



# Burning Love

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** In a world ravaged by a zombie outbreak, Sophia Rosen, a former dance star, fights for survival until she meets Major Alex Bebbington, who saves her life.

In the confines of a militarized compound, their unexpected love blossoms amidst chaos.

Forced to hide their deepening bond, Sophia's rare immunity to the virus sparks both hope and danger.

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

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1

ALEX

The compound stirred as the first light of dawn shone through the perimeter fence, which wasn't as solid as Major Alex Bebbington would have liked.

Here we go again. How much longer can I do this?

Alex liked to take a couple of moments for herself in the mornings to collect her thoughts and prepare for another day in what she had come to understand was an increasingly unforgiving world. There was no coffee to be had for miles around. She knew this. And the reason she knew this is that she'd spent many hours looking for it over the last few weeks—time that could have perhaps been better spent. So, chicory it was. It was just about as grim as it got, but she would have to make do.

Major Bebbington would also have given her right arm for a cigarette, but she'd smoked her last one a couple of days earlier. At the ripe old age of thirty-five, she had seen more than her fair share of chaos, especially recently, but nothing felt so harrowing as being out of tobacco.

Alex had grown up in a military family. Her upbringing had taught her the value of discipline and duty, and her father had instilled in her a sense of responsibility and obligation, but what she was currently experiencing felt like a big ask.

Would he be proud of me? Not likely. Look at the state I'm in. I'm a goddamn wreck.

The lessons her father had taught her were valuable but had come with a price. Frequent relocations all over the States and abroad meant she had attended countless schools, never staying long enough to plant roots or make lasting friendships. Not really. Instead, she had become a real pro at adapting, at putting on a brave face while feeling the ache of loneliness in just about every fiber of her being. All she had ever craved was someone to talk to... just one person to confide in.

As a child, she had watched other kids and the way they behaved with each other. It all seemed so foreign to her. They shared secrets and supported each other during the trials of their teenage years. She'd watched as the girls in the various schools she'd attended organized sleepovers, proms, and trips to the mall. But for her, such activities had always remained just out of reach. Instead, she learned to rely on herself. And against all the odds, she had found strength in her solitude.

Her father's voice still loomed large in her life to this day. She could hear it almost continuously, like an inner monologue. His advice, habits, and strength of character had helped shape her into a soldier. Well, a soldier of sorts.

I'm not a real soldier, though. Am I? No, not anymore. This is all total bullshit. This isn't what being a soldier is about.

The truth was, Alex felt emotionally stranded. She knew what the life of a soldier was meant to look like. She had excelled at the military academy when making her way through the ranks but had only just made it to major when the virus struck. She didn't ever think she'd be thrown in the deep end like this. A major? Really? The title sounded pretty impressive, of course, and she certainly possessed the qualification on paper, but she hadn't had real-life experience in the role. And anyway... Was there even an Army these days? Did the Army actually still exist?

Dressed in her standard-issue cargo pants and a faded shirt, Alex laced up her combat boots, her fingers working automatically as she continued to ponder her predicament.

The leather was cracked from so much walking over the last month or so, but it still held the familiar shape of her foot. They were comfortable. They made her feel safe and somewhat in control.

“Major! You’re up early! How are you?”

The deep, guttural voice interrupted her focus. She turned to see Dorian Tromer, one of the newer members of the group. He had an uncertain expression on his face, and his brows furrowed slightly as if whatever he was about to say was on the tip of his tongue. The uniform she had found for him was a little on the large side, and his rifle lay slung low against his side. Alex studied him with interest, noting the nervousness in his stance.

What’s his deal? What’s the problem now?

She could tell that Dorian was eager to impress her but was still finding his place in this new world.

“How am I? As well as can be expected, I guess, Dorian. And being up early means more time to prepare, right?” she replied, her tone clipped but not unkind. “You know the drill, Tromer. How many years were you in service?”

“Right, of course. What are we p-p-preparing for again? What’s the p-plan?” he stammered, attempting a smile that fell short. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Tromer? Where were you stationed again?”

“I was never stationed anywhere, sir. Ma’am, I mean. I’m not Army. I never was. You told me you wanted me to be a, uh... like a, um... a guard? Um... because... well?—”

“Because you’re young and fit? Well, fit-ish. That’s right, Tromer. You’re a guard now. I forgot. You haven’t been here all that long. It’s hard to keep up.”

“Yep. I, uh...”

“Listen up, Tromer. It’s no biggie, okay? You got this. I spent years in military school. Years! Hell, it feels like I’ve been in the Army my entire life. I’ve got all the credentials, but I’d only just made the grade when... when it happened. I’m not arealmajor, okay? At least, I don’t feel like one. I’m just all we’ve got right now. This isn’t the Army. I don’t know what it is. But don’t sweat it. Let’s take things a day at a time.”

“You’re not in the Army? What do you mean? We’re on an Army base, right? Of course, it’s the Army, isn’t it? You’re Major Beb?—”

“No. There’s nobody in charge. I have no superiors. I don’t know where they are. No commands are coming through. Communications are down and have been for weeks. Fuck knows what’s going on. It’s just me and Major Miller. So, yes, I guess we’re in charge now. But don’t look so worried. You’re a guard now. You’re armed. Just go with it.”

“Yes, Si—Ma’am.”

“Is there something else you wanted to say, Tromer?”

“I, uh... I can’t remember. Um... Oh, yes! Sergeant Henry said he wants to see you.”

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“Thank you,” she waved him off with a hint of amusement as he hurried away. As she made her way across the compound, the distant clanging of metal gates and the buzzing of the generators were already bringing on a migraine. Life had been so comfortable back at the barracks in Atlanta. But this? Growing up, the army housing had always been more than comfortable. But now? This was something else—afew hangars, a shoddy perimeter fence that looked like it was about to collapse, and a crappy makeshift mess hall.

What a shithole.

Once a soldier on the front lines, slowly but steadily following in her father’s footsteps and getting promoted faster than she ever thought possible, she had traded the relative safety of organized war for... What would she even call this? Community defense? Is that what it was? Were they even a community? After the virus had started to take hold, and people were dropping like flies, it took time for her to adjust and find her footing in her current role, which required not only strength but a deep understanding of human nature. And she just wasn’t sure she understood people anymore. She was supposed to be equipped to deal with whatever came her way. But she wasn’t all that sure she could deal with much at all.

As she climbed the steps to Hangar 2 with its view over the eastern fence, a strategic vantage point that allowed her to scan the surrounding landscape for potential threats, Alex took a deep breath before letting out a long sigh. From here, she could see beyond the perimeter of the army training ground—a desolate expanse dotted with abandoned vehicles and gnarly-looking trees. The view felt daunting. It always did. But at least in here she was in control. Kind of.

