the dog in the eyes, as if he'd understand. "Deal?"

I pulled my arm out and extended it toward the bar holding the door shut. The dog slunk back in the cage, eyes locked on my hand and ears plastered fearfully against his head. I eased the bar back so it wouldn't make any sound, and then opened the door just as carefully.

"There," I whispered, "you're free." The dog was tense, watching me with a familiar distrust. "It's okay," I said in the softest tone I could. I wish I'd saved a piece of meat to coax him forward. "Come on." He continued to watch me for a minute before slowly beginning to inch out. "There you go," I said. He stuck his head out, and then a paw. "Good boy."

I held out my hand to give him a destination, and still watching me skeptically he walked to me, touching his nose to my palm. "So good," I praised again, gently petting his shoulder. I'd noticed the collar around his neck before, and always wondered what it said on it. "What's your name?" I twisted the tag so it was facing me. "Rocky?" I read. "Well it's not what I would've picked."

At some noise or smell I couldn't pick up with my own senses, the dog's ears perked and he looked off into the distance. He backed up from me, tense once more, and definitely ready to bolt.

"Don't," I began, too afraid to try and detain him as he took off running, "get caught on your way out…"

I sighed, hoping he wouldn't get recaptured and thrown back in the cage, because I didn't think I'd get another chance to help him out. Tossing my

because I didn't think I'd get another chance to help him out. Tossing my backpack over my shoulders, I started for the exit of the shop. I'd just reached the entrance when I heard some footsteps heading my direction, and ducked back behind a shelf out of sight.

"He's at the gate out back," one of the men said.

Their footsteps continued past me and toward the main shop where they'd all been staying. "About time," the other grumbled.

I crept out of my hiding spot, watching the men disappear into the store. "Don't do it," I whispered to myself, glancing to my exit at the end of the hall. Who was at the gate out back? And why? "Don't do it. Genevieve will get pissed."

I stared after the exit one last time while my feet carried me in the opposite direction. So stupid. But if they were doing something shady then I needed to know.

Crouched down, I tiptoed into the main shop. At least they didn't have electricity at this building, and there was plenty of shadow for me to hide in. The voices were disappearing at the back of the department store, so I followed the sound, trying not to make any of my own. I trailed them to the very back, into the employee section where there was a rear exit and a few offices. The men swung open the back door, letting in a flood of sunlight that temporarily blinded me in the dark of the store.

Once they were gone I rushed into the office nearest the door, checking for my hiding places before extending my arm to the door handle. I eased it open from the cover of the office doorway, and peered through the small crack I'd made to the outside, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light. When they finally did my jaw set angrily.

"Did you get what the boss wanted?" one of the men I'd followed asked another guy standing on the opposite side of the fence.

It was one of the raiders, the ones Jed had told us he'd taken care of. I recognized his face from a brief glimpse I'd got the day we went to the animal shelter.

"Yeah," the raider answered.

"How many?" the second man I followed asked.

"Three."

Both of Jed's lackeys shook their heads. "He wanted six."

"We did the best we could, man," the guy said, taking a pleading step forward but then retreating when he nearly touched the electric wire. "Payment?"

One of the men dug in his pocket for something, but I couldn't see well enough through the slit in the door. So I inched out of my hiding place, bringing my eyes closer to the opening.

"Toss over your shoe," he instructed while he pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket.

The raider didn't even ask what for before throwing his shoe over the fence. Jed's guy stuffed the bag into the sneaker and then hurled it back over.

The raider scrambled to pick it up when it hit the ground, desperate for whatever was inside, but when he pulled it out his face fell. "It's only half."

"Yeah?" Jed's second guy asked flatly while his hand set on the pistol at his waist, challenging the raider to protest again. The raider didn't say anything, and instead turned to leave. "They better still be there when we come tomorrow!" the guy called after him.

"I knew you'd come back for the dog," said an accented female voice from behind me, and it scared me so bad I fell as I turned around. Fuck. It was Mia, with two large men at her side. "Grab her."

When the first guy reached for me I shoved him away and dashed forward, trying to plow through the second one before he could get a grip on me. He managed to catch one of my arms, and whipped me so hard into the adjacent office window it cracked against my back. Before I could

dart forward again the guy I'd pushed slammed his fist into my stomach, and as I buckled over he took my free arm.

Mia waved for them to follow, and with their vice grips on my wrists they started to drag me after her. I struggled. I pulled and pushed and tried desperately to free myself from their grasps. When that didn't work I dug the soles of my feet into the ground, at least trying to slow them down or wear them out.

"Help!" I finally screamed. They were too big for me to break free and reach my radio, so I hoped someone was near enough to hear me shout. "Hel-"

The man's fist smashed into my gut again, and as I choked on air they stripped me of my weapons and backpack and radio. Then they finally released me, throwing me to the ground at Jed's feet. They'd dragged me to the shipping warehouse at the side of the store, and while I regained my breath I glanced around. Jed, Mia, Murphy, the two who'd dragged me, and four others were looking down on me, and for the first time Jed terrified me the least.

I still tried to make one last break for it. I darted to my feet, making a dash between two of the people crowding around me. Their arms shot out, blocking my path and hurling me backward. Another man caught me, the one who kept punching me, and he spun me around just to punch me in the jaw this time, sending me careening to the floor.

The action wheedled a growl out of Jed. "Hit her again and I'll put a bullet in you!" Murph snickered at that.

"What do we care, boss?" asked the other one who'd dragged me.

"We care," Jed grumbled, squatting down in front of me and using his thumb to wipe a spot of blood from the corner of my mouth. I scowled, tugging away from his hand. "Because if we send her back with bruises her girlfriend will come here and kill us all before morning."

Since he'd just told nobody to hurt me, I tried one last time to escape. This time when two men threw their arms out I managed to punch one of

them in the nose before I hit the ground again. He roared and raised a fist to retaliate, but Jed cleared his throat, stopping the man mid-swing.

"I'd stop fighting this, Echo," Jed told me calmly. "I'd like to send you back, but we're leaving tomorrow morning. A dead body could just as easily go missing until then." I took a gander at the people who'd formed a tight circle around me, trying not to let them see how terrified I was. I don't know why Jed wanted me alive, but I had no doubt any of them would kill me with pleasure if he gave the order. "Join us tomorrow."

My gaze snapped back to Jed. "Fuck you," I spat. "I'm not a raider anymore."

"This is the last time I'm going to offer," he said, watching me intently. "Leave with us." I simply glared at him. I'd never give him what he wanted. "You stupid child. What did you see here?"

"I saw one of the raiders you were supposed to kill," I told him angrily, pushing myself up. I'd barely reached my feet when someone kicked the back of my leg, sending me to my knees. It hurt to fall like that, but the fear and fury I felt let me ignore the pain. "Why are you working with them?"

Instead of answering me, Jed looked at one of the men in the circle. "Go get me some of the good stuff."

"Boss," the guy protested, "we're running low." Jed shot him a fierce glare, so he immediately turned. "Whatever you say."

"You understand I have people to provide for," Jed said to me. "I do what I have to."

He held out his hand as the man returned, placing an empty syringe into it. Jed nodded at two people behind me, and not a moment later they grabbed my arms to hold me in place.

"What are you doing?" I asked, jerking at my detainers and feeling my heartbeat start to race all over again.

[illegible]

The man who'd brought the syringe was holding a small plastic bag filled with a glossy brown sawdust. At sight of it my stomach dropped, my blood ran cold, and I refused to look at it again as I immediately resumed struggling.

"What's that for? Jed what are you doing?" I pleaded, too afraid to watch the man liquify the heroin, too terrified to watch Jed suck it into the syringe. "Jed." My eyes blurred with frightened tears. "No, Jed."

"You know what this is?" he asked, turning toward me with the filled needle. I couldn't look at it, so he strode closer to hold it out in front of me. My eyes darted away, and then turned another direction when he followed, attempting to force me to look. When still I refused he chuckled, bent over a little to stare into my teary eyes, and then straightened, chuckling some more. "How many times?"

"What?" I choked.

He moved the syringe into my eye line again, and again I glanced away. "Oh, Echo," he said through a sinister laugh. "You're making this too damn easy for me!" He was so amused he couldn't stop smiling, and cackling, and he scratched at his beard with his free hand. "I've done this before, and most people are so scared they can't look away." He tried once more to put it in my sight. "You know who refuses to look before I shoot 'em up?" My tear-filled eyes met his, there was no point in trying to hide it. "People who know what to expect. People who are ashamed that they know."

A drop slid down my cheek. "Please don't."

"How many times have you done it?" he asked, his voice a forceful growl.

Twice. After Valerie died the guys found some, and I didn't care if it killed me. But not now. Please not now. "I'll tell her," I threatened desperately. "I'll tell Genevieve."

"You're not going to tell her," he replied calmly, tracing the tip of his finger up the length of the needle. "Because if you tell her then I'll let her know you found out what we had, and you came begging for it because you're

a raider, and a fucking junkie."

"No," I whimpered.

"Who do you think she'll believe?" he continued, squatting down once more in front of me with an amused smirk. "Doesn't seem like she knows you got a history. If you lied about that, then why would she believe you over me? You going to lie to her again?" He watched me for a moment, letting it sink in while more tears spilled down my cheeks. "So you're not going to tell her," he stated, "and you're not going to tell her about the raiders, because you care too fucking much what she thinks of you."

"Jed, please." I didn't know what else to do, and my voice cracked with a terrified sob. "I'm begging you. Please." I tried to inch away from him, craning away from his armed hand, but the men held me in place.

"I warned you," he said, straightening up and looking at the men still gripping my arms. "Hold her down."

"No!" I screamed, fighting against the tight grips. "Jed, don't!" I fought desperately, even after they yanked me backwards off balance. "Don't! I don't want it! Don't touch me!" I sobbed, struggling and bucking and squirming. I couldn't look away from the syringe now, like if I stared at it somehow it would disappear. "Jed, please!"

They slammed me onto my back, tears streaming down my face while they knelt over my arms, and a third guy sat on my chest to pin me down. Murph was bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement, and Mia was smirking at me as Jed neared me with the drug.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Please," I cried, a fresh flow of tears running down my temples. It was no use fighting. "Jed, no."

There was a prick in the bend of my arm, and a sickening heat plunged into my flesh, invading and poisoning my veins. It ran thick through my blood. I could feel it squeezing through my skin and my tears and my head. And I completely lost the desire to fight.

Things That Keep Me Alive

This is the Thing by Fink

Things That Keep Me Alive

Echo

They stopped holding me down the moment I ceased struggling, and everyone took a step back. I was just lying there on the floor, barely able to open my eyes through the haze in my head, through wave after wave that rushed in my veins. The tears weren't flowing hot anymore. Those had ceased too. The dampness they left against my face was cold and biting, but it didn't bother me.

"What now?" asked a deep voice.

"You two keep an eye on her," Jed answered, and through the blur I watched him grab a guy by the shirt, pulling him close. "Let me make this real clear. Nobody hits her, nobody fucks her, nobody goddamn touches her. Got it?" The man nodded hastily. "I catch anyone and it's on you, I'll let Murph skin you both alive." This time Murph nodded in vigorous unison with the man. "I'll be back in a few hours."

The room cleared, it went silent. They left me here with two men and a high. I don't know how long I lay there after the men disappeared from sight. I could hear them talking every once in a while, somewhere nearby, but I felt too heavy to move. There was light pouring through the square windows on the large warehouse doors, and eventually I couldn't take it anymore. I rolled onto my other side, away from the garage, and finally found my guardians.

They were playing a card game. I shouldn't be here. Genevieve was probably looking for me. I turned onto my stomach, gradually easing my arms beneath me to try and lift myself. It took an effort, but I managed to work myself to my elbows, and then to my knees. As I got one foot flat on the ground one of the men came over, snickering.

"Where you going?" he asked, reaching for me.

I tried to push his hands away but missed, and swayed so drowsily that I toppled back to my hands and knees. The man gave me a gentle push, laughing when I fell completely to my side, but he didn't leave once I was on the ground again. He knelt down and just stared at me, head tilted to the side with astute focus.

"What are you doing?" the other one asked after a while.

"Just look at her," he answered, glancing over his shoulder at his companion. "Tell me you don't want to."

"I'll tell you what I don't want to," the other replied, "I don't want to get skinned alive."

The man at my side scoffed. "You don't believe that."

"I've seen Murph do it."

The man finally stood and turned away from me. "Bullshit."

"I'm telling you," the other argued, "that freak is crazy. You do not want to fuck with him."

I tuned them out to calm the swaying in my head. After some time I didn't feel so heavy, and though the warmth was still gushing through me I managed to sit up. I pulled my knees to my chest, and after wrapping my arms around them leaned my head forward.

"Enjoying yourself over there?" the cautious man teased. I managed to flip him the finger.

The reckless one laughed at that. "I can see why Jed likes her."

But I didn't feel calm anymore. There was no humor in it. I felt sick, and violated. Tears flooded my eyes again and I sniffled, wiping my cheeks against my arm.

"Such a waste of dope," one of them mumbled

"Such a waste of dope," one of them mumbled.

I sat there for a long while, the flushing slowly leaving my skin and blood while the light left those damn windows. Jed came back after the sun went down. He stormed in with Mia at his side, pacing straight to me.

"Time to go," he said, grabbing me by the arm and yanking me to my feet. He held on long enough for me to steady myself, and then passed me to the men who'd been watching me. "Take her to her room."

"Sure thing," agreed the incautious man.

"Hey!" Jed growled. "Same rules apply." The man grumbled something about no fun, and Jed added grumpily, "don't let anyone see you. You get caught bringing her back and I'll kill you myself."

The man nodded and began to lead me away while the other gathered my belongings in his arms. They guided me through the shadows so as not to be seen, which would've been an easy task anyway considering it was probably dinner time. It was a slow process, but eventually they managed to get me up the stairs of the barracks and to the door of my room. The moment we reached the door I pushed it open, hurrying in and beginning to close it on them.

"Want your shit?" asked the one who was holding all my stuff.

I grabbed it from him and slammed the door, and after flicking the lock into place I staggered to my bed. I fell face first onto it, burying my eyes into my pillow and finally letting out the river of tears I'd been holding back for the last couple hours. I was miserable, and that misery soaked the fabric beneath me until I had nothing left to leak. So I just lay there until someone twisted the door handle, and at finding it locked they knocked.

"Echo?" It was Genevieve. "You weren't at dinner." She knocked again. "Are you here?"

I couldn't face her. Couldn't look her in the eyes because I'd betrayed her. I'd been betraying her every day I was with the raiders, and every day since then that I tried to win her over. I put my hands over my ears, but it

since then that I tried to win her over. I put my hands over my ears, but it didn't block her out. Her voice came through my radio.

"Echo, do you read me?" It echoed through the door, and I knew she could hear my radio coming from the room. She knocked again. "Echo, seriously, are you okay?"

"Not now, Genevieve," I called, my voice hoarse as I realized I hadn't spoken since the afternoon.

"What do you mean not now?" She sounded confused, and she twisted at the handle again. I didn't answer. "Are you sick or something? I know this herbal tea recipe that's really great for your stomach. I'll make you a cup."

"Go away," I pleaded, and the following seconds of silence broke my heart. I didn't want her to go away, and she couldn't understand why I was being cold and she couldn't know.

She tugged on the door handle a little harder. "Echo?" A harsh knock. "You're worrying me." She knocked again, and this time I thought I imagined it when it was followed by a growl. "Echo," Genevieve pleaded, her voice met with another snarl. "Echo, that dog is out here."

I shot up, worried Rocky would bite her, or worse. I scrambled toward the door, nearly stumbling and throwing a hand to the wall to catch myself. When I did I caught a glimpse of the tiny hole in my arm, and I panicked. I rushed to my clothes trunk, grabbing the first long-sleeved shirt I touched and putting it on so hastily it was inside out.

"Shit," Genevieve's voice whimpered, "Echo!"

I threw open the door to find her plastered to the wall across the hall, the dog I'd set free baring its teeth at her. When Rocky heard the door open he looked back, and at seeing me he relaxed and took a step away from Genevieve. Immediate danger over I suddenly worried about how shitty I looked, terrified Genevieve would be able to read it all over my face.

I wiped at my raw cheeks with the sleeve of my shirt and held the door open a little wider. "Come on, dog." The canine padded into my room

open a little wider? "Come on, dog." The canine padded into my room, and when Genevieve took a step toward me I barely managed to whisper, "come back later." I shut the door on her, clicking the lock into place the very moment before she grabbed the handle.

I leaned my forehead against the door, close enough to it that I could hear Genevieve's hand make a disappointed stroke against the other side. Then the door of the room next to mine opened and closed. I sniffled instinctively for the desolation I felt, but there were no tears left to cry. Trudging to the bed, I dropped down onto it, frowning my sorrow while I eyed the dog that had lain nearby on the floor.

"Do you cuddle?" I whispered.

His ears perked forward, and when I patted the bed next to me he hopped up and curled at my side. I extended my arm across the dog slowly, just in case it scared him. When he didn't move I buried my face in the fur of his back, and managed to fall asleep in spite of the emptiness in my chest.

The next morning I felt weak, and exhausted, and depressed, and I was sure most of that wasn't physical. The second my eyes cracked open they filled with replenished tears, but I sniffled them away and sat up. Jed was leaving this morning, they'd be gone, and all I had to do was hide what I'd done until they left. Then I could forget about it, Genevieve would never know and I'd never have to think about it ever again.

Sitting up, I pulled the black long-sleeved shirt over my head to flip it right side out, refusing to look at either of the shameful marks on my arm before I put it back on. I was trying to work up the strength and the will to stand, to go and see if Genevieve was still in the room next door. Fortunately I didn't have to, because hardly a minute later there was a knock on the door.

"Echo?" Genevieve called softly.

The dog growled from his reclaimed spot on the floor, but I shushed him and stood. Being on my feet made me lightheaded, so I trudged to the door, undid the lock, and immediately turned for the bed again.

Genevieve had heard the click, and after she opened the door and came in she closed it quietly behind her.

"Hey," she offered, still standing at the entrance of the room, watching me lean back against the headboard. I'd never seen her look so unsure of herself, so unconfident.

Act normal. Pretend nothing happened. Force a smile. I patted the bed next to me.

She sighed with relief and paced over. She got right on top of me, and under any other circumstance I would've burst into laughter that she buried her face against my chest, nuzzling into my boobs. It was the playful Genevieve that I loved and enjoyed. Only right now I could barely stand it.

I managed a half-hearted smile while she rolled off of me. "Tell me that's not the gayest thing you've ever done so I can call you a liar."

"It's not," she laughed, nudging close to my side and taking my right hand in her own.

"Liar." I'd thought I could fake it, but I couldn't even look at her.

"It's not," she chuckled again, running her other hand fondly up my arm. "I'm pretty sure what I did to you yesterday is the gayest thing I've ever done."