“Major Bebbington.” Sergeant Henry approached, his familiar grizzled features breaking into a wide grin. They had been through enough together recently to trust each other implicitly.

“Morning, Sergeant. Wow. Does it not sound odd to you? Calling ourselves sergeant and major like this? I can’t get used to it. It sounds weird, right?”

“I know, but it makes people feel safe. We need to maintain some sense of hierarchy. So, that’s what we’re doing. You were a major. I was a sergeant. And that’s all there is to it. We’re it, kid.”

“I hate being it. Anything to report?” Alex asked, studying the horizon for any unusual movements.

“Nah. We’ve had a quiet night,” Henry said as he folded his arms across his chest. “There were a couple of deadies we had to take care of, but I’m only talking a couple. Four, tops. Some of the kids in Hangar 4 are getting restless. Bored. Hungry. Agitated. We might need to think about organizing some training drills. What do you think? I reckon it might be a good way to keep morale up?”

His suggestion made Alex feel momentarily hopeful—something she hadn’t felt in some time. Training the younger residents would maybe create the sense of community and purpose that was missing from the compound. “I think that’s an amazing idea, Henry. Where do you come up with them? Hell, I’ve been so depressed recently I haven’t been able to think straight. But you’re so right. We should set something up this week. What day is it again? Not that it matters, but I’d like to know what day it is. I want to help you to coordinate it. Yes, Henry! Let’s train these youngsters to defend themselves. I’m sick of popping zombies.”

“Get out of here! I’ll never get sick of popping zombies,” Henry laughed as he gave Alex a wink.

As they continued to speak, Alex's mind flickered back to her days in the military academy. The rigid structure, the enforced hardship, and the knowledge that everyone had each other's backs were what she missed more than anything. Those memories were bittersweet now, tainted by the isolation that had come to define her life post-virus. She had witnessed the collapse of society firsthand and watched as the military struggled to contain the chaos. Well, struggled wasn't exactly the word. They failed. Miserably.

Now, what was left of her colleagues had banded together to keep control of the compound and to save as many survivors as they could. But things were hanging by a thread.

"How are the supplies looking?" she asked, changing the subject and snapping back to the present. "I noticed that we were running low on canned veggies and fruit. We need to head out and stock up. Who can we send? We'll all end up with scurvy at this rate."

"Miller is heading out. I've got a couple of guys who've been helping me out on the allotment who'd be happy to follow him on a mission—three or four young, healthy fellas. So, we'll see to it. You can leave it with us, Major," Henry replied, his respect for her palpable.

As she opened the door and walked into the hangar, Alex sensed the weight of her responsibility settling on her shoulders. And it felt heavy. The compound had become a refuge, and people were arriving by the day, but they didn't have what they needed to make the place run as smoothly as Alex would have liked. Their supplies and equipment were sorely lacking and as far as Alex could see, there was no end in sight to this crisis. Refugees would continue to come, as would the dead—or undead or whatever they were. It was possible, just maybe, that they could make something of this place—a community, but Alex had her doubts. It would be no easy task.



The clamor of morning began to swell as groups of people started to emerge from their makeshift shelters. The faint smell of burning wood mixed with the aroma of that godawful chicory people were insisting on calling coffee filled the air, reminding her of home, of simpler times spent around dinner tables, laughing and sharing stories with her family. Those memories felt far away, replaced now by the pressing reality of survival.

“Major Bebbington!” Alex jumped with fright as one of the older women, Laura, who had been settled in the compound for just over a week, rushed over, her face flushed with what was clearly panic.

“What is it?” Alex asked, her heart rate quickening. She was bracing herself for yet another emergency, for they’d been coming in thick and fast over the last few days.

“There’s an injured man at the main gate. He’s saying something about being attacked. There’s blood everywhere. We need you to come and look at him,” Laura said, her voice shaky but insistent.

“Sure. Give me a sec, and I’ll find my medical bag,” Alex replied, shifting her focus to the task at hand. As they hurried to the entrance, a pang of protectiveness swelled within her. Every person mattered here. Every life was precious. This was a living hell, but she could make a difference if she put her best foot forward.

They reached the gate, where a group had gathered around a man slumped against the wall, his face pale and gaunt. Alex knelt beside him and assessed his condition. His clothes were filthy, blood seeping through the fabric at his side.

“Get him inside,” Alex ordered. “What’s your name?” she asked the man, trying her best not to bark in too commanding a voice.

“Marco,” he gasped. Alex noted his pain. It was etched in deep lines across his brow.

“I came from... I don’t know... about ten miles south. Near Lake Trent. They took everything I had. I just thought I’d maybe find help here. They killed my buddies. Humans. Humans did this to me. Not, you know,them.”

Alex felt almost sick to witness the desperation in his eyes. The world was clearly growing more brutal by the day if people were prepared to turn on each other like this. “You’re safe for now,” she assured him as she met his gaze. “We’ll do what we can to take care of you, okay?”

As Laura helped Marco to his feet, Alex saw that a small group of onlookers had gathered around to watch what was going on. These people had all lost so much already, and every time someone new arrived, the fear of dwindling resources increased.

“Let’s just calm it, everyone. There’s plenty to do around here,” she called out, her voice echoing with authority. “We need to keep working. Come on. Leave it to Laura and me to get this man stabilized. We can deal. Go find something to do.”

Once the crowd began to disperse, Alex took a moment to collect her thoughts.

Maybe we need to establish a schedule and lay down some ground rules. These people are panicked... lost...

Her mind raced with the implications of Marco’s arrival. Would he bring trouble? It was so hard to tell, and she’d been fooled more than once over recent weeks. She used to think of herself as a great judge of character, but these days, it was a dog-eat-dog world out there, and her radar was way off. The question of how to make things work better at the compound lingered as she made her way back to Hangar 2 to find some medical supplies.

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As she began to sift through the handwritten supplies list to see what she could afford to give Laura to start work on Marco, memories of her career, of the friendships she'd forged, and of the losses she'd endured flooded her mind. These experiences were now a part of her, a mosaic of ups and downs that defined who she had become—a leader, sure, but a leader with an instinct to be a lone she-wolf.

Should I get out of here? Do this on my own? I'd make it. I know I would.

Just then, the sound of laughter interrupted her thought process. A group of children raced past the dirty window, their voices bright and almost happy-sounding. She felt a slight smile tugging at the corner of her lips. She couldn't leave them. They were so young, so innocent. Their futures actually meant something to her. She had the skills and experience to turn this place around. Abandoning them to their fate would be an act of cruelty, and she knew she couldn't do it.