Even though she couldn't see it, her fingers ran over the hole in my vein, and my body tensed. I took a deep breath, biting back the wetness forming in my throat. She had no idea how badly I'd betrayed her. How little I deserved her.

"Yeah," I agreed, unable to force another smile.

Genevieve studied me for a few seconds while I refused to meet her gaze. "Echo, are you okay?" I hummed an affirmative, unable to form words through the lump in my throat. "Did I do something wrong?" she asked, the self-conscious worry in her voice like stab in the heart. "Are you mad at me?" I could hear it. She was vulnerable. She'd told me she

you mad at me?" I could hear it. She was vulnerable. She'd told me she loved me and trusted me with her heart, and all I would ever do was break it. I shook my head, turning my face away so she wouldn't see that my eyes were blurring with tears. "Where were you last night?"

I inhaled a shaky breath, blinking fast to rid the water from my eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Echo?" She leaned forward, trying to catch my gaze, but I turned away from her even more.

"Don't," I pleaded.

"What's the matter?" she asked, squeezing my arm to try and be comforting. All it did was apply pressure to that disgusting mark.

"Genevieve," I whispered, choking on her name, "stop."

"Hey," she said soothingly, reaching for my chin to turn my face toward her. "What-" She stopped, her eyes dropping to my jaw. "What happened to your mouth?"

She was getting too close. I panicked. "Forget about it!" I hollered, shooting off the bed to get away from her.

She inched off the mattress, brown eyes full of concern. "What happened to you last night?" When she took a step toward me I took one back. "Did you get in a fight?" she pressed. "Did Jed do this to you?"

"Get out," I whimpered, terrified that she'd know exactly what happened, and pointed toward the door.

"Echo-"

"No," I interrupted, motioning toward the door again, swallowing back tears.

"Talk to me," she pleaded, stepping forward again.

"Stop!" I pressed myself as deep as I could into the wall at my back,

unable to take anymore. It only worried her more, and she got even closer. "Leave!" When her hand landed on my shoulder I shoved her away. "I don't want you here. Get out!"

Her eyebrows furrowed with hurt, and I hated myself for doing this to her. "Why are you being like this?" she whispered. I wished she still hated me, because then it wouldn't hurt her so bad that I was so wrong. Everything about me was wrong.

"Like what?" I yelled, trying to be angry. Trying to make her angry. "Non-complacent? You mean why am I not doing what you want!"

She shook her head, pained eyes full of confusion. "This isn't you."

"This *is* me!" I clenched the fist of my marked arm. "Get a good fucking look."

She took a step away, and when she blinked her eyes grew watery. "Echo-"

"Don't! Don't say my name!" To her Echo was good, someone she cared about. She'd tainted my armor with her forgiveness, and it was a mistake for us both. "You think you love me, but you don't! You cant! Because you don't fucking know me." She sniffled, too hurt to even look me in the eyes anymore. "This is it. You've said it before, all I ever do is hurt you. Save yourself the trouble and leave!"

A whimpering sound left Genevieve's throat. "I still love you."

"Hate me," I demanded. She'd hate me anyways if she found out, because Jed would lie to her and she'd believe him. I just wanted her to hate me without knowing why. I choked back a sob when she shook her head. "Please," I begged, losing my will to yell, losing my will to even speak. All I wanted to do was break down. Curl up for days and do nothing, be nothing, feel nothing. "It was so easy for you. Just do it."

"It was never easy for me to hate you." One corner of her mouth twitched downward. "I know you, Echo, and whatever this is, it isn't you. When I say I love you it's because I mean it." She squeezed her eyes shut to rid

the remaining tears. "I'm not taking it back. Ever." She pushed past me for the door. "Come find me when you're ready to accept that."

When she disappeared all the pain and frustration boiled over. I grabbed the nearest object – a lamp from the nightstand – and hurled it at the wall across the room. At the loud crash it made as it shattered the dog flinched into the farthest corner away from me, too afraid to lift his head.

"Go ahead," I snarled at him. "Hate me too."

This was Jed's fault. I was getting better. I was finally starting to feel whole again, Genevieve was making me whole again, and he took it all away. We never should have let him through that goddamn gate. And now I wasn't going to let him leave it.

I stomped over to the things I'd dropped by the door last night and grabbed my pistol. Gripping it tight between my fingers I didn't bother to close to door when I left. I jogged down the stairs, slammed open the door to the barracks, and pounded down the sidewalk in the direction of the mini mall.

There was nobody around when I stormed through the front entrance. I continued straight through the main department store, to that nightmarish shipping warehouse at the side, hoping Jed was there so I could empty my clip into chest. I busted in with my pistol raised, ready to shoot anyone who stepped between my target and I.

The only thing in the entire area was that table my guards had been playing cards at. It was littered with paper that I had no interest in, until I turned to continue my search for Jed and caught a glimpse of what was on one. I paced over, scattering the large pages to get a look at all of them. They were blueprints of the base. Hand drawn and with circles and arrows and lines, mapping every guard we stationed and every patrol route our soldiers ran. They'd marked the spots of farmland and taken stock of how much food it produced. And there, highlighted in bright yellow, was the armory with the words 'Genevieve' and 'key' written next to it.

They weren't going to leave. This whole time we'd been feeding them and

giving them shelter, and they'd been scouting and figuring out how to take this from right under our noses. Those raiders outside the gates were probably waiting for some signal, and if Jed knew that the key around Genevieve's neck was for the armory then she could be in danger. I had to warn her.

I turned, fully prepared to sprint back to the barracks in search of Genevieve, but right as I did an elbow cracked into my face. I hit the ground, my eyes blurring with pained tears as hot blood poured from my nose. My pistol was still gripped in my fingers so I raised it, firing a shot that I didn't even have time to aim. Mia kicked my arm the moment I pulled the trigger, ruining my only chance and knocking the gun out of my hand.

She raised her knee, aiming to bring her foot crashing down on my stomach. I grabbed her ankle and rolled, pulling her to floor. The back of her skull smashed against the pavement, and I clamored on top of her before she recovered. I raised my fist, bringing it down against her face and immediately raising it again. She tried to catch my wrist as I slammed it against her cheek a second time, but I yanked it to the side to get her hands out of the way and punched her a third time with my other.

Mia was taller and heavier than me, so when she bucked her hips it threw me over her head. I was too furious to think, too wild with emotion to strategize. We both shot to our feet, and I instantly took off toward her. I caught her in the stomach, tackling her back to ground and raising both fists to hit her hard. I could've killed her easy, I could've smashed and smashed until I'd hit the life right out of her, but the moment I had my arms in the air a boot crashed into my side.

I tumbled off and rolled across the floor, gasping for air when I finally came to a stop. Jed didn't give me a chance to breathe before he grabbed a handful of my shirt and hauled me off the ground. I hadn't even reached my feet when he wound up his fist, and once it connected with my cheek everything went black.

It All Came True

I Would Die For You by Matt Walters

It All Came True

Genevieve

I pushed open the door of the barracks, taking a deep breath to suppress the emotion as I reached the sidewalk. The last thing I wanted to think about was why Echo had been acting the way she was. She was pushing me away. I knew that much, it was obvious. But why? All I could think was that Jed had told me she'd leave with them, and that she'd do it willingly. I didn't want to believe she'd go, but why else would she push me away if she wasn't leaving soon.

The only place I could be alone right now was in the building we kept the HAM radio. Echo was in her room, and I didn't want to talk to Blake or Micah. So I trudged across the street to that building, sniffling away the worried blur in my eyes when I reached the door.

"Morning ma'am," greeted one of the soldiers at the radio. I gave the two a small nod, pacing past for one of the offices.

"Everything all right?" the other asked.

"Fine." I shut the door behind me, dropped my backpack near the desk, and collapsed into the cushioned chair.

A heavy sigh escaped my lungs as I lowered my forehead onto the surface of the desk. I shouldn't have walked away, but I didn't know what else to do. Echo couldn't have meant what she said, but it still hurt to hear her say I couldn't love her, to have her beg me to hate her again. After I'd given her everything. I was vulnerable enough already without her seeing how wounded I felt.

No. I should go back. Tell her she didn't have to talk about what was bothering her, but show her that she didn't have to be alone. Show her

bothering her, but show her that she didn't have to be alone. Show her that I cared because my feelings for her were real. But I'd left with her telling me to stop loving her. I didn't know what to expect from her right now, and I was terrified that if I went back she'd say she didn't really love me.

I sat there for a while with my head on the desk, trying to decide if I should go find Echo, or see to the Jed situation because they were leaving today. Eventually there was a knock on the door.

"Ma'am?"

I straightened up, rubbing my hands over my face to bring myself back to life. "It's open."

A couple of my soldiers opened the door, and after they filtered in a young woman followed. I stood at the sheer unexpectedness of a newcomer. I'd never seen her before, she wasn't one of ours, and Hatfield was holding a compound bow that must've belonged to her. She had short brown hair with a bandana tied around her forehead, and freckles dotted the cheeks beneath her brown eyes. She wasn't scarred like Echo, and she didn't carry herself like she was waiting for a fight. Not a raider.

Before I could say anything to my soldiers she looked me up and down. "Wow. You're a lot younger than I expected."

She didn't sound aggressive either, which was a good sign. "Who are you?"

Hatfield answered instead, stepping forward to hand me the bow. "We found her at the front gate." I took the weapon, examining it suspiciously before setting it down on the desk.

"I'm Mal," the woman offered readily. "I have something important to discuss with you."

My eyebrows furrowed, and I looked to Hatfield and Johnson to see if they had any idea what she was talking about. They both shrugged. "Do I know you?" Mal shook her head. "What do we have to discuss?"

know you?" Mal shook her head. "What do we have to discuss?

Mal glanced between the soldiers on either side of her, and then looked at the rifle on the floor by my backpack, saying almost nervously, "I'd rather not with an audience."

I studied her for a minute in consideration, without a clue as to where she was from or what she had to say to me. She didn't feel threatening, but just in case I asked, "you have any other weapons?"

She immediately reached for her back pocket, freezing halfway when both Hatfield and Johnson pulled their rifles around. "Whoa, easy there." She slowed her movements and pulled a pocketknife out of her jeans, tossing it on the desk to me. "That's all I got." I nodded at Hatfield and Johnson, and they reluctantly trickled out of the room, closing the door behind them. Mal hardly waited for the door to close. "How do you feel about Jed?"

"I can't stand him. Wh-" I stopped short, my stomach knotting as I eyed my rifle. "How do you know that name?"

"I know *of* him." Mal seemed to catch the turn of my gaze, because she held up her palms. "I've been sent to warn you about him."

"Who sent you? Why?"

"The people I'm traveling with," Mal answered. "A man, and a girl. Jed killed their friend, robbed them. They came all the way here to warn you."

My head cocked suspiciously. "Where are they?"

She didn't answer specifically, all she'd tell me was, "they couldn't risk being seen by him."

I reached down at my feet for the handheld radio attached to my backpack. "Blake, Echo," I said into it, "I need you guys at the radio office. Blake and Echo. Over." I was going to have them increase security on Jed until they were out the gate, but there was no answer from either one of them. "Tell your friends thank you, but Jed's leaving today."

Mal watched me call into my radio again, still without response and taking in the growing concern on my face. "I didn't get your name."

"Has anyone seen Blake or Echo?" I asked my radio impatiently. Then to Mal, "I'm Genevieve."

"Oh," Mal snapped with recognition, "okay, um, last night Jed and some British chick were out by the fence. Jed said something about someone, a her, he said 'all she's good for now is distracting Genevieve.'"

My heart sank. "Who?" Mal shrugged apologetically. "Is that all he said?"

Mal squinted thoughtfully. "He said something about it was easy to crush the light in her, and she's their ticket out of here."

"Son of a bitch," I growled, bringing the radio to my lips again. "Blake! Echo! Do you copy?"

In response Blake burst through the office door, nearly knocking Mal down with it, and I would've thought he was concerned about my repeated calls into the radio if he didn't look so panicked. He was panting for air, his face pale as he clutched a piece of paper in his hands, not even noticing that Mal was standing there.

"They have Casey." I was too stunned to say anything, feeling the blow of those words like a drop kick to the gut. Blake was too frantic to let it sink in. "They have Casey, Gen! Jed fucking took Casey!"

No, no, no. Things couldn't fall apart now. I held out a trembling hand for the paper he was holding, and he gave it to me. 'I have the pregnant nurse,' it read, and in exchange for giving her back Jed wanted *everything* in the armory, given to him at the gate right before they left. My hand clutched at the key around my neck. There wasn't much in the arsenal, but I didn't want to imagine what Jed would be capable of with that kind of ammunition.

"You have to give it to him," Blake said. Unable to form the words to explain all the thoughts flying through my mind, I shook my head. "He has Casey! You have to give him what he wants!"

"Blake," I whispered pleadingly. I just wanted him to calm down so *I* could calm down. Breathing was getting hard, and I could feel a cold sweat starting at my forehead.

But Blake took it as denial. "No!" he hollered angrily. "Fucking, no! You'd do it! If it was Echo or Micah you'd fucking trade and you know it!" Those words struck me in the chest.

"Hey, man," Mal offered softly, "take it easy and give her a second to process."

"Who the hell are you?" Blake growled.

Hatfield poked her head in. "Is everything okay in here?"

"No!" Blake yelled. I'd never seen him like this. He was losing it, and maybe even thought they'd already killed Casey, and if I didn't make the trade he'd hate me forever. "It's not okay!"

I slammed my hands down on the surface of the desk. "Shut up for one goddamn second!" The room fell into a stunned silence, all except for Blake's heavy panting. "Echo," I pleaded into my radio, struggling just to get air in my lungs. What did Jed want all that ammunition for? He was a killer, we'd felt it this whole time, and Mal had just confirmed it. "Echo, please answer." There was only static. If I didn't give Jed what he wanted he'd kill Casey. Then I'd lose Blake too because he'd never forgive me for it, and I couldn't get any oxygen and my stomach was cramping and my head was on fire. "Not now," I whispered, taking in a shallow, wheezing breath. I couldn't have a panic attack now. "No, no, no." I turned, raising my forearms against the wall and burying my face against them. "Echo, where are you?" I swiped my palm across my damp forehead and then clutched at my racing heart. "I need you."

White spots started blurring my vision, but just when I thought I'd lose it completely a hand landed on my shoulder. "Breathe." It was Mal, her voice gentle at my side. "Count to seven while you inhale." I squeezed my eyes shut while she counted for me, sucking air to the rhythm of her tone. It took a few minutes, tuning out the stress and Blake's frantic

breathing and fidgeting, but eventually I was getting enough oxygen to lower my arms and turn around. "There you go," Mal said, looking pointedly at Blake, "take it easy."

"Genevieve," Blake whispered, swallowing back a flood of emotion. "He's only giving us an hour."

"When was the last time you saw her?" I asked weakly. Maybe Jed was bluffing.

"Early this morning," Blake answered, and though he tried to keep his voice calm his fist kept clenching at his side. "She couldn't sleep, so she went for a walk. I checked everywhere, Genevieve, I can't find her."

"Okay." I nodded, and ran my hands up through my hair while I took a slow breath, trying to keep from panicking again. We'd give Jed everything, and he'd leave. He'd go away and we'd never have to see him again. That was the deal. "Okay. Go get a truck, I'll meet you at the armory." Blake left immediately, and I turned to Hatfield. "You and Johnson gather *everyone*. All the soldiers, you understand? I want everyone with a gun at that gate in case Jed tries something."

Hatfield nodded, leaving the office with Johnson to carry out my orders. After I slung my backpack over my shoulders I picked up the compound bow on the desk, extending it to Mal. "I'm going to trust you with this," I said as she took it from me, and then I handed her the pocketknife. "Unless you want out."

Mal's brown eyes scanned me thoughtfully. "I got a fifteen year old kid out there who deserves a place to call home." She adjusted the bandana on her head, letting out a resolute sigh. "The least I could do is help."

I motioned for her to follow, and led the way out of the building with my rifle ready in my hands. "Imogen," I prompted into my radio, "do you read me?" And finally there was a response. "Have you seen Echo? Over."

"No," Imogen's voice replied. "What's going on?"

I glanced over at Mal, trying not to let my frustration show. "Shit just hit

the fan. Get to the armory." But as I said that I thought of someone else I hadn't seen yet today. Jed was targeting the people we loved, and I was so used to being without my brother that I hadn't thought of him until now. "Micah, are you near a radio?" I asked, knowing he hung around April and Samuel, who shared one.

The few moments before there was a response I nearly started freaking out all over again, but then his voice asked, "yeah, why?"

I sighed with relief. "No reason," I answered, wanting him as far from this as possible, "stay at the medical complex. Over." And with a hopeful breath I prompted one more time, "Echo, do you copy?" Nothing.

"Who's Echo?" Mal asked, keeping pace at my side. "Your boyfriend or something?"

"Uh," I mumbled, searching around as we walked, looking for any of Jed's men and making sure there were no immediate threats. "Girlfriend."

Mal seemed to have caught on to my tension, because she'd loaded an arrow into her bow. "Is that who Jed was talking about? Last night?" I nodded, taking the key from around my neck as we arrived at the armory. "What did he do to her?"

I'd reached for the lock, but at that question I stopped and leaned my forehead against the door. "I don't know," I murmured, doing my best to ignore the sinking feeling in my gut. I had to worry about Casey. For now all I could let myself believe was that Echo had turned her radio off because she was upset with me. "She freaked out on me this morning," I admitted, "wouldn't tell me anything."

"But you saw her this morning," Mal offered with a friendly half-smile. "So that's good."

I simply nodded, reluctant to fill Mal in on just how complicated everything was. Like how Echo used to be a raider. Echo would never turn on us. It was impossible that she ever would because I knew her better than that. *She* was better than that. But Jed had said she'd leave with them

willingly. What if he'd used all that guilt she still had to convince her that she didn't deserve to be here, with me.

Goddammit Echo, where are you.

The sound of a diesel engine turned the corner, and a moment later Blake pulled up in a truck, parking it in front of the armory door. Imogen arrived then too, looking immediately concerned that we were opening the armory.

"What's happening?" she asked, confused gaze falling on Mal. "…Hi, I'm Imogen."

"Mal." Mal stuck out her hand, but the shake was cut off as Blake stomped between them and into the armory, grabbing a crate of ammunition.

"Jed's holding Casey hostage," I told Imogen. "He wants everything in the armory."

Imogen's eyebrows furrowed, and she watched Blake load another box onto the truck bed. "Are we giving it to him?"

"Not all the ammo," I said, specifically to Blake, who passed by for another box. "And no weapons."

Blake stopped, turning a scowl on me. "If we cheat him he'll kill her."

"He doesn't know what's in here." When I said that Blake shook his head angrily, taking a step to continue loading. I grabbed his arm to stop him. "Blake, we can't give him everything. Please tell me you understand that."