The children chased each other around a couple of empty crates, the sunlight catching the glint of their eyes. Alex felt a warmth spread through her abdomen. Despite everything that had happened to them, these kids had somehow found a way to have fun, to entertain themselves, to forget what was really happening out there beyond the compound gates. Maybe she could learn something from them? Sure, she wouldn't be able to ignore the threat of the world outside—but she could certainly learn to deal with it a whole lot better.

Major Alex Bebbington had a mission. And her mission was clear enough: to keep the compound safe, protect those unable to defend themselves, and find a way forward through this crisis.

She took a deep breath. She had to remember that she was supposed to be trained for events like these. But no, that wasn't true. Nobody could have foreseen an event like this one. She gathered some bandages and antiseptic lotion, hoping it would be enough, and shoved them into a cloth bag. She then stepped outside, feeling the cool air against her skin. The sensation helped calm her.

"Major, over here!" called Henry, waving her over to the makeshift supply tent. "We need to discuss the supplies."

"Really? Right now? I need to get this stuff to Laura."

"Major, I'm sorry, but we've got more problems than we thought," Henry said as he made his way toward her with giant strides and a concerned look in his eyes. "We're really running short on stuff. Not just fruit and veggies. I'm talking about everything. I'm wondering if someone's been stealing it. It's bad. I'm going to send out that scouting team today."

"Agreed," Alex said, her mind already churning with the possibilities of who might be stealing. Who had access to the food? Everyone, she guessed. It was just another example of how disorganized things were and how they needed to get their act together if they were going to survive. "Do you know who you're taking? Have you got water, bags, maps, and flashlights ready to go? We can't afford to wait."

As they quickly discussed logistics, her resolve grew. She knew she could not falter. She was going to have to build this community from the ground up. What other option did she have?

Later that day, once Marco had been stabilized, Alex gathered as many residents as she could in the mess hall. It was time to address them, to remind them of their purpose and the strength they could possess if they chose to work together.

“Listen up, everyone!” she called, her voice cutting through the chatter. “It’s been a tough day. We have a new resident, Marco, who came to us this morning. He’s stable, warm, hydrated... and we expect him to make a full recovery. He got lucky. But it’s one more mouth to feed, right? We don’t all get together like this often, but with more and more people arriving, we’re going to need to have regular meetings. None of us has got much left. We’re spent. I get that. We’re all grieving. We’ve lost loved ones. It’s been nothing short of a nightmare. But we’re stronger than any threat out there, and I need you all to believe that.”

As she spoke, she watched their faces transform. Not everyone’s, but the majority. Their uncertainty faded as they nodded their heads in agreement.

“We’re all fighting for the same thing. So, I want us all here, in this hall, every Monday at seventeen hundred hours. Sorry, five o’clock, okay?”

She watched on as a crowd of worn-out faces nodded softly.

After the meeting, Alex decided to run around the compound’s training ground. Above her, glittering in shades of purple and pink, twilight made its way across the sky. She could hear the faint echoes of chatter coming from the hangars, a reminder of the lives that she and her colleagues were now responsible for.

But the quietness of the outside world sent a chill down her spine. Her thoughts turned to Miller and the scouting group. She hoped that they would find food, but more importantly, she prayed that they would make it back unscathed.

2

SOPHIA

Sophia crouched down, keeping herself low to the ground. What little daylight was

left had managed to make its way through the filthy windows of the abandoned grocery store. She moved her hand up to her neck and felt her blood thudding through her veins. It was pumping so hard she could barely hear anything else. She strained her ears. She could hear something but wasn't sure if it might be some auditory hallucination. Was it her own movements or something lurking... something creeping closer? She imagined the once-busy aisles around her and what they once must have been. Now, they were littered with shards of broken glass, discarded cans, and ripped-open cardboard boxes, remnants of the chaos that had swept through like a storm. Being from England, she didn't recognize most of the brand names, but the pictures on the packaging looked delicious.

I'd honestly eat a can of cat food right now if only I could find some.

Sophia felt that every step was a gamble. The slightest noise felt like danger was about to envelop her. Knowing that she—that no one—was safe anymore was her new reality.

She was all alone. She had been alone for weeks. Alone and hungry. The pain in her stomach made her feel constantly nauseous as the echoes of her solitude seemingly reverberated around her, amplifying the deadly stillness of what must have once been a store buzzing with life and energy. Time was somehow suspended in this place, and as she crept forward, she found herself remembering her student days in London—bright, loud, full of people hurrying through the streets, taking the Tube, drinking in crowded bars before taking their pick from a myriad of on-trend eateries. It felt like a lifetime ago. Just a month or so prior to the virus hitting the States, she'd been one of them, rushing between dance practice and errands without a second thought, impatient at the checkout line, oblivious to how fragile her world really was.

I wonder if life's still like that back home.

Back then, grocery shopping had been something of a chore, an item on her to-do list

squeezed between rehearsals, shows, and sleep. She could almost laugh at its absurdity now. What she wouldn't give to be able to walk into a supermarket without fear and grab something she fancied off a shelf without a second thought. To be part of a line again, which her fellow Brits did so well, standing behind strangers, maybe complaining about the cost-of-living crisis quietly, or the weather, completely unaware that everything she took for granted was about to be ripped away from her. And the goddamn diets she'd been on to keep in shape for ballet, refusing to eat anything that wasn't organic, vegan, or both. But now—and the irony wasn't lost on her—every morsel of food she found felt like treasure, like a prize won through absolute sheer luck.

Sophia's minute frame certainly gave her an edge in this new game of survival she suddenly found herself playing. At five feet tall with a slight ballerina's build, she could slip into narrow crevices, wedge herself behind counters, and disappear into tight spots that most would overlook. It was this ability that had kept her alive, though it certainly came at quite a price. Her body was covered in bruises she'd gotten from hurried escapes and nights spent in cramped hiding places. Every muscle in her body felt knotted with tension.

On top of her physical injuries, her nerves had grown into live wires. She never felt fully relaxed, and the worst thing about it was that she was scared the damage was irreversible.

A cappuccino and some Valium. Now, that would be a treat and a half.

Survival had left her fearful, lonely, and in constant pain, but a part of her was still glad to be alive. She wasn't ready to give in. She needed to find a way back to England, even if it meant swimming across the Pond.

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She crawled over a collapsed shelf, feeling the cold tile beneath her fingers. This place—what was left of it—reminded her of a graveyard. But she was determined not to be buried here. Her senses were on high alert. They always were. She visualized the ghosts of families that once filled these aisles: parents with screaming toddlers, couples deciding on that evening's dinner, and the familiar, almost comforting chaos of a ton of people being in the same space together.

Suppose I had just one person here with me—just one person to talk to.

It was strange to miss those mundane things in life, but she did. She missed the faces of strangers on the Tube, even the briefest eye contact with someone unknown, someone who wasn't a threat. Such small, meaningless actions were pieces of humanity she had always taken for granted. And now they were gone.

She looked over her shoulder and decided the coast was clear. She needed food. She had gone four days with barely a scrap to eat. She felt so frail and knew she couldn't afford to lose any more weight. What had her last meal been? Some stale crackers she'd found in a garbage can. She hated how hunger had become a constant companion. Her only companion. It gnawed at her inside like a parasite. Her movements felt slower and less coordinated than usual. And in this world, every second counted. Every step had to be deliberate.

In the dim light, she finally spotted what looked like a couple of cans on a shelf. They were partially hidden by debris and must have been overlooked by previous looters. She approached slowly. Her senses heightened because a part of her suspected that it could be a trap. She had seen it happen before. People, living people rather than those infected by the virus, left seemingly untouched food to lure in the desperate. They



would then attack them, steal any supplies or equipment, and leave them for dead. Or just dead. Fully dead.

I'd rather go that way than the other, though. Anything but become one of those monsters.

But she didn't have a choice. As she neared the shelf, she scanned her surroundings, flicking her gaze to the darkened storefront windows where the shattered pane allowed a gentle draft to seep through, carrying with it the unmistakable stench of rot from outside. Sophia knew what this meant. There must have been a corpse nearby. Or an infected person.

Her fingers brushed against one of the cans. The cool, metallic feel jolted her heart in hope, but it was empty.

Bollocks.

She grabbed the other can. This one was full. But of what? She squinted at the label. It was barely visible in the waning light. Green beans in a bearnaise sauce. Wow. What a luxury. She tucked it carefully into her pack, aware of how something as small as a single can of food could mean the difference between life and death. She would guard it with her life.

Okay, I need to get somewhere safe. Hide. Eat these beans. Oh, God. I'm so happy. I don't think anyone's ever been this happy about green beans!

Sophia let out a slow, controlled breath. She couldn't believe just how satisfied she felt. But just as quickly, the moment was gone. A faint shuffle sounded from just a few feet away. It was an uneven, dragging gait. She knew exactly what that meant. She froze in position. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

Zombies. But how many? Please let it just be one.

Her heart slowed as she felt her instincts begin to take over, quieting her breath and steadying her pulse. She pressed herself into the shadows beside the shelf, willing her body to become as invisible as possible.

“Jesus. Please, oh, please....” she whispered to herself, unable to stop the words springing from her lips.

Sophia gathered her thoughts. Her heartbeat was now barely a murmur, her breaths shallow and controlled, each one precise.

Stop talking, stop talking. Absolute silence.

She believed that the zombies, for want of a better word, relied on scent and sound more than sight. And she had just exposed herself. Why had she spoken out loud like that? They would be drawn to her now. The creatures were slower than she was, but that didn’t make them any less deadly. One wrong step, one trip, one stumble, and they would be on her. She knew this. She’d seen it.

The footsteps grew louder and closer, shuffling in a disjointed rhythm. Sophia pressed herself down, curling into herself, her muscles tightening. She couldn’t see them yet, but she could picture them—decayed, gray, animated by nothing but an insatiable, mindless hunger. She forced herself to stay calm.

You can do this, Sophia.

This was survival: becoming as small and quiet as the shadows that shielded her. She fought the instinct to run. She had learned the hard way that running was a last resort; it would be too risky a gamble. Memories of a couple of recent close calls flooded her mind—moments when she’d almost been caught, barely escaping with her life. She

could still feel the bruises.

The zombie's shuffling stopped. It was near. She held her breath. Her skin prickled, every nerve on edge, her mind a silent chant of, Don't move, don't cough, don't sneeze.

She thought back to when the outbreak had first begun. How long had it been now? Weeks? Months? She'd lost count of the days. Panic had rippled through the world like wildfire. Contagion. What city had they been in? Somewhere south? She couldn't remember. The city had fallen pretty fast. The dense population meant it was overwhelmed in days, leaving nowhere safe.

Sophia had been halfway through a ballet tour in the U.S. when it happened, performing in one city after another. The rhythm of rehearsals, curtain calls, and sleeping on the company bus had left her feeling gradually more and more exhausted by the day. News had started filtering in—first, just reports of strange sicknesses in scattered towns, but then it came—people falling ill and not getting back up, people attacking each other.

She had been in Boston when the first actual reports broke on the news, but the company insisted on continuing the tour. They went on to the next city, where she and the other dancers stayed in a hotel just a stone's throw away from the theater. That was when Sophia saw the first signs of chaos.

One night, their director called everyone into the hotel ballroom, pale-faced and shaking. She spoke in hurried tones, explaining how they'd have to cancel the rest of the tour—something about the police ordering people into quarantine zones. The company made plans to charter flights back to the UK, just in case. But it was already too late. Within hours, the entire city was filled with panicked crowds, lines of cars snaking in every direction as military roadblocks went up. Sophia felt like she'd fallen into a surreal nightmare.

Sophia and her fellow dancers felt safe for a couple of days in the hotel, but the infected eventually made their way in. One of the stagehands fell sick first. Then the lead male dancer collapsed, convulsing in front of her before his eyes went hollow and something monstrous looked out through his face.

Sophia ran, slipping away from her friends and colleagues and hiding out in a tiny janitor's closet on the third floor. She remembered pressing her hands over her ears, blocking out the sounds echoing through the hallway, the guttural groans, and the occasional, sharp cry that pierced her to her very core.

When the noise finally died down, Sophia emerged. She must have spent two whole days in that closet. Her ballet company was gone. The corridors were littered with signs of a violent struggle, but no one was left. She moved in a daze from room to room, gathering food and bottled water from minibars—anything that could keep her alive.

And that was how she had survived in that place for over a week, wandering between floors, hiding in empty rooms. When she dared to look out the window, the city's skyline seemed almost peaceful. The bustling metropolis had turned into a ghost town. But she knew better. She didn't want to believe it, but she realized what had become of her friends, her fellow dancers, the people she'd spent so many months with. They were gone, swallowed by the outbreak. They had turned. And she was all on her own.

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It was then she realized the horrible truth: survival wasn't a matter of being strong or brave. It was about luck. She was still here, and they weren't, but lucky hardly felt like the right word. She had never felt this low in her entire life. She'd escaped with her life, but the cost was almost unimaginable. She felt like the last woman alive.