Instead of responding he jerked his arm from my grasp and picked up a small crate of grenades. "Thirty minutes."

I rubbed my fingers over my eyes, taking a moment to keep myself composed. When I opened them again Imogen was passing in front of me with a box in her arms. "Where's Echo?" she asked.

I shrugged, catching movement in my peripherals and turning to see who

I shrugged, catching movement in my peripherals and turning to see who was sprinting toward us. "I told you to stay at the medical complex!"

Micah stopped at the door, blinking his green eyes at me innocently. "Yeah but you sounded worried over the radio."

I was starting to lose it again. Fuck. Casey was taken, Echo was missing, and now Micah had left somewhere safe. Plus Blake looked like he was ready to blow at any second. The last thing I wanted to do was think about what would happen if Casey was hurt, or if we didn't get her back at all. With a deep breath I squatted down, setting my elbows on my knees and running a hand through my hair. At least if I passed out I was closer to the ground.

Imogen explained the situation for me, and when she was done the only thing Micah had to say was, "where's Echo?"

I let out a frustrated growl and stood, pacing around the corner of the armory so nobody could say anything and make me go ballistic. Cap never prepared me for this. All I'd done the last six years was lead a group of soldiers to shoot at Ferals and raiders. No prior experience told me how I was supposed to respond to someone like Jed, or how to make sure nobody got hurt in the exchange, or how to even keep him fulfilling his end of the bargain. And the one person who could keep me sane, the only one in the world who'd know how to talk me through this wasn't answering her radio.

"Fifteen minutes!" Blake called sharply.

I strode back around, unable to look Blake in the eyes because I couldn't stand the fear on his face, and hopped into the cab of the truck. Blake drove us to the front gate with the other passengers in the back with half of the ammunition. I had no idea if Jed would know for sure that this wasn't everything – it definitely wasn't much – but we had to hope he'd be satisfied with it. If not, I had to prepare myself for the worst. He could kill Casey, start a firefight, and since our soldiers were just about evenly matched in number there would surely be casualties on both sides. There were so many ways this could go wrong.

All my soldiers were there when we arrived at the gate. Some were standing in front of it, others hovered along the sidewalks on either side of the road, all had their weapons on hand. There were also some civilians who'd caught wind of the situation, lingering in the group of soldiers. They stuck out amongst the crowd because they weren't armed, which was the exact reason I didn't want any of them here. If things took a turn for the worst then we'd lose a lot more people than we should.

I got out of the truck after Blake parked in front of the gate, calling to the people gathered around, "I want all civilians to move into the barracks or the cafeteria immediately." There wasn't a single step amongst the crowd, and when I looked at Blake his worried twitching made me impatient. "That's an order!" I yelled harshly. "Move!"

Finally people kicked into gear, and the civilians who'd been standing around slowly migrated into the safety of a building. Blake checked the time again while his other hand constantly brushed over the pistol at his side. So far he hadn't been the gentle, rational guy I'd always known. At this point he was unpredictable, and given the situation I didn't completely trust him.

"Blake," I said, gently setting a hand on his arm, hoping it would remind him that it was *me* talking to him, and that I was on his side. "I want you to give me your gun." His forehead creased, but when he took in a breath to protest I reached up to grab his face. "Hey, look at me," I waited for his gaze to focus on mine, "I need you to trust me."

He just stared at me, looking like he still wanted to protest but was completely unsure of how to express himself. Instead of waiting I dropped one hand, carefully pulling his pistol from its holster, and when I had it I tucked it into the back waistband of my jeans.

We waited the remainder of minutes, and soon there was the rumble of vehicles nearby. Before long the two tanks and truck that Jed had arrived with were coming down the street. The two tanks pulled to a halt about thirty yards away from us. The truck parked behind them where its passengers were hidden from view, but I could hear the cab door of the truck open and close, and a moment later Jed strode out from behind a tank.

tank.

"Glad you could make it," he said, teeth glimmering behind his smug grin.

"Where's Casey?" Blake barked.

Jed deliberately leaned to peer into the bed of the truck behind us. "Where's the stuff from the armory?" I turned to pull down the tailgate, and we stepped aside so he could see. "Doesn't look like much."

I could feel Blake pass me a worried look, but I tried not to let my own concern show. "You remember that thing that happened a few years ago? The outbreak," I said with forced sarcasm. "This is what's left."

Jed hummed thoughtfully, glancing back and forth between Blake and I with a gloating glimmer in his eyes. He knew. It was so obvious that he knew we were lying, but he approved anyway. "Alright." He let out a loud whistle. In response we could hear the cab doors of the truck open again, followed by the sounds of a soft scuffle.

Blake glared at the sound of the struggle. "I swear to God if you hurt her."

But when two of Jed's people rounded the corner with the hostage, my stomach dropped. It wasn't Casey. Echo was struggling against their grips, but her hands were bound behind her and they'd tied a cloth around her mouth so she couldn't speak. She'd been hit in the face and the nose, and even though she was no longer bleeding the rag around her mouth was stained red. Her eyes met mine as the men dragged her forward, and even from here I could tell they were full of tears. But I recognized the look behind those tears. I'd seen it daily since we found her in the city. Remorse. Her soggy gray eyes were begging me not to be upset, and there was only one reason I could think that she had to feel guilty.

"Fucking bastard!" Blake hollered, instantly shooting forward to try and get at Jed. I darted in front of him, pushing against his shoulders to try and hold him back. "Where's Casey!"

I looked frantically at my closest soldiers. "Hold him back!"

My soldiers hurried over to grab Blake, who was still shouting at Jed. It took four of them to wrestle him to the ground, but even from the asphalt he muttered profanities.

"Change of plans," Jed smirked, and turned to motion to one of the tanks. The top hatch opened, and one of his men rose halfway out with Casey, holding a gun to her head. She wasn't tied like Echo, but she appeared too terrified to try calling out to us. "As you can see, the nurse is fine. But all these soldiers here," Jed motioned to all my men, "they make me a little nervous. So here's what we're going to do."

He motioned again, and while the man disappeared back into the tank with Casey, Jed came forward with the two holding Echo, until they were standing directly in front of us. Even though I was dying to look her over and make sure she wasn't seriously hurt, I felt too wounded to meet her gaze.

"In exchange for the ammunition, you get my little raider friend here," Jed continued, shoving Echo forward. But she was so unsteady on her feet, either from struggling or being beaten or pure grief, she fell to her knees in front of me. "Nobody tries to stop us leaving that gate, then you can have Casey back safe and sound. I'll give you one more hour, and you can pick her up." He pointed beyond the fence. "One mile that way. She's all yours."

"How do we know you won't kill her before we get there?"

"If you want I can just kill her now." Jed shrugged. "Or you can trust me and show up in one hour. Up to you."

"You give us Casey back," I growled, feeling my cheeks tint with a burning hatred for him, "and I never want to see your goddamn face again."

His facial hair twitched with a smile. "In case I didn't make it clear, you try to stop us from leaving, and my guy in there will kill the nurse," his gaze dropped to Blake, "and your friend's unborn child."

He didn't say anything else. Just strode right past us and hopped into the

truck we'd loaded the ammunition onto. My soldiers opened the gate, and we watched the truck leave, followed by the other three vehicles.

"Let me up!" Blake shouted once they were gone, forcing the soldier's hands off of him and rising to his feet.

"Blake," I pleaded.

He was too furious to even say anything, and stormed off toward the radio office.

"Genevieve," Echo whispered, bringing her hands around when Imogen cut the rope from them. "Plea-"

"Don't," I interrupted. I tried to scowl at her. "Not out here." I tried to be mad because she'd gone and got herself caught, but when I looked at her I couldn't keep the corners of my mouth from twitching down, and I had to look away before my eyes flooded.

I turned to chase after Blake, hearing the rush of footsteps following behind me. "Blake," I called, bursting through the office door.

"You let them get away with Casey!" he roared the moment I entered.

"We'll get her back," I promised.

"It's a trap, Genevieve! For fuck's sake!"

"No." I shook my head, desperate for that not to be true. "Why? He has everything. There's nothing else we can give him."

"Blake's right," Echo murmured from the door, where she'd filtered in with Imogen, Micah, and Mal. "He's going to lure you away, and he's going to come back here and take the base. That's what he's after."

Fuck. If Jed wanted the base then that meant I couldn't take a rescue team to go and get Casey back. If I took even half of my soldiers with me the base would be too exposed and unguarded, and he'd be able to take it without much difficulty. But not taking soldiers meant we'd have to get

Casey alone, and that was riddled with risk I didn't want to begin thinking about.

"Echo," I groaned, digging the heels of my hands into my eyes. "Do you have any idea of you've done!"

Her face twisted with agony. "You have to let me explain."

"Explain what?" I hollered, holding on to whatever anger I could muster so the betrayal I felt wouldn't sink in. "How they got you? You went over there on your own, didn't you?" I paused to let her answer. She didn't. "You went over there! What the hell were you doing over there!"

Echo's eyes filled with tears, and even though she tried to sniffle them away a stream slid down her cheek. "It's not what you think."

"Not what I think," I repeated quietly. I took in a deep breath, but not even that could keep away the hurt anymore. "I think you went over there because you were going to leave with them. And Jed decided to bargain with you instead."

"No," she swallowed hard, eyebrows converging with pain.

"Then why?"

Echo whimpered, unable to hold back a steady flow of tears as she pushed the sleeve of one arm up past her elbow, holding it out to me. I strode forward as everyone else leaned in to look. At first I wasn't sure what she was trying to show me, but then I saw the tiny red dot above her vein.

I took a disturbed step back. "I don't understand."

She lowered the sleeve hastily, wiping the back of her hand beneath her nose and sniffling again. "I went last night to free that dog. They caught me and held me down." Her chin dropped, and she shut her eyes tight, trying to speak through the wet tension in her voice. "I tried to fight, Genevieve. Please believe me. Please, I tried so hard."

My own eyes blurred, and I felt sick to my stomach over what I thought

My own eyes blurred, and I felt sick to my stomach over what I thought she was saying. "But, I-I don't… what is that? What was it?"

She ran her fingertips over her cheeks, saying so quietly it was barely audible, "heroin."

I raised my hands to my head, taking in a shaky breath. "Everybody out." For a moment they all just stood there, looking as stunned and pained as I felt. "Out!"

They shuffled out of the office, and when the door closed behind them Echo looked at me, her eyebrows furrowed pleadingly. I knew that look so well. She thought I was mad. She was afraid I was about to yell at her.

But I could never yell at her for this. I wrapped my arms around her neck, pulling her to me.

The moment I had her in my arms she broke down. "I'm sorry." She sobbed against me, her shoulders shaking with every shallow, unsteady inhale. "I didn't know they had Casey. I'm so sorry."

"No." I squeezed her harder, and then pulled away to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Stop, it's okay." But the tears wouldn't cease. I'd never seen her like this. She looked so hurt. So defeated. Broken. "Echo," I said soothingly, pressing my lips to her forehead, "it's okay. I'm here." She took in a blubbering breath, and used it to hold back whatever tears would've fallen next. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked softly.

She inhaled deeply to be able to speak, working up the courage to answer. "It wasn't my first time," she whispered, mouth pursing with a frown when I squinted in shock, "and I didn't hate it as much as I wanted to. Jed said that if I told you he'd lie. He'd tell you I begged him for it, and I thought you'd believe him. This morning I just… I never wanted to hurt you, I'm so sorry."

"After everything we've been through," I took her face in my hands, thumbing away a new tear, "why would you think this would be the thing to break us?"

"I've made so many mistakes," she sniffled, blinking fast to rid the blur in

"I've made so many mistakes," she sniffed, blinking fast to rid the blur in her eyes. "I keep thinking you'll realize it and start hating me again."

I wrapped my arms around her neck and held her to me once more, trying my best to squeeze the doubt out of her. I released her after a minute, pulling away to meet her gaze. "I love you, and I meant it when I said I was never taking it back. Nothing you do will ever change that."

In response she cupped my face, leaning forward to give me one long kiss. It was exactly what I'd needed an hour ago. It was exactly what I'd need every day for the rest of my life to make up for all our lost time. When she pulled away she had a content smile on her face, and even though her eyes were still soggy she looked better.

"I can feel it, you know, when you kiss me," she said.

"What?"

"That you really aren't fighting this anymore." She took my hand, bringing it up between us to hold it in both of hers. "Thanks… for not being mad."

I wanted to tell her that she was my everything, but words couldn't have expressed what I felt when I was with her. They could never do justice to how much I loved her, and how much I loved that she could tell. All I could really do was lean my forehead against hers, just to feel her for one minute before we had to return to the chaos waiting for us.

Echo took in a calming breath, giving me a final peck before pulling away. "We have to get Casey back." I nodded. "He'll probably kill all of us."

"If we're going down," I said, squeezing the hand laced with mine, "we're going down together, and we're going down swinging." Her hand tightened around mine in acknowledgment. "You ready?" When she nodded I reached for the radio at my shoulder. "Blake, you guys can come back in now."

The door to the offices opened, and Blake came in trailed by the group he'd left with. There was an extra body that came with them, but significantly smaller and a lot more hairy. The dog bolted past the group straight to Echo, nearly knocking her over when it jumped to put its paws

straight to Echo, nearly knocking her over when it jumped to put its paws on her stomach.

"Hey, dog," Echo said, pushing the canine off her and scratching him behind the ears.

"Listen up," I said to our small group. "Imogen and Micah, you're going to come with me and Echo." I glanced at the newcomer. "Mal?"

She nodded. "I'll come too."

Then I looked at Blake, who was already scowling at me with extreme displeasure. "I need you t-"

"No," he interrupted urgently. "I am not staying here while you go get Casey. Dammit, Genevieve, I need to be there."

I strode over, taking him by the arm to lead him a few steps away. "If Jed really is coming to take the base, then I need you to counter it," I whispered so nobody else could hear. "I'll get Casey back, I promise. Okay? But I need you here in case it's the last thing I ever do." He straightened away from me, his scowl finally disappearing behind a genuine frown of concern. "You're the only one I trust."

His hazel eyes scanned my face, and I knew he could tell what I meant. He wasn't just the only one I trusted to counter an attack by Jed. He was the only one I trusted to command this place if Echo and me didn't make it back. But he looked so worried now that he didn't say anything.

"Gather all the soldiers, prepare for a fight." I started past him to head for the exit, but he grabbed my arm to stop me.

"Pipsqueak," he said, still looking unsure of what to say because neither of us knew if it'd be his only chance. "Come back."

All I could offer was a small smile, and then I nodded to the others and headed out the door. We paced to the gate, and left it on foot in the direction that Jed had told me to meet him. After only going a quarter of the way, however, I stopped.

"What's wrong?" Imogen asked.

I let out a sigh, glancing into the distance. "Micah, you know the town we were at a couple days ago?" He hummed the affirmative. "Go there with Imogen and Mal." He opened his mouth to protest, but I added, "go to the roof where Echo caught the Hunter. Wait there for us."

"Gen," he shook his head, "Jed will kill you."

"But I won't let him get you too," I said, and when he tried to protest again I held up a hand to stop him. "I'm not asking, Micah." Then I looked at Imogen and Mal. "You two take him, and make sure he stays." They both nodded, and I pulled the armory key from around my neck, extending it to Imogen. "Keep this safe for me."

As I turned to leave Echo didn't follow, and instead motioned to my backpack. "Got any rope?" Even though I was curious about the reason, I pulled my pack around and handed her some. "Take the dog with you," she said, kneeling to loop the rope through his collar. "Mal, right?" Mal nodded as Echo passed her the rope. "Watch his teeth, he's a biter."

"Give us two hours," I told Micah, "if we're not back, try getting to Blake. The civilians are priority one. Okay?" They all nodded, and Echo fell into step at my side as we continued in the direction of the meeting place. "You don't have to come," I said, taking her hand in mine. "He's hurt you enough already."

She gave my hand an affectionate squeeze. "Together, remember?"

I smiled gratefully, and we continued the rest of the way in silence. I wasn't sure exactly how far we'd gone, only that we'd been going in the right direction. Part of me expected Jed's entire group to be waiting for us, with weapons ready to fire when he gave the word. Another part of me didn't expect them to show up at all because he'd already killed Casey, and all he really wanted was to get me away from the base.

However, I knew when we'd arrived because there was a small clearing around a stretch of the same river that cut through camp. At first there was nobody there, and Echo and I stopped at the center with our

weapons drawn to search our surroundings. We'd barely arrived when just four people emerged from the woods. They were all pointing guns at Echo and I, whose aim teetered back and forth because we were surrounded. Jed was among them, but he was the only one of importance. Mia wasn't here, and neither was Murphy.

Jed and his men advanced until they'd formed a tight circle around us. I glared past the sights of my riffle. "Where's the rest of your group?"

"You know where they are," he answered with a smirk. "And you came anyway."

"We came for Casey," I sneered.

"I'm fully prepared to take you to her as soon as you surrender your weapons." I continued to glare at him, not in the least bit trusting that he wouldn't shoot us the moment we lowered our guns. "Go ahead," he challenged impatiently. "Pull the trigger. My men have orders to shoot her if we're not back in thirty minutes."

My eyes scanned Jed and each of his three companions. If he wanted us dead this instant he'd have already shot us. I couldn't see why else he'd want to take us somewhere if he wasn't actually going to keep his end of the bargain and give us Casey. I nodded at Echo, and we simultaneously held out our guns.

One of Jed's men took my rifle, but he reached out for Echo's pistol personally, saying smugly as he did, "looking a little fiendish there, Echo."

My jaws clenched, and before I could control my reaction I'd taken the knife from my thigh and made a furious swipe in Jed's direction. He snarled when it slashed him in the arm, but before I could do it again one of his men caught my arm. The very next second Jed's fist connected with my cheek, and I hit the ground.

Echo lunged in my defense, trying to get at Jed, but the other two men caught her and held her back. The one who'd caught my arm reached for my knife to take it away.

"Let her keep it," Jed growled, pulling his bloodied hand away from the gash in his arm. "She's going to need it." He grabbed me by the wrist so I couldn't stab him, and yanked me off the ground. "You try that shit again and I'll kill you before we get to the nurse." Then he shoved me ahead of him, forcing Echo and me to lead the group. "Let's go."

We walked ahead of the men, every once in a while throwing menacing scowls over our shoulders. I'd just begun to wonder where he was taking us when things started to look familiar. Only a minute later that old animal shelter came into view, and standing outside the gate to the kennels were the raiders who'd been giving us problems when we first arrived. At seeing them I wanted to turn around and take another swipe at Jed. The son of a bitch had been lying to us from the start, but I took him seriously when he said he'd kill us if I tried getting at him again.

"Casey!" Echo called as we reached the gate.