A soft, scratching sound brought her back to the present. The zombie stumbled further up the aisle, its decayed body brushing against the shelves, its hands reaching, searching. Her pulse quickened as she briefly shut her eyes, willing her body to become even smaller.

The creature lingered for what felt like forever, its presence causing every fiber of her being to focus on remaining silent. She reminded herself of the countless times she had done this before. She knew she had to fight every instinct that was screaming at her to flee.

Finally, the shuffling steps began to fade, the zombie moving away, its attention drifting elsewhere. Sophia counted her breaths, waiting until the silence felt complete. Only then did she release the tension she had held for what felt like hours.

She unfurled herself slowly, every movement careful, deliberate. These creatures were unpredictable, and she'd learned that they sometimes circled back. She needed to get out there very carefully and find another place to hide before night fell.

Sophia's loneliness settled back over her as she made her way to the exit.

Where should I go now?

It was an ache that never left her. She had nothing. Not here, in any case. She could only cling to the hope that everyone back home was still there. She remembered the faces of the few survivors she'd encountered, their wary eyes, the way they'd sized each other up, always calculating. Trust had become a luxury. And there was no room in this new world for luxuries. When every encounter carried a risk, isolation had become her armor.

She took one last look at the grocery store. There was something hauntingly beautiful about its emptiness.

Sophia slipped into the shadows outside. She moved with purpose, her senses alert, her mind focused on finding a safe place to spend the night.

As she walked, her thoughts drifted to her family. Had any of them survived? Were they also aimlessly wandering the ruins of London, haunted by memories of their once near-perfect lives? The ache in her chest grew. She could feel the tears coming, but she pushed them aside. There was no room for longing when she was supposed to be in super-vigilant mode.

Oh, Mummy. Where are you? I need you. I really need you.

She suddenly remembered an article she'd read online about soldiers on the battlefield. Oh, wow. Online. How odd to even think about it. The internet! Had that really existed? Would it be coming back? Was someone working on that? It was hard for her to believe it had even existed now that it was gone. Only a few weeks had passed, yet it felt like a lifetime since she'd last held her entire world in her pocket. Her iPhone had been a lifeline, a real-time portal to every person she knew, every fact she could look up, every thought or photo she wanted to share. Now, it was just a useless piece of metal and glass. She didn't even know why she was still carrying it around. There was no signal. No power. But it was another hope she was clinging to. She thought about how easily she'd once tapped on friends' names, seeing their lives

unfold in pictures and messages as if they were right there with her. How she'd pulled up maps without a second thought, let music fill her ears with a quick scroll, held endless information in the palm of her hand. Now, the device was cold and silent, much like herself.

The article that had suddenly appeared in her mind detailed the universal tendency for wounded soldiers to call out for their mothers in their final moments, no matter how tough or battle-hardened they'd been. The words haunted her, tracing the edges of a feeling she hadn't wanted to acknowledge—that primal, desperate longing for comfort, for someone who might make this nightmare bearable.

After having walked for about half an hour, she happened upon a small woodshed on the terrace of an abandoned bar tucked away in a corner. A rusty padlock dangled from the door, and to her surprise, the key was still in it. With a glance over her shoulder, she slipped inside, taking the padlock with her, and ducked into the cramped, musty space. She closed the door behind her and padlocked it from the inside. The shed was barely big enough to stand in, but she didn't need space—she required safety. The cold seeped into Sophia's bones, wrapping around her like a second skin. She shivered uncontrollably. The air smelled stale and very faintly of old cigarettes. But it was enclosed, and right now, that was all she needed. It was her haven. She pressed herself into a corner, hugging her knees to her chest, trying to conserve any heat her body had left. Her tights and pants offered little protection against the chill, and her thin jacket was of almost zero use. She would have to make it her next mission to find some clothes. Sophia rubbed her arms in a futile attempt to bring warmth to her frozen skin, her teeth chattering as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Mother...

But her mother wasn't there. Nobody was here. There was not a single person in this world who would tell her what she wanted to hear—that everything would be all right. She was traveling solo. Each day was a battle. And she felt it now more than

ever—an aching, desperate urge to scream. But she knew no one would hear her.

3

ALEX

The forest was eerily silent as Alex led her patrol forward through the darkness. Every rustle seemed amplified, and Alex was reminded that when there wasn't a sound to be heard out in the wild, it didn't always mean they were safe. She knew that her three-person team had razor-sharp senses and that she could count on them to scan every inch of the surrounding area.

We have to find them. Oh, God, Miller? Where the fuck did you go? Shit!

As a range of scenarios flickered through her mind, a cry pierced the quiet. It was distant but unmistakably human. But it didn't sound like Miller or any of the youngsters he'd taken out of with him. No, this was a high-pitched, desperate scream. She recognized it immediately. She'd heard it many times. It was the sound of someone fighting for their life—a woman. Alex raised a hand high into the air; the signal for her team to stop in their tracks. She turned her head, her ears narrowing in on the source.

“Follow me, you guys. It could be one of ours.”

Without even a second's hesitation, she started moving with purposeful and determined strides. Her small team fanned out behind her. They knew to be quiet and efficient. They had been in this situation more than enough times already, and in case they had forgotten, Alex had spent hours drumming it into them before they'd left the compound. The screams grew louder as they neared a small clearing. In one swift motion, Alex broke through the underbrush and into the open space.



Although she should have been, Alex wasn't quite prepared for the sight that met her. In the clearing, a young woman stood alone, bent over with a lone zombie on her back, its arms around her neck. It clawed at her throat, grabbing her with its rotting fingers as she tried to fend it off with what looked to be little more than a twig. Her face was twisted with terror. She made a series of strangled gulping noises as she tried, and failed, to jab at what once had been a young man, the twig doing very little to hold the creature at bay.

"Hey! Get off her," Alex cried out, her voice loud and authoritative despite knowing full well the undead thing no longer had the ability to understand her.

The woman's head snapped sideways, and Alex recognized the flash of hope in her eyes. The creature lunged, snapping its teeth mere inches from the young woman's arm. Alex was already running straight into the chaos, her hand gripping a baseball bat with an ease that surprised her, seeing as she had only ever been trained with firearms. With a mighty swing, she struck the creature on the back of the head, sending it into a backward spin. As the zombie's body collapsed at her feet, motionless, she whacked it in the head one last time.

Finish him, Alex.

The woman was shaking from head to toe, clutching the twig like a lifeline. Alex stepped closer and reached out her hand. "You're safe now. Come on, you can come with us. Don't be scared. It's over."

The woman's wide eyes searched Alex's face as if trying to make sense of what had just happened.