I followed her gaze to the large grassy area in front of the kennels. Casey was tied to a tree at the center, but she was alive, and from here looked completely unharmed. Echo and I both looked at Jed, and when he motioned we sprinted toward Casey. I skidded to a halt at the tree, moving around to undo the ropes keeping her in place.

"You're alive," I said in disbelief, tugging at the impossible knot. "Did they hurt you?"

Remembering the knife at my thigh I pulled it out and cut the rope, then went back around to Casey and Echo. I'd almost started to feel hopeful again, before I realized Casey was crying, shaking her head with tragic disbelief.

"You shouldn't have come," she whispered.

No sooner had she spoken than there was an almost inhuman roar from the entrance of the kennels. My gaze darted over to see that the men were carrying over three crates. In each one was a Feral, and they were setting them within the gate to unlock the doors. *Oh shit*. It really was a trap. Jed had taken our weapons, and he was about to set three Ferals

loose on us.

"The kennels," I said frantically, feeling my blood run cold at the sound of another hungry snarl. "Get to the kennels!"

All three of us took off running for the nearest row of cages, knowing we only had a few moments before the men managed to get those crates open. I made sure Casey sprinted into the kennel first and then went in right after her, cramming into the back so there'd be room for Echo and hearing the door slam shut behind us. I swiveled around, about to ask Echo the adrenaline-fueled question of what we should do next, but when I turned to face her she was on the wrong side of the gate.

Our eyes met, and that laugh line at the corner of her mouth deepened with an apologetic smile, with that same look she'd had earlier, begging me not to be mad. My heart had been racing wildly ever since I'd seen those crates with the Ferals, but when my focus dropped to Echo's hand and I saw the padlock in her grip, it stopped beating completely. My blood froze in my veins with instant horror because I observed her intentions in the sad glint of her eyes, in the repentant turn of her mouth. In that brief moment it's like she was waiting. Second-guessing what she was about to do or hoping I'd realize exactly what she was about to sacrifice. When she recognized the tensing of my body, saw that I was about to take action, her hand shot up. Out of pure instinct I vaulted myself at the chain-link door to try and stop her, but right as I hit it she clicked the lock into place, shutting Casey and me in while she remained outside.

"No, no, no, what are you doing?" I asked, already starting to panic at the apologetic look on her face. "Open the door."

"Give me your knife, Genevieve."

"Echo, open the door," I pleaded, tears flooding my eyes because I could see the resolve in hers. "Echo, don't do this, open the door." She couldn't fight them on her own, and there was nowhere to run or hide.

She held up a hand, motioning for the weapon. "The knife." But her hand was trembling violently, betraying the terror she was trying so hard not to let me see.

let me see.

"Echo, open the goddamn door!" My voice cracked while I gripped the fence, giving it a desperate shake.

"They'll break through in a minute flat and you know it," she whispered, taking in a tremorous breath. "That knife is my only chance."

"Please don't do this," I begged, feeling a warm drop cascade down my cheek. "Together, remember?" I reached both arms out to grab her shoulders pleadingly, like my touch and voice and soggy eyes would get her to understand just how much I was pleading with her, like it would show her what I'd give so she wouldn't do this. Instead she finally stuck an arm through, grabbing the knife from my thigh because I wouldn't give it to her. "Echo, please."

Once she had the knife she unclipped the bracelet from her wrist, where she kept her bobby pins, and replaced it on mine. "Here, you never could pick a lock." She tried to smile at that, but when she took in the frenzied look on my face her eyebrows furrowed with regret. "I can make this right," she said. "I have to. For all the lives and time I've stolen." She raised a quivering hand to wipe at the single tear that fell down her cheek. "I'm sorry." Then turned and ran.

"NO!" I screamed, throwing myself at the door.

I flung myself at it again and again, attempting to break the rusty hinges from the frame while I yelled, trying to distract the Ferals from Echo. When the hinges wouldn't give I reached out to grab the lock, pulling at it as hard as I could while I struggled for every desperate and panicked breath. I twisted it maniacally, applying so much force I thought something would break, either the lock or my hand. Nothing.

I couldn't see Echo anymore. She'd disappeared around the corner and I couldn't see through the blur in my eyes, but I could hear the snarling and growling of the Ferals so much closer than the entrance. The lock wouldn't give, and there was no use in me trying to pick it. In this state I'd never be able to open it, and my entire body was shaking so badly I'd probably drop the bobby pins.

There was a sharp cry of pain from the invisible distance.

"Echo!" I yelled, pushing Casey to the very back of the kennel so I could pick up speed before colliding with the door.

The entire structure shook when I slammed my shoulder into the chain-link. The metal dug into my skin, bruising me to the bone and cutting through a layer of skin so that blood started seeping through my shirt. I did it once more, ignoring the throbbing pain. But it wasn't working. Echo was out there alone, with three Ferals and nothing but a knife. None of this was working. I threw my hands to my head, struggling to breathe while I searched for something else. I couldn't lose her.

There. At the bottom of the door the wires that held the chain-link to the frame weren't very strong. If I applied enough force closer to them I could wrench them free. I picked my knee up and brought it down hard, smashing my boot in the corner of the door and feeling a spark of hope when the wire gave a little. I did it once more, throwing the weight of my entire body into it. Through the exertion and the desperation and the inability to breathe I smashed again and again, trying not to focus on the dwindling sounds of scuffle as I broke the door apart.

I kicked my boot into the corner until I'd broke away enough wire pieces that I could peel the chain-link back, creating an opening at the bottom just large enough for me to crawl through. I dropped to my hands and knees, in such a hurry to squeeze by that I didn't care if the edges were sharp. They scraped against my back as I wormed out the bottom, caught on my jeans when I worked my legs through. But finally. Finally I was out.

"Echo!" I shot to my feet, running back to the grass area to look for her. There was nobody near the gate anymore. Jed and his men had set the Ferals loose and then taken off.

But then I spotted Echo near that tree Casey was tied to. She'd killed one Feral and had the knife buried in a second one, but right as I looked the third one threw itself on her back, gnashing its teeth deep into her neck. I sprinted there as fast as I could and wrapped my arms around the Feral's head, pulling it off of her and twisting as hard as I could. Its neck snapped

head, pulling it off of her and twisting as hard as I could. Its neck snapped with a sickening crack, and I threw the lifeless body away and shot forward, catching Echo before she collapsed to the grass.

"No," I whined, tossing one of her arms over my shoulders and lowering her to the ground where she could lean back against the tree. "Oh God." Blood was pouring from the wound in her neck, and I tried not to look at the bites in her arms and shoulders because I didn't want to admit to myself what they meant. "Put pressure." I dropped my backpack and ripped my shirt over my head, bundling it up and pressing it hard against the bite in her neck.

"Genevieve, stop," she choked, raising a hand to her mouth to wipe at the blood she'd coughed up.

I shook my head, sniffling past the tears flowing down my cheeks. "You're going to be okay." If only I could stop the bleeding. Casey could patch her up, and it would heal, and everything would be okay.

"Please," she said, pushing my hands away. I returned them instantly, desperate to stop the flow. She was everything to me. "Genevieve." She pushed again, and swallowing back a sob I fought my shirt back to the wound. "Let me bleed or you'll have to kill me yourself!"

Those words hit me like lightening. They struck me hard, barreling through my head and heart and stomach with so much force it made me sick. I couldn't hold it back anymore. I choked on the tears. "Please don't do this," I begged. Casey dropped to her knees at my side. "Echo, please. I can't do this without you."

Echo took my hands, tossing the shirt away so she could hold them in her own. "Genevieve?"

"You can't go," I whimpered pleadingly. She looked so resolved that this was it. That this was the end. "Please." It couldn't be the end. "We'll take you back, and you'll be fine."

She lifted my hands to touch her cheek, to show me that her skin was already burning with a fever. *NO*. I yanked my hand away, my chest

quivering with a series of breathy sobs. This was Echo. She'd survived raiders, and Ferals, and heartbreak. She could survive this if only she tried. She could survive anything.

"I can feel it in me, they weren't Hunters," she said, sniffling at the pain in my expression. "Look at me." She waited until my tear-filled eyes met hers, but at finding her skin getting pale I had to look away. "You have to keep fighting." And her voice had grown so quiet. "You understand? Promise me."

"I can't." My face twisted with agony, and I ran a bloodstained hand beneath my nose. The copper smell of it flooded my nostrils, and it was Echo's and the smell was so strong I got lightheaded. "I need you. Please don't do this." She coughed again, choking on the red that tinged her lips. "*You're* the fighter," I told her. Her focus was fading, so I took her face in my palms to make her look at me. "Fight it!" She reached up to take one of my hands, her grip so weak she barely managed. "Please, don't leave me here," I cried, bringing her head to my shoulder and hugging her to me. "Echo, please." I sobbed. "I can't."

But she didn't respond, and the fever was gone and her skin was cold compared to a minute before and she'd never respond again. Never kiss me, touch me, tell me she loved me. I completely broke down, falling sideways for immediate lack of strength and burying my face in her lap. My world collapsed.

Battle Cry

Seven Devils by Florence + The Machine

Battle Cry

Dugan

Kara and I were crouched down behind a fallen log in front of the military base's front gate, where we'd parted with Mal a couple hours ago. We'd watched her walk right up to those gates, anxious that she'd be taken prisoner. We'd watched her be accepted by them, observed an exchange with Jed, and then watched Jed and his three vehicles roll away. Now we were waiting to see what would happen next, because Mal had disappeared with some people back inside a nearby building. It took a little while, but eventually they all reappeared, and a group of five including Mal were heading right for the gate.

"That's Wolf!" Kara pointed at the group leaving the gates, nearly darting from behind the log in her excitement.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. "Not yet."

We weren't sure where they were going, or why. They didn't even look happy that Jed and his raiders had just left the base, which seemed like something worth celebrating. For all we knew Mal had been accepted, but hadn't seen fit to tell them about Kara and I yet because she didn't trust them. We had to play it safe.

The group started off into the woods in the opposite direction of Kara and I, so I motioned for her to follow me. Keeping low to the ground to remain out of sight, we ducked behind trees, trailing the soldiers and Mal at a distance far enough that even Wolf couldn't detect us. It didn't take long at all until the group stopped. I motioned for Kara to crouch down and did the same while we waited for them to start moving again. We were too far away to hear anything being said, but one of the women leashed a rope to Wolf's collar, handed it to Mal, and then started off in a different

direction with one of the others.

The only ones left were Mal, another woman, and a boy that didn't look much older than Kara. At the reduction in number Kara shot me a questioning look, asking whether or not we could reveal ourselves now. I studied the remaining three. Mal had her bow back, but both the other two were armed with assault rifles. They all seemed tense, and while the boy stared after the two women who'd just left the other girl was scanning the forest with an anxious distrust.

Before I could make up my mind about whether or not to leave our hiding spot, the woman tapped the boy on the arm, and they picked up walking with Mal and Wolf. The longer the group seemed to be unconcerned with Mal's presence, the more comfortable I got with the idea of coming out of hiding. So we picked up our pace a bit, slowly closing the distance between them and us. Eventually we got close enough that Wolf recognized we were there, and he stopped, releasing a rumbling growl in our direction.

I immediately dropped down behind a bush, worried the soldiers might shoot first and ask questions later with how tense they seemed. They both turned around with their rifles raised, and even Mal stretched an arrow into her bow.

"Who's there?" demanded the other female.

I took in a deep breath, nervous even though I knew Mal was on our side. "Mal," I called, "it's us."

Mal lowered her bow immediately, telling the other two, "they're with me. It's okay."

It seemed a bit reluctant, but after a few moments the other two lowered their weapons. Kara didn't wait another moment to dart out from our hiding spot.

"Wolf!" she hollered, sprinting in the direction of the group.

I panicked a little when the soldiers tensed at her fast movements, but

when Wolf recognized Kara he shot forward so fast it yanked the rope from Mal's hand. Kara collided with the happy canine so hard it knocked her to the ground. She wrapped her arms around him, wrestling with him and running her hands through all of his fur while he jumped all over her. The dog was so happy he was whining, and he kept throwing himself on top of Kara, only to run an excited circle around her before jumping on her again. Mal and the other two met me at the reunited pair, and I was relieved to see that both the soldiers were smiling.

"That dog wouldn't let anyone but Echo touch him," said the boy, laughing. "I'm Micah."

When he extended his hand to me I shook it. "Dugan." Then I held my hand out to the other woman.

"Imogen," she introduced herself.

Kara managed to haul herself off the ground, and even though Wolf wouldn't stop slamming into her legs with his wiggling body she shook with both Imogen and Micah. "I'm Kara."

Though they'd been delighted at how Kara and Wolf were acting a moment ago, the second Kara finished introducing herself the smiles faded.

"What's happening?" I asked, looking between Mal and Imogen with concern.

Mal sighed. "Jed's taken a hostage. Genevieve and Echo went to get her back."

"The two who split with you a ways back?" I clarified, to which Mal nodded. "Why'd they go alone? It's a death trap."

I didn't miss the awkward way Imogen's eyes darted to Micah. The kid blinked at me, absorbing my words for a moment before offering a half smile. "My sister will find a way," he said in explanation.

"We need to keep moving." Imogen motioned for us to follow, and we all picked up walking. While we traveled she explained the situation in

picked up walking. While we traveled she explained the situation in greater detail. "We couldn't bring any other soldiers because we think Jed's going to try and capture the base."

"Is your leader there to counter an attack?" I asked. It was one thing for us to have gotten here too late to warn these people about Jed. It was another thing entirely for us to have arrived right when everything turned dire. I was trying to protect Kara, not drop her right into the middle of a battle for territory. But I'd also been desperate to find her a permanent home.

"Genevieve is their leader," Mal answered.

My eyebrows furrowed at that. "The one who just left to," I paused, filtering my immediate and potentially insensitive response because it was Micah's sister, "get the hostage back?" Jed would kill her for sure. I didn't even think she should've left the safety of the base. "Is that the kind of risk she should be taking?"

"She left someone in charge," Imogen replied. "Someone we all trust."

I shook my head, saying quietly, "I just don't think it sounds like the smartest decision."

Both Imogen and Micah turned cold stares on me when I said that, and Mal visibly winced at their reaction. But what did they want me to say? When you're fighting a war the objective is to take out the opposing side's general. This side's general was about to deliver herself directly into Jed's hands. I couldn't be comfortable with that. Not when it appeared that by following this group Kara and I had just inadvertently signed up as warriors.

"I think she sounds brave," Kara offered, taking a deliberate step in front of me to break the near-glares I was getting. At seeing the smallest of relieved smiles on Micah's face she hurried forward to his side. "Is she the one who's your sister?" Micah nodded. "Are you worried about her?"

"Yeah, but she's with Echo," Micah said, and his shoulders bobbed with a shrug. "They'll take care of each other."

Mal dropped back to the rear of the group to walk at my side. "You just got rescued by a fifteen year old," she chuckled. All I did was give a deep sigh. "Dugan, you need to take it easy. So far they trust us, but we haven't exactly been vetted yet."

"But can *we* trust them?" I asked skeptically. "And I don't mean that they won't hurt us. Can we trust that they know what they're doing?" I couldn't ignore the fact that everyone here was half my age. Their *leader* was half my age. "Jed's already made a play and I'm risking Kara's life by keeping us here."

"They got blindsided," Mal said. She studied my face, taking in the remaining doubt. "Look, do you know how many people are on that base? There are more people there than I've seen since the outbreak started combined. Those people wouldn't be alive and somewhere secure if these guys didn't know what they're doing." She put a hand on my shoulder, stopping me while the others continued forward so she could say quietly, "I trust them, but if you decide a time comes to bail, just say the word. Okay?"

I nodded, grateful that even though she seemed so sure we'd arrived somewhere worthwhile she'd still give it up for Kara and I. We resumed our pace at the back of the group, and followed along until the woods ended, and we were standing at the outskirts of a small town. From our cover in the brush I could see a Feral or two wandering around, but the place was small enough that there weren't too many.

"It's that building," Micah told Imogen, pointing to a three-story office nearby.

She held up her rifle and peered through the scope to get a better look at how many Ferals were around. "We'll sneak around the back, try to get in the door before any of the Ferals notice us."

"We caught a Hunter here," Micah informed us. "There could be more. Everybody stay close."

That sparked some questions for me. I assumed a Hunter was what they called those stalker Ferals, and I wanted to know why they'd caught one

called those Stalker Ferals, and I wanted to know why they'd caught one, but I'd have to wait a little longer to ask.

Our small group crept along the outside of town to the rear of the building, and then one by one we plastered ourselves against the back wall. Imogen led the way to the side, peeking around the corner to check for Ferals before edging herself around. At the front of the building we worked our way in, inching more and more slowly toward the door at the center, hoping the Ferals wouldn't notice us. The few wandering around were busy digging through bushes or old garbage bins looking for food, and two others were fighting over a dead animal.

It seemed like we were going to get through the door without being noticed at all, but Imogen had just reached for the handle when there were gunshots from the distance. Each of the Ferals looked up toward the gunshots, which put us in their line of sight. The first one to see us snarled loudly and took off in our direction.

"Move it!" Imogen shouted, yanking open the door and waving us in one by one.

We all darted in, first Micah, then Kara, Mal and then I. Imogen whipped around to throw herself through the door, but the Feral managed to launch itself through the opening before the door slammed shut behind her. It took her to the ground, its jaws wide for a hungry bite. Before it could bury its teeth in her I smashed my foot against it to knock it off of her, and then I aimed my pistol at it and fired a shot.

"You okay?" I asked while Mal offered Imogen a hand and pulled her off the ground.

Imogen nodded, brushing herself off. "Thanks."

I flinched when the next Feral collided with the closed door, and without another word our group headed for the roof. The gunshots were still sounding in the distance. They were constant, and different pitches as though coming from a variety of different guns. When we reached the roof both Micah and Imogen strode to the edge, staring in the direction of the shots as though they could see what was happening.

I trudged to Imogen's side. "Is that coming from the base?"

She nodded, and we all stood there for a few minutes in tense silence, listening to the echo of gunfire crack through the air. With how many people Mal had told me were on that base, and with how vicious I knew Jed's group was, I expected the battle to last for hours. It was far from comforting then when after only a few minutes the shots ceased, and not another sound came from the direction of the camp.

"Didn't sound like much of a fight," Mal observed cautiously.

Neither Micah or Imogen said anything in response, but Micah folded his hands behind his head while Imogen squatted down and let out a stressed sigh.

"What now?" I asked, but what I meant was, did Jed win? Are we going back to try and rescue them? Is there a plan if Genevieve never returns? Who takes over, and calls the shots, and makes sure I'm not risking Kara's life for nothing?

"Wait for Genevieve," Micah answered, turning around to sit at the edge of the roof.

"She said to wait two hours," Imogen added. "It's been about forty-five minutes."

Imogen dropped down next to Micah, so I gradually sat down too, along with Kara and Mal. They both seemed more tense now than they had been previously. For a while we sat there, and they kept glancing toward the base. Micah's foot was tapping impatiently, and Imogen kept sighing and adjusting the rifle she'd set in her lap. It wasn't hard to imagine why they were so concerned. Micah's sister had gone into a dangerous situation, and their camp had probably already given up fighting Jed and surrendered the base to him. Surely there were people at camp that they cared about, and they were worried about what Jed might do to them, or what might happen if they couldn't take the base back.

Seeing as I didn't know Micah or Imogen well, I didn't want to try making conversation with them while they were tense, but after a few minutes of

silence Imogen asked, "how'd you find this place?"

"We encountered Jed a while ago," I explained. "We overheard some of his guys talking about a radio signal they'd intercepted, coming from here. We tried to get here sooner to warn you guys, but he took all our supplies and weapons, and I was injured…"

"You still made it," Imogen said with the smallest of comforting smiles. "Hopefully things go our way for once."

"Micah, Imogen," said a female voice from the radio at Imogen's waist.

"That's Gen!" Micah said happily, turning to face Imogen while she brought the radio to her lips.

"We're here," Imogen replied. "Did you guys get Casey?"

There was such a long pause that I almost expected Genevieve hadn't been able to get the hostage back, and she was afraid of delivering bad news. "I have Casey," Genevieve finally said, but even though I'd never met her before I could hear the strain in her voice. "We'll be there soon. Over and out."

Imogen had taken in a breath to say something else, but at 'over and out' she closed it and stared at the radio.

"Is something wrong?" I ventured to ask.

Imogen lowered the radio, her eyebrows furrowing for a moment before she returned it to her belt. "I don't know," she answered, but when her brown eyes met mine there was an unmistakable fear in them.

It felt like an eternity that we continued to sit there, waiting for Genevieve, Echo, and Casey to return. While Micah seemed relieved that Genevieve was coming back, Imogen didn't bear the same light anticipation. Eventually the door of the roof cracked open, and that same voice from the radio called 'it's me' before two females strode through. Micah had stood and began pacing over, seeming intent on giving Genevieve a hug, but when they made it through the door he stopped in his tracks, and the

rest of us rose to our feet.

The woman with black hair, who I assumed was Genevieve because she was the only one I'd seen separate from the group, had nothing covering her upper body but a sports bra and a terrifying amount of smeared blood. The blood streaked her arms and hands and there were the remnants of some on her face. Her shoulders and mouth and eyes were sunk with grief, and even without hearing what had happened, I already knew.

Genevieve looked at me, and then at Kara and Mal, but she refused to look at Micah or Imogen. Nobody said anything, nobody so much as breathed. The first one to make a sound was Wolf. He sauntered forward, his nails clipping the hard surface of the roof at a pace so slow I was sure he knew what had happened too. He padded right to Genevieve's side and placed his head beneath her hand. It meant something to her, because her face converged and as she took in a deep breath to stop the emotion she yanked her hand away.

"Gen," Micah whispered.

Before he could say anything else she started forward, motioning to the radio at Imogen's hip. "My battery died, I need your handheld."

Imogen backed away from her reach and her eyes flooded with tears. "Where's Echo?"

"The radio," Genevieve insisted. Where she previously wouldn't so much as look at Imogen, now she wouldn't look away, and her eyes were narrowed with command.

"Genevieve," Micah prompted again, "you're cov-"

Genevieve cut him off, growling fiercely. "Give me the radio, Imogen, or so help me."

I glanced at Mal. We didn't know these people. I didn't know how Genevieve would react if Imogen refused again, or how she'd deal with the loss she'd so clearly suffered, or if she was capable of still leading.

Mal didn't seem sure either, because though she was clearly concerned about the tension between Imogen and Genevieve, she shrugged.

"The blood," Micah murmured.

"Where's Echo?" Imogen repeated in a whimper.

"Have you heard from Blake?" Genevieve demanded impatiently, desperately motioning for the radio again. The more Imogen and Micah refused she got visibly closer to the edge of breaking. "I need to make sure he's okay."

When Genevieve reached for the radio Imogen pushed her hand away. "Is she-"

"Give me the goddamn radio!" Genevieve snapped, and her face grew so fierce I was afraid she might actually get physical.

Imogen glared at the same time she sniffled, and after she pulled the radio from her belt and shoved it into Genevieve's hands she escaped behind the roof door so we couldn't see her, but I could hear her break down in tears. Genevieve held the radio before her, staring at it as if she'd forgotten what she wanted it for or what it even did. Her face wasn't angry anymore. She looked blank. Empty. And I was realizing this was how she wanted to deal with it.

But the others wouldn't let her.

"Let me give you something to clean up," Micah suggested quietly, pulling his backpack off to search through it.

"I'm fine," Genevieve answered, adjusting the frequency on the radio.

He pulled out a bottle of water and a roll of gauze, and while he tore a piece from the roll he said gently, "You're not. You're covered in blood."

"Genevieve," Mal added softly, taking a step forward to try and break the girl's concentration on the radio. "Maybe you should take a minute."

"We can wait," Micah agreed.

We can wait," Micah agreed.

"I'm said I'm fine!" Genevieve screamed, finally looking up from the handheld to glare. "I'm fucking composed! Jed already has the base! Every second we spend could mean another life and you want me to take a goddamn minute! If one more person fucking brings it up I'll fucking lose it! You want me to lead in a goddamn cavalry then let me do what I have to fucking do!" She stopped while every one of us blinked at her in stunned silence, panting for air because she'd expended it all on shouting. "Thank you," she grumbled in an aggravated sigh. She adjusted the frequency on the radio one more time and then brought it to her lips. "Blake, do you copy? Blake, it's Genevieve, over."

I was too worried about their leader's emotional state to even open my mouth, so I stood there silently with Kara and Mal while she waited for a response on the radio. Though Micah appeared intensely concerned about his sister, he refrained from saying anything else. Instead he took off his jacket, pulled the shirt over his head, and put his jacket back on.

"Blake, do you read me?" Genevieve asked again, taking the shirt Micah was offering her.

"Loud and clear, Pipsqueak," replied a male voice. "Casey?"

"She's here," Genevieve answered while she dropped her backpack and tugged the shirt over her head. "She's okay."

"Jed's scanning frequencies," Blake said hurriedly. "We only have a minute before he finds the emergency channel."

"Give me a full update. Over."

"He got to some of our men," Blake began to explain. "They turned on us, took over before we could even catch our bearings. We're outnumber-" Blake stopped short, and there were a few moments of tense silence before his voice came back. "Outnumbered. I took everyone I could into the sewers and snuck back up for recon. They're looking for me. Jed's got some of his troops guarding all the civilians he trapped in the cafeteria. Roger so far?"

Genevieve stressfully ran a red-stained hand through her hair. "Roger."

"He and the rest of them are posted at the armory with their vehicles. They're trying to get it open."

"Casualties?" Genevieve asked.

"A few in the firefight," Blake answered. "Gen, he's keeping everyone alive. He wants to use them as slaves I think. But I heard his men say he only wants enough civilians to sustain his men, the rest he-"

"Genevieve," interrupted a familiar voice. It was Jed, and he was singing his triumph and at hearing him Genevieve visibly froze. "I'm surprised you made it out alive." Her fist clenched around the radio, and when there was no answer Jed continued. "I'm organizing the slaves by tiers. I've got a spot reserved for you at the top if you surrender yourself." I don't know if it was terror, or rage, or a muddling of all kinds of intense emotions, but Genevieve's hands had begun trembling. "And tell Echo I've got some product left to quench her thirst."

At that Genevieve let out a snarl and raised the handheld in the air, preparing to smash it down against the surface of the roof. "Not the radio!" Micah exclaimed, darting forward and snatching it from her before she could release it.

Now that she didn't have anything to take her anger out on it didn't seem she knew what to do. So she threw her hands to her head, huffing uncontrollably and grumbling to herself as she began to pace the edge of the roof. Imogen came back around, wiping at her dampened cheeks while she resumed a spot beside Micah. We all watched Genevieve pace for a minute, calming herself down, until eventually she stopped to face us.

"We're taking it back," she said sternly. "Get your stuff."

"What? Now?" Imogen asked in shock. "Shouldn't we wait until nightfall?"

"That's what he's expecting," Genevieve mumbled, and even from feet away I could feel the rage boiling beneath her skin. "That's what he thinks

we'll do, what anyone sane would do." She strode forward, and when she motioned for the rifle over Micah's shoulder he gave it to her. "I'm done playing games with him. We're outnumbered. Any advantage we'd gain at night would be his advantage too. The only way we stand a chance is if we catch them off guard, and the only way we'll do that is if we attack now."

I glanced over at Mal, and she knew by the look on my face what I was thinking. If we were going to leave, and bail without helping these people get their camp back, now was the time to do it.

"Um, Genevieve," I said cautiously, taking a timid step toward her. Her brown eyes focused on me, widening a bit as if seeing me for the first time. "Dugan," I introduced myself with as friendly a voice as I could, but my heart was thudding hard. It was impossible to predict how Genevieve would react to it if we didn't stay. They needed all the hands they could get in order to recapture the base. For all I knew she might try to force us to help. "Look," I started, getting closer to Genevieve as if to have a private conversation with her, even though I knew everyone could still hear me. "I know you have people to worry about, and that you need all the help you can get. But that kid is everything, and I can't let anything happen to her."

"Dugan," Kara protested instantly, knowing what I meant to say. That we couldn't go with them.

Genevieve looked from Kara to me, thinking quietly to herself for a few moments. It was obvious she hadn't been expecting it, and I could tell she didn't like it. "Mal?" she prompted, because I hadn't stated where Mal stood on the issue.

Mal pursed her lips apologetically. "I made them a promise."

Genevieve nodded, and I could tell by her continued thoughtful silence that she was readjusting her expectations about how their rescue mission might go. "Okay." She sighed. "Whether you help or not, there's room for you if we manage to get it back."

Without another word she started for the exit, and Imogen, Micah, and

Without another word she started for the exit, and Imogen, Micah, and Casey followed.

"Dugan," Kara protested again, stepping in front of me with urgency. "We have to help them."

"It's too dangerous." We only had two weapons between the three of us, and I still hadn't completely healed from my injury.

"Being alive is dangerous," she argued. "If you want to keep me safe then we have to help them!" She felt so passionately about it that her eyes were getting watery. As the group exited the building down below I heard gunshots, and knew they were dispatching the Ferals outside. I also knew the fact that they were leaving was causing Kara to panic. "We'll get the base back and then we'll be safe."

"Kara," I pleaded.

"Did you forget how he hurt you?" she asked impatiently, and then pointed to the still healing wound in her cheek. "How he hurt *me*? He took their home, and he killed their friend."

"Girlfriend," Mal corrected, and when we both looked at her she clarified, "Echo was Genevieve's girlfriend. Just saying. I don't know how she's functional and not rampaging."

I sighed, and sat down to bury my face in my hands while the true gravity of what Genevieve had lost sank in. Was it fair to say this group had suffered more than Kara and I had? They had friends and family stuck on that base and Jed would kill them. He'd just killed someone Genevieve loved, and even though she was clearly heartbroken and desperate to take it all back, she'd been kind enough not to force us. They were *good* people. The kind of people we'd been searching for, and I knew they deserved our help as much as Jed deserved justice.

"I say we vote," Kara said eagerly. "All in favor of helping." And her hand shot in the air. What I didn't expect was when Mal raised her hand too, giving me a helpless wince. "Wolf agrees with me and Mal."

"Okay," I groaned, standing back up and hoping with everything in me

"Okay," I groaned, standing back up and hoping with everything in me that this didn't go horribly wrong. "Fine."

"Wait!" Kara yelled after the disappearing group on the ground, and immediately ran for the roof door. "We're coming!"

Mal and I followed her down the stairs and out the building, where we reunited with the group at the edge of the woods. Genevieve extended a nod of acknowledgement, and continued in the direction of the base.

"What's the plan?" Imogen asked.

"I want you to take Micah and Casey into the sewers," Genevieve answered, pulling the magazine out of the gun she'd taken from Micah to check the ammunition. "Find the civilians Blake hid down there. Mal and Dugan will come with me to find Jed at the armory. Um, you," she faltered, motioning to Kara because they hadn't been introduced.

"Kara," the teen supplied readily.

"You want to go with Imogen?" Genevieve asked.

I cut in before Kara could answer. "We aren't separating."

"She'll be safer," Genevieve offered knowingly. "She doesn't have a weapon. Casey's a doctor, if that helps…"

"Dugan," Kara said before I could protest again. "I'll be fine. I'll have Wolf with me too." All that was left for me to do was nod in agreement.

"See how many people down there have weapons," Genevieve continued to tell Imogen. "Take the ones that do to the cafeteria. Don't engage until you hear us fire at the armory first. Okay? We need the element of surprise." Imogen nodded. "Leave anyone who's unarmed in the sewers."

"Do you want this back?" Imogen motioned to a key hanging around her neck.

"Keep it." Genevieve shook her head, and then stopped to squint through the trees. "We'll split up here. Stay alert, they might be patrolling outside

the gates." Imogen nodded once more, and Genevieve made an indicative glance at the two teens and Casey. "Keep an eye out for them. Please."

"It's okay," Imogen said reassuringly. "I got this."

Genevieve turned to her brother, but before she could say anything to him he wrapped her in a hug. "You stay alive," she told him sternly. "You hear me? Don't do anything reckless."

"I should say the same to you," he said with a half-smile.

Genevieve ruffled his hair, but the action seemed as sad as it did playful. Then she looked at Casey, extending a hand to the woman's stomach as she came forward. "Take care of the nugget."

"This isn't goodbye," Casey said, throwing her arms around Genevieve's neck, and I heard Gen whisper 'you never know.' When Casey pulled away she wiped a tear from her cheek, and sniffled to keep anymore from falling. "Thank you." But the sniffle was useless, and a few fell from her chin. "I'm sorry."

Genevieve took in a visibly deep breath and nodded, and then headed off without waiting for Mal and I.

"Don't you do anything reckless either," I told Kara. "No heroics."

"I won't, Doogie Doug." She smiled, giving me a push in Genevieve's direction. "Go find Jed. I'll see you soon."

We parted ways, Mal and I pacing to catch up with Genevieve. It was the first time in a long time I'd let Kara out of my sight, and it was far from easy.

"She'll be okay with them, right?" I asked as Mal and I took stride beside Gen.

"She's safer than with us," Genevieve answered, but she stopped walking to look at me seriously, and her voice grew impatient. "If you're uneasy, you can go with them. If you're here, I need you focused."

you can go with them. If you're here, I need you focused."

"I'm here." To prove it I pulled the pistol from my waistband. "I'm ready."

Genevieve's eyes scanned my weapon, and then lingered on me for an apologetic moment before she picked up walking. We were deep enough into the woods that I didn't realize right away we were following the perimeter of a fence. We were right outside the base, and being so close was almost enough to make me trade worrying about Kara for worrying about a more immediate danger.

Eventually Genevieve stopped and crouched down behind a set of bushes. "We need to find a way past the fence."

"We can climb it," Mal said. Gen looked like she was about to protest, so Mal added, "Jed and that chick turned off the electricity last night."

To test that out, Genevieve left cover to toss a stick toward the fence. It hit the cold wires without so much as a spark and dropped to the ground. Finding Mal's assessment true, she waved us over, motioning for us to hurry and climb. Mal went first. Having pulled her jacket out of her backpack she draped it over the barbed wire at the top so we could get over.

I went second, and though my ribs hadn't bothered me much the last few days, I felt it climbing. Every upward pull ached, and when I leant over the top to shift my weight to the opposite side it grew to sharp pain. I tried not to let it show, gritting my teeth so the pain wasn't visible on my face. The last thing I needed was Genevieve doubting how much use I'd be because of an injury. I'd resolved that I was going to help, and I'd do it to the best of my abilities.

Genevieve was the last to cross over, and when she reached the ground she handed Mal the jacket. "Stay close to me. Mal, keep an arrow loaded. Dugan and I won't shoot unless we have to." She looked at me to make sure I understood, and while Mal hooked an arrow onto her bowstring I nodded that I did.

Keeping low, Genevieve led the way to the closest building, and we

pressed ourselves against it. We moved to the edge, and she checked to make sure the path was clear before darting to the cover of the next one. Building after building we headed across the base, until finally we found our first obstacle. We'd come to the end of side streets and small housing roads, and reached our first major street. After peeking around the corner Genevieve motioned us back a ways.

"Two of Jed's men are standing outside this building," Genevieve whispered. "They've got a clear view of the entire street. There's no way we're getting across without being seen."

"What do you want to do?" I asked, taking in her rifle and my pistol and thinking there was no way we could take the men out without making noise.

She crept to the edge of the building to take another brief look, and scanned Mal and I for a moment before coming up with a plan. "I'm going around to the other side," she said, pulling a long hunting knife from her thigh.

So far Genevieve had been incredibly goal oriented, so when she seemed stunned by the knife in her hand, and frozen by the sight of it, I didn't know what to do. She just stared at it, squeezing the grip between her fingers like she was unexpectedly terrified of the weapon but unable to let go.

"Genevieve?" Mal prompted after nearly a minute.

The girl blinked away whatever shock she'd endured and tore her gaze away from the knife. "I'm going to see if I can lure them to the corner where I can catch one off guard. Mal, shoot one the second the other reaches the corner of the building. Got it?"

"Do you think maybe we should try to knock them out instead?" I asked. "Or try to get information out of them?"

"Can you knock them out?" she asked rhetorically. "Hand to hand is Ec-" she froze again, but cleared her throat and recovered far more quickly than she had the last time. "It's not my strength, and we've always had a

zero tolerance policy with raiders."

There was no way I could guarantee I'd be able to knock out even one of those men before they managed to get a shot off and alert everyone in the area of our presence. Even though that made me feel somewhat useless, it was at least a little comforting that Genevieve seemed confident in her plan.

"Come with me," she instructed instead. "Have your pistol ready just in case."

I gripped my gun in my hand and followed Genevieve around to the opposite side of the building, making sure to walk as silently as possible. At the corner of the building she motioned for me to crouch down, and once I'd taken a knee she scraped her boot against the grainy wall, making a scuff loud enough to attract attention.

"You hear that?" one of the men asked.

Footsteps accompanied the other's voice saying, "let's check it out."

Genevieve's fingers tensed around her knife, her feet planted firmly against the ground and her shoulders rose with a deep breath. I hoped Mal was ready to fire the moment one of the guards reached us. The footsteps drew nearer and nearer, until finally the barrel of a gun rounded the corner. Genevieve darted out, pushing the man's gun up just enough to expose his torso, and before he could even get a shot off she plunged the blade straight through the center of his chest. She hadn't even removed the blade when there was a thud from around the corner, and the second man fell into view with an arrow planted deep in his back.