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“It’s never over,” she responded in a whisper, her fingers cold and shaky as they slipped into Alex’s hand. As Alex pulled her closer, she noted how slight she was... almost skin and bone. The second thing she saw were cuts and bruises almost wholly covering the woman’s skin.

“What’s your name, sweetie?” Alex asked, keeping her tone kind, almost soft as if coaxing a frightened animal.

“Sophia,” the woman said, tears forming in the corner of her eyes. She dropped Alex’s hand quickly, wrapping her arms around herself as though trying to hold in her terror. “Thank you. I thought I was done for. That one... He killed someone over there, right in front of me. He just ate him. I swear?—”

“You were pretty incredible, you know that? You were giving it a go! You were defending yourself. That’s more than most could do out here,” Alex said, her expression softening before she turned to Jeremy, one of her soldiers, and barked an order, “Go find the other body and get back here ASAP. I need to know what we’re up against.”

As Alex turned and held Sophia’s gaze, she could see the young woman’s cautious eyes. But at the same time, she felt something stir within her—a strange, immediate connection, like a thread of understanding between them.

You know I won’t hurt you. My God... I can’t believe you’ve made it this far. Look at you...afraid, beautiful, with such deep eyes.

It was only a fleeting feeling but also one she hadn’t experienced in years. Alex had

spent so long in military training that most of her feelings, good and bad, had long been buried to make way for honing her survival instincts. She shook off what was, for reasons that baffled her, a pleasant feeling building up in her chest and forced herself to stay focused.

“Are you out here alone?” Alex asked, her voice careful. “What are you doing here, Sophia?”

Sophia’s shoulders slumped as she gave a slight nod of her head. “I-I... I’ve been on my own for a while. I don’t really know how long. I guess since the beginning?”

Alex could detect the weariness in her words, each one heavy with exhaustion and fear. She knew that feeling all too well—the kind of loneliness that gnawed at your insides. She gestured toward the path. “You’re not alone anymore. Let’s get you out of here. Come on, let’s follow Jeremy and assess the damage.”

“Ma’am! Stay back! You’re not going to want to see this. It’s Spike. I’ve finished him off,” shouted Jeremy, his voice echoing through the trees.

“Shhhhh! Don’t holler like that!” replied Alex angrily. “Get over here!”

“There’s no sign of the others. Just Spike. He was... He was in a bad way. But he’d turned. I finished him off.”

“Does he have family back at the compound?” Alex asked urgently, her mind trying to picture which kid was Spike.

“No. No family. And even if he did, we can’t take that body back for burial. The state of it is...” Jeremy stuttered over his words, unable to finish his sentence.

“Fine. Leave him where he is. Let’s go. Maybe the others found their way back. We

can't stay out here. It's getting dark," Alex said matter-of-factly.

Her approach was blunt, hard and cold, but there was no other way to survive in this new broken world. They began walking, carefully moving through the underbrush. Alex realized that Sophia's steps were unsure and that she was struggling to keep up. Possibly she was still in shock, or maybe she just needed a good meal and a good night's rest.

"Are you okay?" she asked, slowing down the pace a little.

"No, I'm not. Who's Spike? Did you know that boy? You don't seem the slightest bit bothered about what just happened," Sophie said as she looked down at her feet.

"I am bothered. But no, I didn't know the kid. He lives on our compound, but we weren't close. There's a lot of them now. I can't keep track. He was out with some of the others, looking for food... and unfortunately this kind of shit is to be expected, right?"

"Right."

As they continued, Alex glanced at Sophia from time to time, taking in her disheveled appearance—the filthy streaks on her cheeks, the mud-caked tangles in her hair, the purple and red bruising peeking out from under her ripped clothing. Her posture was tense and guarded, but there was still a resilience in her eyes that Alex found intriguing. It was odd that she had survived alone for this long. Most of the people who turned up at the compound were in pairs or threes. It was rare to find a lone survivor. Someone uninfected. The people who tended to show up at the compound were rarely related, but they'd formed groups. It was only natural, thought Alex.

"So, where were you headed when we found you?" Alex asked, trying to keep her tone casual.

Sophia shook her head. “No clue. Nowhere, really. Just... away. I’m always just trying to get away. I don’t know where to go anymore.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, each word feeling like a confession. She let out a bitter laugh, glancing at Alex with a flicker of vulnerability. “I don’t think I have any plan. I’m just... trying to get out of here.”

Alex laughed gently. “I know that feeling all too well.”

They walked in silence for a few more moments; each lost in their own thoughts.

After a while, Sophia spoke.

“Listen, thank you very much for saving me. I honestly don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t been there. But I’ve got to go now. If that’s alright, I’d like to go now.”

“Go?” Alex couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something significant about Sophia—something that pulled at her despite the hardened walls she had built around herself. It wasn’t just Sophia’s vulnerability that stirred her; it was the quiet strength beneath it, the way she carried herself even amid exhaustion and fear. Even though she sensed that the girl wasn’t trusting in her whatsoever. “Go where, Sophia? You got places to be? People to see?”

“No, but I’ve been just fine. I’m fine. I’ve got to get back to?—”

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“To England? I love the accent, by the way. But you know you’re not making any sense right now. Have you gotten a look at yourself lately? Are you really sure you’re fine? Because I think you were about to get squashed by a rotter just then.”

Sophie made no reply as she continued to put one foot in front of the other as if on autopilot. Alex finally broke the silence. “Listen, lady. There’s a compound nearby. It’s not much, but we’ve got it more or less secure. I’m happy for you to stay for as long as you need to. Get washed up, have a bite to eat, sleep on a mattress in a real cot for the night, but we have rules.”

Sophia turned her head to look Alex straight in the eye. “Rules?”

Alex nodded. “We do our best to work together to keep it safe. Everyone contributes something. No one freeloads. Well, not usually. Let’s say the rules might need tightening up. Basically, you’ll have to pull your weight if you decide to stay.”

Sophia seemed to consider this, her gaze drifting back down to her feet. Alex thought for a moment that she looked as if she might refuse, her mind weighing unknown fears and hopes against the reality of life out here.

After a pause, she whimpered, her voice still on the shaky side of normal. “Alright. I’ll come and take a look, I suppose. And I’ll obviously follow your rules. I can leave at any point, though, can’t I? I have to get home at some point, you see. It’s a lot to trust that you won’t hurt me either.”

Alex allowed herself a small smile. “That’s right. Good choice, Sophia. I’m not feeling too optimistic about getting back to England. Not anytime soon, at least. But

we'll take care of you in the meantime. How does that sound? I have no intentions of hurting you."

As they continued, Alex explained some of the basics of compound life. Sophia appeared to be listening intently, her expression clearly showing her obvious apprehension. But Alex thought she also spotted a slight glimmer of trust in the woman's eyes, a willingness to believe that Alex might just be offering her a lifeline.

The sun cast a deep glow over the compound as Alex led Sophia through the barren terrain, the grit under her boots grinding like bone on stone. The air was carried on it, and it was the faintest acrid tang as if someone had been burning something. The distant sound of muffled voices sounded harsh and uninviting.

"In this hangar, we have a few cots, but it's what we use as the main hall," Alex said, her voice flat as she gestured to the vast, cold-looking structure. Its walls were scabbed with peeling paint, and the concrete was rough and pockmarked. The inside, Alex realized, as if looking at it for the first time, wasn't much better. Rickety tables and mismatched chairs sat in uneven rows, their surfaces scratched and scarred. Several people were huddled in clumps, heads bowed, their voices low and strained.

They know already—the boy.

Alex's eyes moved slowly across the room, her expression hollow. "Are Henry and the others back?" she shouted out to nobody in particular, but her words hung in the air. A young woman with a gaunt, her eyes ringed with exhaustion, gave her a brief nod.

"Okay. We'll debrief later. This is Sophie. She'll be joining us for now," she said, her sentence falling on deaf, uninterested ears. She turned to Sophia and attempted a smile. "I think everyone's feeling pretty low. It's to be expected, given what happened. Look, this place is... it's functional," Alex explained, her gaze lingering

on a corner where a group of youngsters sat in silence. “We sometimes eat here. Talk when necessary. I’m trying to set up regular get-togethers. I guess it’s all about keeping things moving.” There was no pride in her voice, only a grim acknowledgment of their situation.

The tour continued, the compound revealing more of itself in stark, brutal lines. The doors, windows, and walls bore the evidence of hurried repairs, and the scent of damp clung to their clothes as they made their way from building to building. Alex’s steps faltered at times and her shoulders tightened as she tried to imagine what Sophie must be thinking.

The younger woman followed, her silence speaking volumes. Alex understood precisely what this place must look like to a stranger. Every corner of the compound reeked of desperation masked as endurance. It was survival stripped bare.

They stopped by the supply room, where Alex showed her the essentials they had managed to gather. “We’ve got some food, although nowhere near enough. That’s what Miller and... well, you know the score, right? We have some medicine and other supplies. We have plenty of blankets, for example. I think that’s about the only thing we have plenty of. Other than people,” she scoffed, pointing to the shelves lined with thick woolen bedcovers.

Sophia nodded, her gaze sweeping over the provisions with a mix of gratitude and disbelief. “It all looks very... organized. It’s pretty incredible. You’re doing a great job here. I never thought I’d find something like this after what is left out there.” Her voice carried an undercurrent of emotion.

Is she kidding? The place is the fucking definition of a shithole.

“Well, like my grandpa used to say, you can only piss with the dick you got, right?” she replied, immediately regretting her coarse language. She’d gotten so used to



banter with her army buddies over the years that she had forgotten how it was you were supposed to talk to people who weren't soldiers. "You've got to adapt. That's what we're trying to do."

Alex left Sophia in the capable hands of Laura while she found a place for Sophia to sleep.

She found it in one of the quieter corners of the smallest hangar. A narrow frame with a sagging mattress would have to do. It wasn't much, but she had pulled some of the cleaner-looking blankets from storage, shaking out the faint scent of mildew before folding them onto the cot and tucking them in carefully at the corners.

Alex returned to where she had left Sophia and showed her the way to her new quarters.

"I think this might work for you," Alex said, her voice steady, though her chest tightened at the way Sophia hesitated before stepping closer. The dim light caught on the strands of Sophia's hair, illuminating the soft curve of her jaw and the tension in her frame. "My bet is you'll sleep well tonight. Did someone give you something to eat yet?"

Sophia traced her fingers along the bedframe, her movements tentative. "Yes, I had some soup. It was amazing. And this bed looks perfect," she murmured, her voice carrying a vulnerability that made Alex want to reach out and touch her pale, delicate skin. But she stayed rooted to the spot and clasped her hands together in front of her.

"Good," Alex managed to splutter through half-gritted teeth. "Well, goodnight, Sophia. It was nice to meet you. Um... under other circumstances, it would have been nicer. I mean... I don't know what I'm saying. Just that I'm glad you're here. Here's a screen for a little privacy, okay?" The tension between them was palpable now, an unspoken current that only seemed to grow in the enclosed space that Alex fashioned

as she placed a screen around the bed. “You’ll be safe here. If anyone upsets you, you come to me, okay?”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Sophia said, glancing over her shoulder, her lips curving in the faintest hint of a smile before it faltered. She sank onto the edge of the bed, the mattress creaking softly despite her weighing next to nothing. Her gaze lingered on Alex, the shadows deepening in her eyes. “You’ve really gone out of your way to help me, and I appreciate it.”

Alex sat down on the cot next to her. She was surprised at herself and wondered inwardly how she’d managed to think up such a bold move, all the time hoping that Sophia wouldn’t find it unusual. “You’ve been through a lot,” she said quietly. “I just wanted to make sure you were comfy. I know it’s not the Ritz, but I don’t want you to be scared.”

Sophia’s breath caught, her chest rising and falling in a rhythm Alex couldn’t help but notice. The air between them felt thick. Alex’s eyes traced the line of Sophia’s collarbone, the way it disappeared beneath her torn shirt, and she found herself gulping for air.

“I feel safe. And where’s your bed, Alex? Are you nearby?” Sophia whispered, her voice almost breaking. Her fingers played with the hem of the blanket, a nervous gesture, but her gaze was steady now, locked on Alex’s. “I think I’d feel better knowing you weren’t too far away.”

Alex caught the faint scent of Sophia’s skin—earthy, warm, human. She hesitated, her hand hovering near Sophia’s knee, her own pulse a deafening drumbeat in her ears.

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“You’re perfectly safe here. Laura is just a few feet away. She’s with Marco, a guy who’s in a pretty bad way. She’s watching over him. If you need anything, you can ask her, or tell her to alert me and I’ll help you get settled,” Alex murmured, her voice rougher now. She didn’t miss the way Sophia’s lips parted, the soft exhale that escaped them. “I don’t sleep in this hangar. And anyway, I’m on duty until 4 a.m., so...”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The silence stretched taut between them as Alex fought the urge to close the distance between them. She could feel it building—something raw, something inevitable.

I want to hold her hand. Would that be weird? Yes, it would be super weird. For fuck’s sake, Alex.