In another situation I might've been remorseful we hadn't tried to take them prisoner, or horrified at the shocked expression still painting the dead man's face. All I really felt, however, was relief that I'd underestimated Genevieve. No longer was I concerned that she didn't know what she was doing, or that Jed had managed to take over because she was a weak leader. It was obvious she knew what she was doing. She was a soldier. Mal and I were in safe hands, and I was sure that Kara was too.

"Drag them into the alley," Genevieve said.

She reached under the arms of a body and threw her weight backwards to pull him. I grabbed the second man, ignoring the ache in my ribs as I hauled the body out of the street. Mal jogged over to us, retrieving her arrow from the man's back while Genevieve knelt to store a weapon, a shotgun, in her backpack.

The other weapon, a pistol, she handed to me. "For more ammo." I took it gratefully. "Let's move." She had her rifle back in her hands as she sprinted across the street ahead of Mal and I.

We didn't encounter another raider until we were within sight of the armory, and then I could see why. All the rest of Jed's men were standing around, guarding the boss himself and a truck with crates of ammunition in the back. The truck was parked a good fifty feet from the armory, and while more than half of the men lounged around taking stock of the ammunition, the others were prying at the lock and door of the armory.

After seeing all the men, Genevieve rushed to a building and opened the door, leading the way in and to the opposite side of the darkened interior. Even from the first floor the windows had a clear view of the armory, but all except for one had been boarded up and were impossible to see out of. So Genevieve made her way to the only open window, completely empty because the glass was missing, and crouched in the darkness beneath it.

Once Mal and I had dropped down at her side she pushed up enough to peer out the window at what was going on. She only looked for a moment before falling back with a growl. "Chickenshit bastard."

I couldn't help but sneak a glimpse to see what she was upset about, but when I saw I nearly grumbled too. Jed knew Genevieve would be coming for him and that there'd be resistance to his takeover, because he'd strapped on a bulletproof vest and a Kevlar helmet. No doubt she'd wanted to shoot him first, and now it was impossible.

She leant up again at my side, and Mal did the same so that all three of

She leant up again at my side, and Mal did the same so that all three of us were watching the raiders across the road.

"Think, Genevieve, think," Gen murmured to herself.

Jed was standing at the truck barking orders at some of the men who were taking inventory. Murph was perched on the roof of the truck, tossing something solid and round back and forth between his hands, and after some squinting I recognized it was a grenade. Mia was posted at the armory, supervising the few others who were trying to get the door open.

While we watched, Genevieve raised her brother's rifle into the window and put her eye to the scope. "If we don't get the ammunition, nobody does."

"You're going to shoot the truck full of ammunition?" I asked in shock. That was the plan? Blow it all sky high?

"Aren't a couple of those your soldiers?" Mal added.

Genevieve lowered the rifle just long enough to say, "Not anymore. Have an arrow ready." She glanced through the scope again, but as her finger tensed over the trigger Jed paced away from the truck to talk with Mia. "Shit."

He wasn't close enough anymore for the blast of exploding ammunition to kill him, and I let out a breath that mirrored Gen's disappointment. We watched for a minute to see if he'd return to the truck.

"Come on," Genevieve urged, shifting impatiently. Another minute. "Walk back over." Her hand wavered on the grip of the gun, her trigger finger tapping anxiously. "Fuck it."

Without waiting another second she fired a shot into a box labeled grenades. The immediate explosion was so much bigger than I anticipated, but it wasn't just one. Whatever grenade she hit exploded, and then something else blew, and something after that, in a series of blasts in all of two swift seconds. It was so powerful that every person around the truck was dead instantly, including Murph, and the truck itself

around the truck was dead instantly, including Murph, and the truck itself propelled massive chunks of metal and shrapnel in every direction as thick black smoke shot into the air. Anyone standing around the armory was hit by the force of the blast and thrown to the ground so hard they skidded or rolled a few feet. Hell, it was so strong it reached the building we were in and shook straight through the ground beneath us.

Mal darted to her feet, laughing in astounded amazement. "Holy shit!" She pulled back on the bowstring, aiming and firing at a raider who hadn't even recovered enough to stand.

"Get the fuck up!" I heard Jed's voice scream at the men around him, furious but audibly rattled.

Out of the two dozen or more he'd had around him, only a large handful were capable of rising to their feet. Every one of them was injured, including Jed and Mia. Shrapnel had tore through some in such critical places that even from here I could see they'd bleed out soon. A couple worked themselves to their feet only to drop to their knees, in too much pain to even stand. Jed and Mia had been hit too, but they both had vests and Jed has his helmet. Mia's arm was bleeding profusely, and even after Jed was standing he couldn't put all his weight on his left leg, where there was a spot of red growing in the side of his jeans and running down to his boot.

In the distance our explosion was responded to by a succession of gunfire, the beginning of the civilians' rescue just like Genevieve had told Imogen to do. Now that some of the raiders were back up we ducked out of the window, dodging the barrage of bullets they sent into the building while they scrambled for cover.

"Outside!" Genevieve hollered over the loud firing. "I'll cover you from here, go, go, go!"

Mal and I sprinted out of the building while Genevieve fired her rifle. Once we reached the outside I hugged the corner of the building, shooting my pistol at any target I could to provide more cover for Mal, who darted across the alley to the building on the opposite side. Everything was so loud and chaotic. What was left of the truck was on fire, the flames

roaring almost as loudly as each crack of a propelled bullet. Shots were echoing all over the base, a snap or staccato from pistols and automatic rifles, and I couldn't tell anymore when it was Genevieve firing or the raiders or soldiers from the cafeteria in the distance. I probably wouldn't have known the sound of my own gun over the raucous if I couldn't feel the kick against my palm. I'd only started with ten bullets, and by my count of that recoil I'd already fired half, making me glad Genevieve had given me a second gun. One more shot and I managed to hit a skull leaning out from cover across the street. Even though I couldn't see them, I knew who'd been shot, and so I knew that Jed, Mia, and two others were the only ones left firing at us.

Before I could get another shot off Genevieve burst through the door of the building. "He's running!"

I risked leaning out enough to get a good look, and caught sight of Jed and Mia retreating, running as fast as they could through their injuries. Genevieve had so much momentum built that she slid out as she rounded the corner. I couldn't tell if it was recklessness or confidence, but she shot out of the alley, laying on the trigger and showering bullets on the two remaining raiders. Mal and I ran after her, sprinting across the street to give chase. We'd only made it halfway when a bullet pierced the pavement directly in front of my feet. I jumped sideways to dodge it and then immediately threw myself behind a large mailbox.

Some of Jed's men had left the cafeteria and just reached us. There were eight that I could see, too many for the three of us to handle when Genevieve was the only one with an automatic weapon. I fired in their direction at the same time Mal released an arrow from my side, and Genevieve shot from where she'd ducked behind the corner of a building. We didn't have time for this, and just as I began to worry that Jed and Mia would escape a series of shots came from behind us. The roar of an engine reached my ears, and before I could turn to see who or what it was a vehicle screeched to a halt at our side.

"Go!" the driver shouted as his two passengers littered bullets at the raiders sprinting down the street. "We got this!"

"Blake!" Genevieve yelled over the constant and deafening noise. "When

"Blake!" Genevieve yelled over the constant and deafening noise. "When you're done take Garcia and Tripton to the DFAC!" The driver nodded. "Make sure they're safe!"

"Okay! Go!" he repeated, and Genevieve took off running.

Mal and I resumed pursuit right behind her. We could just see Mia and Jed sprinting ahead of us, their pace slow because of Jed's leg. Mia stopped to let him get ahead, and each of us jumped behind cover while she emptied a clip at us to let Jed retreat. Once her clip was empty she turned to run, and Genevieve raised her rifle, firing bullets that exploded into the concrete walls of buildings around Mia. As we picked up speed again Jed and Mia split, Jed disappeared between buildings while Mia continued straight to lure us away.

"Go after Jed!" Genevieve commanded, and I hadn't realized she'd been holding back for Mal and I until she picked up a burst of speed to chase Mia.

She flew by Jed's last location while Mal and I tried to pick up the pace, and we both turned down the alley Jed had disappeared in right as the door of an office building slammed closed. We flew to it, and after I yanked it open I followed Mal inside. It was dark in this small, two-story place. As intimidating as it was not knowing where Jed had taken to hiding, or how much ammunition he had left, Genevieve had chased after Mia alone. I wanted to get this over with as fast as possible so we could catch up and make sure Gen was okay.

"Can you search down here?" I asked Mal.

"I'm good," she nodded, half-tensing her bowstring while I started for the stairs to the second floor.

I crept upward as silently as I could, cursing every creak in the steps even though I doubted it could be heard over the gunshots still coming from outside. When I reached the top of the stairs I paused, thinking I should use my flashlight to see. With any luck shining it at Jed might disorient him because it was so dark in here. Having found it in my bag I raised my handgun, leading with it and the beam of my light so I could

fire the moment I needed to.

There were two small office rooms on each side of the hall, so I tiptoed to the first one and plastered my back against the wall. It took a deep inhale to work up the nerve to shine my light into that room, but eventually I did. I darted out, moving the beam over every inch and then rushing in to check behind the desk. It was empty.

I worked up the guts to move across the hall to the second room, sticking close to the wall once more. The gunshots outside were mimicking the pounding of my heart in my ears so thoroughly I didn't know what was what. All I knew was that I was nervous. Last time I encountered Jed he could've killed us easily, and I was terrified he could do it just as easily now.

"Okay," I breathed quietly, preparing myself to leave cover.

Now. I burst into the doorway, nearly expecting that Jed wouldn't be here, and so when my light flashed over his figure I was so stunned that I got my shot off a moment too late. He had his gun on me too, but the light blinded him so that as he ducked to dodge my slow shot he missed me with three of his. But then he charged forward, colliding into me with his massive body and ramming me backward into the doorframe. I felt the sharp refracturing of a rib, but I didn't have time to be grateful that it hadn't pierced a lung again. Jed whipped me to the side, his fist smashing into my face before I could recover from the pain.

"I remember you," he rumbled, winding up again.

It was pure instinct that made me drop my head to one side when he punched again, and his fist went straight through the drywall. I pushed forward with all my strength, trying to take him to the ground because maybe there the fact that he was twice my size wouldn't matter so much. But I couldn't take him down as easily as I hoped to. We both stumbled backward until the desk of the office caught his weight. I had a grip on his shoulders and he had a grip on mine, so I released one hand while he tried to wrestle me off of him, and wound up to release it into his stomach. He huffed angrily against the strike, but it didn't hurt enough to throw him off.

throw him off.

Jed forced us around, and as he tried to push me down on the desk, where he could hold me with one hand and hit me with the other, I could see Mal in the doorway. She had an arrow ready to fly, but I was struggling to keep Jed from pinning me, and Mal was too worried about hitting me with the arrow to actually release it. Instead she rushed forward, pulling the arrow from the string to grip it in her hand, and she plunged the head into Jed's back. Jed growled, and turned from me just enough to shove Mal so hard that she tumbled to the ground. Then he reached behind him to pull the arrow out, and now was my chance to strike him again, but hitting him in the abdomen wasn't enough.

I wound up, crouching just enough to slam my fist into the hole the shrapnel had made in his thigh. The shrapnel was still embedded in the muscle, so that when I hit it the piece of metal sliced my knuckles, but it hurt Jed so bad that he yelped with pain. So I did it twice more, ignoring that the metal got closer to the bone in my hand every time I struck him. The second time he dropped to one knee, and hitting him had been so effective that I thought he was done. But before I could punch him a fourth time he shot up from that one knee, slamming his head into my stomach with so much force the desk scooted back a few inches. It knocked the breath and the sheer ability to even think right out of me, and I collapsed into a fit of desperate wheezing on the floor.

Mal had gotten back up and was rushing in to help, but Jed turned right as she lunged at him and knocked her away. He didn't waste a moment to try and attack. He darted for the door, slamming it shut behind him, and after it closed there was a loud crash from the other side.

"Are you okay?" Mal blurted, scrambling over to check me.

I wasn't okay. I couldn't breathe just yet, but we couldn't let him get away. I forced myself to my feet and rushed to the door, and when I pushed on it I discovered what the crash had been. Jed had knocked over one of the heavy filing cabinets in the hall to block it. I threw myself against it, feeling the cabinet on the other side budge just slightly.

"Help me!" I hollered frantically. Every moment Jed got farther and farther

away.

Mal hurried to my side, and together we heaved and heaved against the door. It took three, four, five tries using every bit of energy we could muster until finally, panting from exertion, we'd opened it enough to squeeze through. We slipped out into the hallway, barreling down the stairs to try and catch up with Jed. I reached the bottom and turned for the door, slamming it open and bursting out, checking each direction to look for Jed.

He hadn't gotten far at all. He was only twenty meters away because Genevieve had intercepted him. But if I couldn't beat him on my own, there was no way Genevieve could. He'd taken her to the ground, and now he was sitting over her hips, hands wrapped around her throat while she clawed at his long arms to try and get free.

Fury gave me speed, and I was there in a matter of seconds. I brought my arm up and down again, pistol-whipping Jed so hard in the side of the head that he fell sideways off of Genevieve with a thud. Genevieve scrambled to her feet gasping for air. I don't if it was Jed or Mia who'd hit her, but she was bruised and her bottom lip was split open and blood was pouring from a gash above one eyebrow. As much as she was struggling for air, she had mind enough to retaliate for what Jed almost did to her. She pulled her boot back as far as she could and kicked him hard in the ribs. She did it a second time, grunting with the force she applied, but when I thought I might have to drag her back to keep her from doing it many times more, she kicked his weapons away from him with all the composure in the world.

"It's over, Jed," I spat venomously.

He groaned, and as he pushed himself up to sit Genevieve raised her rifle, holding the barrel only a foot from his forehead.

"Mia?" I asked Genevieve.

Her eyes never left Jed's gaze as she said almost vengefully, "I took care of her."

"Where's *your* girlfriend?" Jed countered, his eyes darkening with animosity. Genevieve's jaw clenched, and she raised her foot enough to kick him in the shoulder, knocking him back to the ground. His chest shook, and a moment later his exhausted chuckle reached my ears. "Why haven't you shot me yet?" he asked in annoyance, pushing himself back up.

"I want to see the look on your face when you actually realize your life is over," Genevieve growled.

Jed narrowed his eyes at her, his face set with rigid defiance. But it only lasted the span of a few seconds. Then it truly did seem to set in that it was over for him. Like a wave his eyes softened in defeat, his breathing slowed with recognition, and the perpetual smirk faded from his face until the corners of his lips had dropped completely. He glanced from Genevieve to Mal, and finally at me, and when his eyes met mine I could see years and years of life after the outbreak in the fractured lines at the corners of them.

Then he looked at Gen again, his voice almost pitifully soft. "It wasn't supposed to be Echo that didn't make it out."

Genevieve's knuckles went white with the grip she had on her rifle. "Tell it to the dead." CRACK. She pulled the trigger, and the force of impact knocked Jed's lifeless body back to the ground.

I bent over to put my hands on my knees, in desperate need to catch my breath now that it was finally over. Even the gunshots coming from the cafeteria had nearly faded. But Genevieve didn't stop to catch her breath, not for a second. She reached down to one of Jed's pockets and pulled out a stolen radio.

"Imogen, come in," she prompted into it. Only static. "Imogen." When still there was no response she adjusted the frequency. "Imogen, do you read me?"

"Sure do," came the response, hope ringing in her voice. "We did it, and everyone's alright." And like Imogen knew Gen would ask, she added, "Micah's fine, Kara's good."

"Micah's fine. Kara's good."

Instead of letting out a relieved breath, or smiling because we'd gotten their home back, Genevieve's expression was blank. "Blake? You good?"

"Took a bullet in the arm," Blake's voice replied. "But I'll be okay. Where are you? I'll come get you."

"No," Genevieve said hastily, her eyes darting to Mal and I uncomfortably. "Stay there. We'll come to you."

"See you soon, Pipsqueak. Over and out." No sooner had Blake finished his response than Genevieve dropped her arm to her side, and the radio slipped from her hand, hitting the ground with a noisy clack.

"What now?" Mal asked, rubbing out a sore spot on her shoulder where she'd taken a hit.

"I'm done," Genevieve said flatly.

And I could see it on her face. In the hollowness behind her eyes and how sunk they suddenly looked. Now that this was over, now that the only thing that had kept her going was finished, she was done. So emotionally drained she couldn't feel happy at our accomplishment, or triumph at Jed's death, or even relieved that everyone else she cared about was alive.

Mal's eyebrows converged. "What do you mean?"

"Follow Blake," Gen whispered, kneeling down with new urgency to remove the spare weapon from the backpack and leave it on the ground. "He'll be a better leader than I ever was."

"Genevieve?" Mal's voice gained an edge of worry.

"Him and Micah won't understand." She ran a hand through her hair, swallowing a deep breath in order to speak again. "Tell them I'm sorry."

By the confused look on Mal's face I knew she was going to ask another question. So I answered what I thought she didn't understand. "She's

leaving."

Mal's head shook with protest. "You can't go out there alone. The Hunters are getting smarter. And you're bleeding, you might need stitches."

Genevieve palmed at the wound over her eyebrow with recognition, touching it so roughly I cringed for her. She didn't so much as wince before wiping the blood on her jeans. But it was clear Mal's protests meant nothing. "I can't. I have to go."

"Wait!" Mal said urgently when Gen made a move to walk away. It stopped her, and Mal immediately took the quiver off her back, extending it and the bow to Genevieve. "You know how to use one of these?" When Genevieve's chin dropped with a curious nod Mal said, "Trade me." Genevieve just squinted at her in confusion. "If you're going out there you'll want something quiet and sustainable. You can give it back when I see you again."

"You might not-"

"Just," Mal interrupted, giving the bow a shake. "Take it."

Genevieve strode forward slowly, reaching out for the weapon with an unsure timidity. After she'd taken it she looked at the rifle in her other hand, and then put it into Mal's. "Thank you," she said to Mal, her grateful gaze wandering to me to say she was talking to me too. Then she was gone. Sprinting back between buildings until she was lost in them.

Mal and I were both silent for a minute before she let out a deep sigh. "I don't know how to tell her brother she just up and left."

"I'll tell him." It was the least I could do for the woman who'd been prepared to offer us a home whether we earned it or not. I picked up the gun Genevieve had set on the ground and put it in my backpack. "I'll follow you."

Mal led the way in the direction of the cafeteria while I trudged silent at her side. She was relatively unharmed except for a few bruises. We'd

both walked out of it in better shape than I expected us to. Even though I'd been set back in the healing process with my ribs, now that we were somewhere safe I figured I'd have plenty of time to heal properly.

The moment we came into view of the cafeteria Kara immediately ran out of the crowd toward us, Wolf trotting beside her. She collided into me so hard I grunted with pain, though I still couldn't help but return the hug. She embraced Mal too, and even though she seemed to notice someone was missing she didn't get to ask. Micah and Blake jogged over, first excited, and then curious when they too realized someone was missing.

"Where's Gen?" Micah asked innocently, like he thought she'd had something else to take care of before meeting up with us.

I pursed my lips in a sympathetic smile, saying gently, "She left."

Micah's eyebrows furrowed, reluctant to believe what he knew I was saying. "What do you mean she left?"

"I think… maybe she needs to be alone for a while." I looked at Blake, and though he was silent he seemed to be taking it as hard as Micah was. "She left you in charge," I told him. "Said you'd be a good leader."

"Micah," Blake said in a forced voice, "why don't you go see if Tripton and Garcia need help." It didn't appear Micah wanted to do anything but worry about his sister, but he ran off so none of us would see how upset he really was. Blake's eyes were welling with tears too, but he swallowed them back and cleared his throat. "I'm Blake."

I shook the hand he extended to me. "Dugan."

He introduced himself to Mal. "Either of you hurt?"

Mal shook her head. It was nothing compared to the bullet hole I knew was hiding beneath the cloth binding around his bicep, but I told him about my ribs. I left out the bit about my knuckles, figuring that was something I could fix on my own. He immediately told me to follow him to one of the doctors, and they'd be able to look at me as soon as they were done with the more severely wounded. As we walked we passed a large

military vehicle, on the back of which about a dozen surviving raiders were tied up.

"Prisoners?" I asked curiously, remembering Genevieve's comment about their zero tolerance policy with raiders.

"I thought Gen would decide," Blake sighed, shaking his head as he studied the group. "There's so many of them, and they surrendered. I can't just shoot them. Maybe exile without weapons." I nodded in understanding. "Anyway, wait around here and one of the docs will take care of you."

"Blake," I prompted, stopping him as he made to walk away. "I know you don't really know us yet, but if there's anything we can do to help, we'll do it."

He took in the sincerity in my voice, and on my face, and he managed a small smile while giving my shoulder a friendly pat. "I appreciate it. I know Gen would too."

Before any more emotion could mar his composure, he left. I sat down on the curb nearby, Mal and Kara dropping down next to me. There were wounded soldiers and civilians lining up to be seen by the few people who looked like doctors. Even though it would take a while, and my side and hand were aching, I was perfectly content to sit here as long as it took. We'd found a place to finally stop. Right now it was struggling, and its leader had left and it was a little bit broken. But there were so many people. It was populated, and secure, and it could thrive once it got back on its feet. It was home.

Crashes Are Heaven

**** Alrighty guys, this is it (ultra nervous sweating). It really has been a wild ride, and I can't thank you enough for all the feedback and support while I was writing this. I love you all for putting up with me dragging your emotions through the mud. I really hope this wrap-up is satisfying. I did my very best. And uh, if you're reading this before the reviews, forego the spoilers this time, eh? :P*

In regards to the Q&A video I mentioned last update: my youtube url is /user/zoewrites Idk if you can subscribe until I've posted something, so I'll be posting the announcement video in the next couple days here. Or you can simply start submitting questions now if you already have something you want to ask (PM, or Tumblr)

OH! SUPER IMPORTANT! ONE SHOT REQUESTS!

Before I forget, I'm going to be taking some time off from starting another major writing project until about August to finish school. BUT! As of this very moment I'm officially taking requests for one shots from any stories I've written, involving any of the characters I've created. Cross overs, AUs, nothing but fluff (or smut, obvi), whatever you want just send me a PM or hit me up on Tumblr and I'll get to it as soon as I can. It'll keep me sane during these next 9-10 months of finishing classes. Thanks guys!

Never Let Me Go by Florence + The Machine

Crashes Are Heaven

Genevieve

As I took a step forward I set my foot down slowly in the thick layer of snow, trying to reduce the crunch it made as it broke through the frozen crust. I was stalking the first live deer I'd seen all winter. I'd seen carcasses completely picked clean, some all the way down to the bone marrow. The Hunters were insatiable. It seemed Ferals were changing at faster rates. The Hunters were larger in number, smarter, and they didn't

care to leave any game for anyone else. Deer, rabbits, squirrels, even predators like bears and mountain lions. The woods couldn't be barren, but everything smart enough to avoid the Hunters was smart enough to avoid me. But this deer.

I already had an arrow set against my bowstring, but I hadn't pulled it back yet because if I did my hand would start shaking and it'd knock my shot off. Even simply holding the bow for so long already had caused a slight trembling. It wasn't just that I was weak with hunger. It was the scar on the inside of my arm. A bite from a Hunter that instead of infecting me completely had only impaired my right hand. My good hand. The strength in it wasn't half of what it had been. I couldn't close it or stretch it all the way for more than a second or two, and if I tried to do anything precise with my fingers, like shifting the pins in a lock or tying a knot, my hand would tremble too violently to keep attempting it.

So I'd taught myself to pick locks with my left hand, use my knife with my left hand, and stretch an arrow only when I was ready to shoot, aiming in that split second before releasing it. Now I pulled it back, struggling against the tension because I was fatigued and already quivering. When I finally let the arrow go, even though it was hardly a moment later, my aim had been so unsteady that it skimmed the back of the deer's neck, splintering against the tree behind it while the animal darted off into the woods.

A frustrated growl escaped my throat, and an even deeper one rumbled in my stomach. I was starving. Had been starving ever since the first frost of the season killed any edible vegetation, because there wasn't enough game left to hunt unless I got smart about it. Running on autopilot wasn't enough anymore but I couldn't turn it off. I wouldn't.

From behind me there was a gentle thud, like snow falling from the branches of a tree. Knowing what had knocked the snow down, I pulled another arrow out of the quiver and turned on my heels as I wound up. At my movement the Hunter sprinted back out of view, disappearing in the thick of the forest before I could get my shot off.

It had been following me for at least two weeks now. It was as hungry as I was, so hungry it had been growing steadily bolder and more impatient

I was, so hungry it had been growing steadily bolder and more impatient. Because of it I hadn't slept in two weeks – never more than a wink at a time because if I shut my eyes for too long the Hunter closed in. At first I set traps. Then it learned how to avoid them. How to get by without setting off a sound alarm or stepping in a snare. My snares were shit anyway, I couldn't get the knots right anymore. It was a wonder why the creature hadn't just attacked me yet, why it was waiting. The last Hunter hadn't waited.

Ignoring a stalker I could no longer see, I jogged off in the direction the deer had escaped. The snow was almost up to my knees, making it difficult to reach a pace that would let me catch up quickly. And I was so hungry and so tired that I could only keep it up for a couple minutes before I was panting, huffing frozen air into my burning lungs with such desperation I fell to one knee. I immediately stood, even though I wanted to sit and catch my breath. That Hunter was watching me. I knew it. I felt it. If I left my feet for a second it might see it as an opportunity to strike.

But with my next step forward my foot caught on a hidden rock or a root beneath the surface of the snow, and I fell face first. The powder was soft enough that it didn't hurt, but I was too tired to rise. Too defeated. So I lay there, uncaring, face buried in the snow while it froze the skin of my cheeks, while my body, heated with exertion, melted it around me so it soaked into my clothes and would freeze me later. But I didn't feel any of it. Not the cold. Or the heat. I didn't even feel the exhaustion, just knew I needed to lie here because I simply couldn't get up.

I thought for sure the Hunter would come for me, but minutes passed while my breath melted a pocket into the snow, and nothing attacked. Eventually I recovered enough to rise to my knees, and a minute later to my feet. When I finally stood I found the deer's tracks in the snow, and followed their direction with my eyes to check the path ahead. What I saw caused me to blink rapidly, afraid that I was seeing things because I hadn't slept.

No matter how many times I blinked, the cabin remained. Though I wasn't very deep into the woods from the interstate, I'd come to a rural enough area that this was the first home I'd seen in a while. It was also rural enough that just maybe, even after seven years, it hadn't been

ransacked of its food just yet. I trudged through the snow toward the cabin, dragging my legs through the drifts because I didn't have the strength to try and lift them for full strides. It's because I was dragging my legs that one caught on a sound trap. My foot hit a wire, and I winced when cans attached to the trees on either side of me rattled together loudly. I would've seen it coming if I weren't so tired. I stood there for a minute, waiting for someone to appear. When nobody did I continued to the door and gave the handle a twist, but it didn't budge.

Locked. I eased myself down in front of it, reached for the bracelet at my wrist, *her* bracelet, and pulled out the bobby pins. I stuck them into the keyhole, mechanically shifting and applying tension until the lock released and I could push the door open. I strode into the small cabin with an arrow loaded. It was only one large, open space, so I could see immediately that it was empty. I could also see immediately that there were cans in an open cupboard.

I sauntered over, setting my bow down to grab the convenient can opener on the counter, and then I crouched down in front of the cupboard. The only ones that were labeled were various cans of vegetable and chicken broth. I picked one out and punched a hole in the top, tilting it to my lips from some immediate sustenance while I grabbed a mystery can. Still sipping cold broth with my right hand I held the mystery tin awkwardly between my arm and body, attempting to open it with my left hand.

I'd just managed to get a good angle on it when a furious shout came from the door. "HEY!" I looked just in time to see a man was pointing a hunting rifle at me, and ducked the moment he got a shot off. I dropped the broth from my hand and hurled the unopened can at him. It hit him in the shoulder hard enough to knock him off balance, but I knew I wouldn't have time to grab my bow and load an arrow before he recovered. The cabin was small enough that I could cross the length of it in one leap. So I lunged at him, knocking him back into the wall and yanking the rifle out of his hands.

He seemed to have as little fighting skill as I did, because instead of knocking me down or punching me while I hurled the rifle across the

room, he grabbed me by the collar of my jacket and rushed forward. The back of my hip hit the kitchen counter, and he was a sloppy fighter and I was too exhausted to put up an eager fight. I don't know what he was trying to do anyway, maybe only fight without hurting me because all he wanted was to scare me off. All he did was attempt to wrestle me down onto the counter.

It was too easy for me to reach for the knife at my thigh, and once I had it I jabbed it into his side. He let out a shocked cry of pain and stumbled backward. His eyes darted to the rifle on the other end of the cabin, but the moment his body turned to run for it I shot forward. I led with my knife and collided into him, burying it in his back as we both hit the ground.

Already over, but that short spat had cost me precious energy. I was panting again, struggling for air. No sooner had I pulled the blade out of the man's back that I heard the softest swish of a footstep directly behind me. I flopped onto my back, swinging my arm as I did so the blade swiped. It caught the Hunter in the arm, stopping its hungry grab for me. It had finally attacked, far too hungry to pass up the chance for two whole bodies and smart enough to know the man and I would do half the killing work for it.

When I hit my back it roared at me furiously, a streak of red coloring its forearm where I'd slashed. It stomped forward, throwing its arm so hard when I raised my knife to make a stab that it smacked the weapon right out of my hand. Rendering me completely unarmed, the Hunter lunged. I kicked, catching it in the face and bashing its aim off course. When it hit the ground at my feet I turned onto my stomach to scramble for the knife, but I'd only scurried a few inches before the Hunter grabbed my boot.

I spun onto my back again, kicking at it with my free foot. It snarled, and when I brought my knee up to kick it again it whacked me in the shin so I missed. In less a second the creature had climbed over me, intent on getting at my neck while my hands shot to its shoulders to push it away.

It weighed more than me, I was still hungry and tired and both scrapples had drained me of whatever fight I had left and my right arm was weak. In the struggle of keeping the Hunter from bearing down and sinking its

teeth into my jugular, the sleeve of my coat had begun to fall. It revealed that crescent shaped scar just below the bend in my arm. I'd been fighting when the Hunter bit me. It was instinct that drove me to fight more than a will to survive, because after it bit me and I killed it, I'd stared at the wound for hours. Days. Waiting for the fever to set in. Praying for it. Begging it to take over and give me a reason to finally end it. All I got was a fucked up arm.

I could end it now. It would hurt, but if I let it bite hard enough then I'd bleed out fast enough, and it would be over quickly. I wouldn't have to do this anymore. More than I was hungry, and more than I was tired from lack of sleep, I was exhausted of fleeing. Of running and running so the grief wouldn't catch up with me, because when it finally did I knew I wouldn't survive it. Maybe it had just now caught up with me, because the harder it got to keep the Hunter's mouth from my flesh the more I didn't care. The more I wanted it.

Before the idea really sank in I resigned. I stopped fighting. I let my arms flop to my sides and I let the Hunter go. It dropped forward ferociously, jaws wide and teeth wet with voracity. Its hot breath hit my pulse point, and then its jagged teeth. But before it could snap down and take what little life was left in me there was a second gunshot. The Hunter went limp, and I was so startled that I pushed it off and sat up, prepared to face the assailant head on so they could shoot me too. Then I saw who was standing at the entrance.

"Oh my God," Garcia breathed, and then shouted out the door. "She's here!"

Multiple sets of footsteps pounded across the cabin's porch, and the first person to arrive nearly shoved Garcia aside as she burst through the doorway. Her eyes locked on me. Those perfect, pearly gray eyes, and her laugh line was deep with thrilled disbelief. "We found you."

But when I saw her I felt the breath completely knocked out of me, like I'd just been hit in the chest with a cannon ball. No. What was left of my heart shattered into a million abysmal pieces. It wasn't real. As I struggled to suck in even a small breath and forced myself to my

unsteady feet, I knew it couldn't be real. I took a step forward, teetering from exhaustion and sudden lightheadedness. I hadn't slept in two weeks. This wasn't real. It was a hallucination because she was dead. Or maybe I was dead. Maybe the Hunter *had* sank its teeth in, and it had ended faster than I thought, with less pain than I'd predicted.

She took a couple steps toward me, and when I reached her I raised a trembling hand. Everything was there. The laugh line. The scar I'd put in her forehead. The one Kellan had punched into her cheek. A newer, grisly scar in her neck. Not real. If I touched her with my shaking fingers there would be nothing there, they'd fall right through her and I'd find it was all a lie and I'd die because my heart and will and spirit were broken. I couldn't bring myself to do it. Couldn't find the courage to touch her because I didn't want to know. If I'd *finally* cracked and it wasn't real I didn't care, I wanted it to last.

When she realized I couldn't do it she reached up carefully. Her hand set against the back of mine and she brought it forward to her cheek. And she was solid. She was soft, and she was warm. She was alive. And all at once I felt confusion, grief, fear, joy, and relief. My eyes flooded with tears for the first time since I'd left, and I broke down. I sobbed so violently with fatigue and emotion that I collapsed against her, entirely unable to hold myself up.

Her arms caught my weight. They closed around my waist and she felt *so real*. "Okay," she whispered soothingly. "It's okay." As carefully as she could she lowered us both to the ground, and while she sat back on her feet my face fell into her lap, and I continued to sob.

"You're dead." I was choking on so many tears I could hardly speak. "Kill me," I pleaded. "If you're not real, please just kill me. I can't take it." My shoulders shook, and I took in a series of hard breaths just to blubber, "I can't."

"Give us a bit," Echo said in a low voice, and footsteps retreated out the door. "Genevieve." Once the others disappeared I felt her weight against my back. "It's me." She folded over me as I sobbed into her legs. "You feel me. I'm here."

"I'm dead." My head shook, more tears soaking her cargo pants. "I let the Hunter bite me and now I'm dead."

At that she straightened up again, and when her hands found my face she carefully straightened me too. I met her soggy eyes with my own, so relieved to see them after so long. "You're not dead," she said, thumbing a fresh tear from my cheek. "I'm not dead." Her forehead set against mine, releasing a tear when she squeezed her eyes shut. "I've been looking for you for eight months to tell you that. And I found you."

I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't even completely believe it. So I threw my arms around her and buried my face in her neck, and she let me cry. She let me cry away eight months of grief and desolation. Let me cry a minute for every week I'd spent empty and broken. Twenty minutes. Thirty. Soaking her skin and shirt until it slowed and I could finally breathe again. It was like breathing for the first time in years. Each inhale carried her scent and filled me with her. My throat, lungs, head, my heart, they were all exploding with her smell and her warmth and her life. Even after I'd finally stopped crying I didn't want to let her go, terrified she'd disappear and it'd all be gone.

With my head against her shoulder and her arms around my waist it took nearly an hour before I finally felt calm. I was nearly ready to try speaking, to try and ask what happened and how she was here and how she wasn't infected. But then Echo's hands clamped down on the back of my coat, and her body went frigid against me. I pulled back to ask what was wrong, but her eyebrows were furrowed and her face compressed with an agony I couldn't even imagine.

"Echo?" I whimpered. No no no. I just got her back.

It didn't seem like she could hear me. She dropped sideways, covering her head with her arms and rocking forward as she touched her forehead to the wood floor.

"Garcia!" I screamed, falling back in helpless horror.

He burst in frantically, but when his eyes fell on Echo the panic shifted for sympathy. "It's alright," he said, striding over and kneeling down at my

sympathy. "It's alright," he said, striding over and kneeling down at my side. "Just give her a minute."

I couldn't give her a minute. She was groaning with pain, writhing against the ground and so out of control with suffering that she was digging her nails into the back of her neck. I was terrified. I made a move to go to her, unsure of what I could do but determined to try and help before I lost her again.

"Don't touch her," Garcia warned, putting a hand on my arm to stop me. "She could hurt you."

My eyes flooded with tears again as I asked desperately, "what's wrong with her?" It was getting so bad that I didn't care if she hurt me. I just wanted to know what was happening and make it stop.

"Just give her a minute," he repeated. "It'll end."

I sniffled, trying to hold it together so I wouldn't break down again because Garcia seemed so confident. And he was right. A minute later she stopped writhing and clawing so furiously from torment, and a minute after that it was done. She still had her forehead against the floor, huffing tiredly, but then a huff turned into a retch. She struggled to her feet and staggered out the door, and I could hear the sounds of her vomiting around the side of the cabin. Another minute and it was over. She ambled back through the doorway looking collected.

"Thanks, Garcia," she told him, and replaced him at my side while he left us alone.

"What was that?" I asked worriedly. I couldn't take my eyes off of her, afraid that it would happen again.

"Headache."

"Why?" I was so emotional. "From what?" I couldn't keep it together, and had to wipe a few tears that forced down my cheek.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, one hand going to the back of her neck to rub out the red spots she'd dug into it. "Every couple days, um,"

she glanced at me nervously. "The parasite tries to take over. So I have to fight it, and it hurts." She shook her head and sighed sarcastically, "Nice timing. I didn't want you to see that before you knew."

"You're infected?" I blinked at her in shock, completely dumbfounded. She nodded, and I felt my eyes blur all over again. "Are you… are you contagious?"

Echo stared down at her knees while she answered. "My blood is… Yeah." I took in a deep breath to keep from breaking down, and looked upward to try and keep the tears from spilling down my cheeks. "No," Echo pleaded, reaching forward to take my face in her hands, and when a tear fell she wiped it away. "It's okay. I'm okay."

It was all my fault. She'd sacrificed herself because of my mistakes, to save me. She'd been infected because I couldn't save her and she *kept* being hurt by it. "I'm so sorry," I whimpered.

"Don't," she said, wiping away another drop. "Stop, it's fine."

Her lips pressed against my forehead. It was something I thought I'd never feel again, and it was so overwhelming I finally broke down a second time. "I thought you were dead," I cried, desperately trying to keep it together enough to speak. "The fever was gone and you were bleeding so much." But reliving the memory drew out a series of blubbering sobs. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"I was starting to think so too," she said, one corner of her mouth curling with a small smile. "Finding you was hard work."

"It was supposed to be," I sniffled. "I thought Blake would try and find me. I'm so sorry." I inhaled a set of hard breaths. "I should've stayed. I should've checked you and I shouldn't have run and I should've made su-
"

Echo's hand moved to the back of my head and she cut me off with a kiss. Her lips touched mine and for the first time in almost a year my heart skipped. The feeling swelled beyond my chest, into my head and

my fingers and my toes and it shut me up fast. I'd left her alone and infected and for eight months I'd dragged her all over Pennsylvania. And she *still* wanted to kiss me. It was everything I would've died without.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling back after only a couple seconds. "It's been so long. I should've asked if-"

"Don't apologize," I interrupted, pulling her mouth back to mine.

The feeling of the smile on my lips was so unfamiliar I almost didn't realize that it was there under the kiss. But it was. I was *grinning*, and it felt so awkward with the tears still on my cheeks, and the realization and the astounding ecstasy of it was too much for how exhausted and emotional I still was. A sob broke us apart, but it was a happy one and I blushed because of it and Echo *laughed* at me. I closed my eyes against the sound of her laugh just to listen, just to hear it and feel the effect it had on me.

"God I missed you," she whispered, leaning back to look at me. Her gray eyes scanned me over, drinking in every inch of me so that I could see in them how much that was true.

It had been so long that it was with timidity I told her, "I missed you more."

In response to that she stretched an arm over my shoulders and pulled me into her, and I let my head fall back on her shoulder. It felt so good to be near her, and though I'd stopped crying, for the next few minutes I just couldn't stop going over it in my head. Everyone I'd ever seen get infected had a fever for a least a day. It didn't stop after only minutes like Echo's had. And people didn't survive *Feral* bites, they survived *Hunter* bites, like I had. Had Samuel gotten all the science wrong? Was there a real cure, a better one than waiting for all the Ferals to evolve past contagion, and Echo was the key to it?

"Echo," I prompted. I wanted to stay there with my head against her, but I sat up to look at her. "What happened?"

"I woke up," she said with a shrug, but her hand went up to rub at the

scar in her neck. "It wasn't as deep as we thought, and after the fever knocked me out the bleeding slowed. That afternoon I woke up, and you guys were gone and I was so weak. I almost didn't make it back to the base. Thinking you'd be there was the only thing that kept me pushing."

That *hurt*. I knew she didn't blame me, but knowing she got there only to find out I'd left was enough to make me sick to my stomach. "But the bites," I said, trying desperately to ignore how guilty I still felt. "How?"

"You remember when Samuel said the parasite feeds off the pleasure chemicals in the brain?" In response to her question I nodded. "When Jed drugged me," she explained, and I could hear by the rasp in her voice that it was hard for her to talk about, "a lot of those chemicals in my brain were wasted on the high. Samuel thinks the parasite didn't get enough to feed off of when I first got bit, so it wasn't strong enough to take over. It latched on, and it's in here," she pointed to her temple, "but the fever ended so fast because the parasite wasn't strong enough, and my body didn't have to keep fighting."

"But you're still fighting it," I pointed out worriedly. "Echo, what if one day it's strong enough?" Just the thought was enough to nearly make me start crying again. "What if one day you get a headache, and when it's over you're not you anymore?"

"That won't happen," she stated.

"But how do you *know*?"

"I'm a fighter," she said with a small smile, brushing a frightened tear from my eye.

"Are there any other side effects?"

"I mean," she said with a shrug, "the occasional appetite for human flesh but…" My eyes must've betrayed my deep and horrified concern, because she laughed again. "I'm joking! Geez, you're out of touch."

"That's not funny," I whined, pulling away from her just long enough to push her in the shoulder. "Don't joke about this."

"Sorry," she said, giving me an apologetic squeeze. "Anyway, Samuel wanted me to stay. He wanted to keep running tests and keep an eye on me." She chuckled a bit and rolled her eyes. "I had to let him at first because I was too weak from the loss of blood. But once I had most my strength back I took a handful of volunteers to come look for you."

For the first time I thought about the faces I'd seen at the door: Garcia, Tripton, Hatfield, and Mal. "Micah didn't want to come?"

"I had to leave in the middle of the night so he wouldn't," she told me amusedly. "Kid's more stubborn than you are. But I knew if I let anything happen to him you'd kill me for real when we found you. Blake wanted to come too, but he had a base to run."

"You didn't give up on me." I couldn't help but sniffle. I felt *so* fucking guilty. "Echo, I gave up," I admitted tearfully, pulling the sleeve of my coat up to show her the bite mark. "I wanted this one to kill me, and it didn't. That Hunter," I glanced at the body on the floor nearby, "I gave up. If you didn't find me when you did. I was going to let it- I'm so sorry."

"Don't do this to yourself," Echo said, pulling me into a comforting hug. "Don't feel bad. You didn't know, and we *did* find you." She let go, and took my face in her hands to plant a soft kiss on my lips. "Everything is okay now. I can be a pain in your ass again." I let out a teary laugh, wrapping my arms tight around her so I could bask in how she felt. "What about you?" When I tilted my head for clarification she said, "Side effects? Murph got bit by a Hunter and he was a little insane."

"I lost some function," I sighed, flexing my right hand to show her. "I can't grip as tight, and if I try to tense my fingers or use them for anything my whole hand starts shaking." I shrugged, massaging over my jacket where the bite was. "I don't know if it's from the bite or the parasite." It was nothing compared to what she had to live with from now on. Incapacitating headaches seemed far more crippling than having to use my left hand from now on.

"When did it happen?" Echo asked. She reached for my arm and pushed the sleeve of my coat back up

the sleeve of my coat back up.

"I don't know. Four months ago?" While she traced the mark she ran her hand down to the bracelet around my wrist. The bracelet she'd given me before she… "Here," I said, reaching to remove it, "you probably want it back."

"No, keep it." Her hands set on mine to stop me, and when I did she lifted her sleeve to show me that she'd created a new one.

A large part of me was relieved she didn't want it back. Even though she was here, and alive, that bracelet was all I'd had left of her for the last eight months. I'd grown attached to it. As she pushed the sleeve back down I caught a glimpse of one of her own scars, and got stuck staring at where it had disappeared. Echo noticed, and out of the corner of my eye I could tell she was staring at it too.

"The Ferals have made a mess of us," she said, the sound of sadness in her voice for the first time since I'd seen her. But I didn't want her to be sad. Her smile had been bringing me back to life; I wasn't ready for it to stop.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," I said, and in an attempt to lighten the mood grumbled, "that's clearly bullshit."

Echo chuckled, tearing her gaze away from her arm to pull me closer again. I laid my head back on her shoulder, to get comfortable and to settle in for what I hoped would be a few hours of nothing but the way she felt, but after a minute she said, "Casey had the baby."

I picked my head up happily. "Yeah?"

"We've been in contact with them over the radio." Echo nodded. "A few months ago. It's a girl."

"What's her name?"

"I have a better idea." Echo stood, taking my hands and pulling me off the ground. "Let's go home," she said, wiping at my cheeks to make sure there was no moisture left. "We'll meet her together." I nodded, but as I

there was no moisture left. "We'll meet her together." I nodded, but as I stood there I teetered from exhaustion, and ended up setting a hand on her arm to steady myself. "You okay?"

"Just hungry, and tired." I tried to give a reassuring smile, but Echo's gray eyes looked me up and down with an undeniable glimmer of concern. I knew that over the last few months I'd lost weight I couldn't have afforded to lose in the first place, and though Echo hadn't said anything when she first saw me, just like she didn't say anything now, I knew she could tell.

"Sit down," she suggested. "There's time for you to eat something."

I shook my head. "I'll eat on the way." She raised her eyebrows at me, and in response I added, "I'm sure."

She studied me for another moment before seeming satisfied, and when she held out a hand I slipped my own into it readily. She followed at my side while I retrieved my knife and bow, and only let go for a minute so we could salvage the rest of the cans in the cupboard. Then she took my hand again, and together we walked out the door. The others had been waiting patiently on the porch the whole time. At seeing each other every one of us was grinning.

"About time we found your scrawny ass," Tripton teased.

"It's good to see you, Genevieve," Hatfield agreed.

I smiled at them gratefully, turning my gaze on Mal. "You came too, huh?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "I just wanted my bow back."

I knew she was only messing with me, but I extended the weapon anyway, figuring it really was time to return it. "It took good care of me. Thank you."

"And I took good care of this," Mal said, giving me the same rifle I'd traded the day I left.

Echo laughed. "She cleaned it religiously."

Mal gave a shy, embarrassed smile, but didn't get to say anything because Tripton groaned, "Let's go! I'm ready to sleep in a real bed again." As he turned away to head in the direction of the road he grumbled, "Eight months! What the hell was I thinking?"

We all followed after him, and during the trek back to the road Echo kept a slow pace at my side, close enough for me to keep my hand on her shoulder for balance. About half way I was breathing hard, so she wrapped an arm around my waist to support most of my weight, even going so far as to lift me as much as she could over some of the taller drifts. I was grateful for it, because there was no way I would've made it back in less than an hour if I was huffing it on my own.

Not a minute after we'd all jumped into the back of a Stryker was Echo digging through her backpack. She pulled out two tins and presented them to me. "Mystery cabin can, or turkey stuffing can?"

I wasn't numb anymore. With the return of my ability to feel emotions came an extraordinary hunger like I'd never known. I snatched the stuffing can, just the thought of what was inside making my mouth water. Directly after that Echo handed me the can opener, and out of habit I held the can in the bend of my right arm because I'd learned it was easier than trying to grip the can with my hand. I ran the opener around the top, finding Echo ready with a spoon the moment I discarded the lid. The first bite was explosive. I nearly moaned as I shoveled in another. Already I was so content that I happily leaned my back against Echo's side to recline while I ate.

As I swallowed another mouthful without chewing Echo leaned over by my ear, laughing. "Slow down. You know better than that."

"But it's *so good*," I whined with protest, making her laugh again.

And it *was*. So fucking good that I almost started crying again. My eyes were growing more and more watery with every bite. Like every emotion I'd been pushing down for the last eight months was intent on erupting if I got the least bit excited about anything. Echo *was* right, though. I'd been

so hungry for so long that if I ate too fast I'd get sick. So I slowed down, even if it was damn near torture.

Eventually I'd emptied the can of every crumb, and even though I was dying to open another one, I also knew better than eating too much too soon. Instead of begging for more I turned on the bench, lying down to rest my head on Echo's lap. I was facing her, so that my face was buried in her stomach and I was comforted by her warmth and her smell. Despite how exhausted I was, I couldn't sleep. Though soon I knew Echo thought I'd fallen asleep, because she started running her fingers through my hair and she didn't stop for the entire drive. It made me have to fight tears once more because not only did it feel overwhelmingly comforting to be in contact with another human again, but it was *Echo*.

It took a few hours to get back to the base, but then the vehicle slowed as it got to the gates, coming to a full stop a few seconds later.

"You ready?" Echo asked, catching the suddenly nervous look on my face.

"Please don't leave my side," I begged, resisting the urge to put a vice grip on her hand. "If I lost sight of you I-" I shook my head, terrified of even thinking about it.

In response Echo gave me a slow kiss, letting out a content sigh when she pulled away. "The last thing I ever want to do again is leave your side."

I smiled gratefully, and when Garcia pushed open the door of the Stryker we strode out together. I'd hardly set foot on the pavement when a body crashed into me. My feet left the ground, and the person who had their arms around my middle spun me around in ecstatic circles. He was spinning me so fast he almost tripped over his own shoes.

"I just got back," I laughed as Micah set me down, "don't kill me already."

Instead of letting me go once my soles touched down, his arms tightened, giving me a hard hug. Though Echo had taken a step back to let him say hello she stayed well within my line of sight.

"Don't you ever do that again," Micah scolded, and somehow his arms tightened even more, squeezing the air out of me.

I hugged his neck, content to let him embrace me as long as he wanted, even if I could barely breathe. "I'm sorry." And I meant it. I never should've put him through losing me a second time.

While he held me I noticed Imogen and Ty had run up, and Imogen had wrapped Echo in a joyful hug. After letting go she started toward me, and at seeing her coming Micah released me. Imogen gave a soft smile, and it seemed that might be all she was going to do until she threw her arms around me.

"Hi," I huffed amusedly.

While Imogen let me go I searched for Echo again, and when I spotted her she was kneeling down, petting an excited canine that had run up with the newcomers, Dugan and Kara if I remembered correctly. Though, I suppose they weren't newcomers anymore. Micah followed me over, practically glued to my side, and when I got there I extended a hand to the man.

"Dugan, right?" I asked as he shook it.

He nodded. "Welcome back."

"Echo, watch!" Kara exclaimed, pointing at the dog. "I taught him the thing." Echo straightened up, releasing the dog so Kara could show her 'the thing.' She called the dog's name, and when it looked at her she threw her hands up. "Dance!"

The dog put its front paws up as high as it could and stood on its back legs, clumsily turning in a couple circles before dropping back down.

"He's a superstar," Echo praised, and it must've been something they'd taught him before Echo left looking for me, because she knelt down again and held up a hand. "High five." The dog lifted a paw to her palm, and she rubbed behind his ears in reward.

The soft squeal of brakes let me know a car had pulled up behind us, and when I turned to face it my heartbeat picked up nervously. Blake got out and came around to the passenger side to open the door for Casey, who climbed out with a bundle in her arms. He closed the door and began to walk over, but I was already heading to him, and met him halfway.

"Blake," I greeted timidly, so worried that he'd be mad at me. I couldn't judge by his face either. His mouth was set in a thin line, and his eyes kept running over me, studying me intently. The longer it took the more worried I grew.

"Pipsqueak," he said finally. And it was such a relief that I nearly sighed. There was no way he'd call me that if he was upset, and as if he could see my immediate relief he grinned, scooping me into his arms and off the ground. "I fucking missed you!" he bellowed happily. "Goddamn!" He was too happy to say much more than that, and instead he expressed his joy much the same way Micah had, by squeezing the very breath out of me. Not that I minded.

He let me go to give Echo a hug too, and while he did I turned to Casey. I felt unpredictably awkward when I faced her, because I knew that she'd felt guilty after what happened to Echo and I could only imagine how it'd made her feel when I left. She seemed to notice that, but thankfully she didn't let it put her off.

Since her arms were full she leaned forward to give me a friendly peck on the cheek, saying with a grin, "I'm glad you're back." I could tell by the joyful glimmer in her eyes that she meant it, and I gave her a genuinely grateful smile.

"Who's this?" I asked, pointing to the bundle Casey was holding.

"Genevieve," Blake said as Casey put the baby in my arms. "Meet Hayden."

For a few seconds I blinked at them in shock, and then I glanced at Echo, who'd come up to my side to see the baby for the first time too. It appeared she'd known about the name, because she smiled at me

encouragingly. There they were again. The tears, and I did everything in my power to hold them back as I pressed my lips to the baby's forehead. She had Casey's eyes. Big and green and bright, and after I kissed her head they were watching my face with curious intensity.

"Hello, Hayden," I said, my voice soggy. "I'm Genevieve." And she *smiled* at me, an open, toothless grin that made her arm wave and both Echo and me laugh.

"She likes you," Echo chuckled.

We both admired the baby for a few minutes until Blake cut in. "So, Aminah had the kitchen prepare a huge dinner. You hungry?"

It was the first time I noticed that the cafeteria nearby was buzzing with people and conversation. I answered with "starving" while Echo nodded vigorously, and I carried the baby as we all hurried in to eat. The kitchen's volunteers had created one of best meals I'd ever had, and Echo was so busy shoveling down her own food that she didn't care to remind me to eat slowly. I feasted until I was so full that it would take someone to pull me out of my seat.

At least I didn't need to get up right away. Even after I couldn't eat anymore we sat there for a long while. Everyone was so happy. Micah wouldn't stop talking about everything he'd been doing and helping with. He'd learned to make fuel with Ty and Imogen, and he wouldn't stop telling Echo about all the books he'd read. Blake caught me up on everything he'd been doing as leader, like working on getting running water and live cattle and horses, and he told me everything about what it was like to be a father. To my great appreciation, no one asked about my time away.

While in so many ways it was rejuvenating to be back and around people I cared about and loved, having everything happen all at once was taking its toll on me. I'd been alone for so long that after a couple hours I started slumping in my seat, leaning into Echo because I was so overwhelmed by the noise and commotion and amount of people.

It was such a relief when Echo noticed. "Want to get out of here?" I

It was such a relief when Echo noticed. "Want to get out of here?" I nodded, and she stood to address the table. "Sorry folks. I'm stealing my-" she stopped mid-sentence and side-glanced at me, "Genevieve for the rest of the night."

Despite the protests she walked me right out. It was dark by now, and when we reached the sidewalk I turned in the direction of the barracks.

"Nope," Echo said, taking my hand and pulling me in the opposite direction. "This way." I knew exactly where she was taking me without needing to be told. We were going to the home with the blue door, and the piano and the Giants flag. To that magical house that had always been *ours*.

"You could've said it, you know," I told her while I scooted in closer to her side. She raised an eyebrow at me. "Girlfriend. That's what you almost said, right?"

"Yeah…" She nodded, giving me a timid smile. "But I didn't want to assume how you wanted things to be. I thought maybe you'd want to start over, or ease into it until you got used to being back."

"No," I said urgently, stopping our progress to look at her. "I wasted so much time with you, and I spent the last eight months regretting it." I brought her hand up, hugging it against my chest with both of my own. "I don't want to ease into it, or take it slow, or start over. I don't want to live another day without you knowing exactly how much I love you."

"I know it," Echo said confidently. She tilted her head forward, setting it against mine. "Do you know it? Because I do, Gen. I love you."

My confirmation was to kiss her, and I kissed her deep. I wrapped my arms around her neck and kissed her for every day I'd forced myself not to grieve. For every day I'd missed out on feeling *this*, her arms around my waist, her lips so soft and so willing. On feeling in her touch and taste how much she loved me. She loved me enough to lay down her life. Enough to search for so long after I'd left. Enough to suffer through the headaches when if only she'd given up looking for me maybe Samuel could've found a solution. But she never gave up. She didn't give up

living, or loving, or fighting, and every day for the rest of my life I'd show her what that meant to me.