The moment hung in the air, fragile and electric, before Alex finally stood up. Her fingers curled into a fist at her side, resisting the pull to stay, to linger in the quiet closeness of Sophia’s presence. A feeling that seemed so far in the past. A feeling that seemed impossible in this new world.

“Get some sleep,” Alex mumbled, the sound coming out croaky and strained. She forced a grin. “And tomorrow, we’ll look at getting you out of those clothes.”

Sophia’s eyes lingered on Alex. “Huh? What was that?” she asked in mock surprise.

“Oh... I mean...” Alex mumbled, feeling the burn in her cheeks as she tried to joke her way out of her Freudian slip. “We’ll try to find you something else to wear. We don’t have a whole lot of options, so don’t go expecting some on-trend little London-

Fashion-Week combo, okay? But I can sort you out.”

Jesus. I’ve just done it again. What’s wrong with me?

“I’m sure you can,” Sophia smirked. “Goodnight, Alex.”

“Yeah, goodnight, Sophia.” Alex nodded in return, then turned and left the hangar. The door banged shut behind her, the sound echoing in the stillness of the compound. She walked across the courtyard with slow, measured steps.

Okay. Get to work. Stop thinking about her.

But in the early hours of the following morning, after her shift, Alex moved restlessly in her cot. Her chest ached, and her thoughts spiraled as she tried to make sense of what she was feeling. She had spent so long building walls around herself. A lifetime, in fact. But Sophia... Sophia made her feel exposed in a way she hadn’t allowed herself to be in longer than she dared to calculate.

Her fingers brushed against the cool metal of her dog tags. She breathed in deeply, trying to force herself to lay still, though her heart continued to thud in a rhythm she couldn’t ignore.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed her. But even in sleep, Sophia lingered in her mind—a vivid and inescapable presence.

4

SOPHIA

Sophia’s entire body ached when she woke the following day. The cot creaked beneath her as she stretched. She felt a knot of tension in her neck and winced in

pain. The tension in her muscles was refusing to loosen despite the relatively good night's sleep she'd just had. She let out a soft groan as she reached for the glass that Alex must have left for her on the cardboard box next to her bed.

The narrow space behind the screen offered little distraction—just the box, a small step that was maybe supposed to serve as a stool, and a plastic bag where someone had left a lightweight, pale blue sweater and a pair of dark gray pants. She looked down at the tattered clothes she'd arrived in. As bloodstained and threadbare as they were, what she was wearing felt like armor, and she wasn't too sure she was ready to change into something else. They were her last tie to who she had been, the last shred of her old life.

Don't be mental, Soph. Put the new stuff on. You probably stink. Pull yourself together.

When she stood up and started to undress, she had to sit down again immediately. Her ribs twinged, and she instinctively ran her hand over them. The bruises were still tender, their colors a range of angry purples. With great difficulty, she peeled her shirt upward, exposing the mottled skin beneath, her fingers tracing the bumpy texture of the rough surface.

A flash of discomfort caused her to let out a long, slow sigh as she closed her eyes and tipped her head backward. But the pain was more than just physical. An uncomfortable wave of unease washed over her as she came to a sudden realization. This was her body now—this patchwork of cuts and scrapes and dirt and blemishes together formed the new Sophia. She'd always been slender, her muscles lean from years of classical dance training, but now she looked fragile.

I look like I might snap in half. I'm breakable.

Her father's voice echoed in her mind. He'd always said that a woman's body should

be treated with care, kept in line with virtue and restraint. And surprisingly, she'd never questioned it.

God, Daddy. You were so old-fashioned. I don't look like your dainty little dancer now, let me tell you. Can you hear me up there? Look at me now.

She continued to run her hands along the curves of her body in a way that felt unfamiliar. It was as if she were discovering it for the very first time. She shifted slightly, and her body groaned in protest. She knew full well the bruises would fade, but how she felt in this new body of hers would remain.

This can't be me. Why does everything feel so out of control?

Her mind wandered back to the previous day and the strange feeling that had settled over her as Alex left her for the night. The woman was so tall and confident; her presence both intimidating and comforting. Alex had been nothing but polite and kind—nothing out of the ordinary. It was her job to be welcoming, right? But still, Sophia couldn't shake the sensation that there was more to it.

But what? Sophia didn't really want to admit it to herself, but when Alex was near, she felt a lurching, giddy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Butterflies? No. Impossible.

She wasn't like that. She'd only ever been with men—straight men, men her father approved of, men who were usually members of his congregation. Sophia had never dared be in anything other than relationships that fit within the narrow mold of decency, the kind of relationships she had been raised to expect. Even at the Royal Ballet School, when she'd had her first taste of freedom, she had never strayed from what her parents had expected from her, even when she'd wanted to. Not even when it came to Sarah, her roommate, and the girl she'd shared those secret, quiet moments

with—when their hands brushed during rehearsals, when their glances lingered a little too long, when their laughter carried just a bit more weight than it should have. But nothing had ever come of it.

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So... what's with this Alex woman? Maybe I'm just scared of her.

A knock on the other side of the screen startled her, yanking her from her thoughts. She froze, panic rising.

Oh, shit. No. Not now. I'm half-naked here.

She didn't know what to do or say when the knock came again, more insistent this time.

Sophia grabbed her shirt and held it in front of her breasts in a sharp motion.

"Who is it?" she called. "Can you give me a sec?"

Alex's broad frame appeared from behind the screen, "What was that? Oh, sorry. It's noisy back here. I didn't know you were getting dressed." Her eyes met Sophia's, and for a moment, the hustle and bustle beyond the screen faded, leaving only the intensity of the moment. Alex stepped inside Sophia's small bedroom space without hesitation, carrying a folded towel under one arm.

"You startled me."

"I didn't mean to," Alex said, her voice calm and neutral, but Sophia could hear the faintest hint of concern. "I figured you might want this. You can get washed up. We have a shower block. It's not great, of course. It's just rainwater. But I have some soap you can borrow and a little bit of toothpaste. It's not much, but it'll help you feel better."



Sophia's gaze flickered downward. She felt unable to meet Alex's eyes. She focused on Alex's boots for a moment. They were caked in dried mud or blood or something equally as disgusting. However, she felt oddly grateful for the distraction.

"Thanks," Sophia mumbled. She hated how weak and vulnerable she sounded when she felt nervous. "Sounds wonderful."

Get it together.

"Are you still in pain?" Alex's question was blunt, a sudden shift in the atmosphere. Sophia's eyes snapped back to Alex's face, realizing that the woman had been watching her ribs.

Sophia swallowed hard, her throat dry. She shifted uncomfortably, avoiding her gaze. "Not really," she lied, the words sticking in her throat. It was easier than explaining the ache, the lingering discomfort. She wasn't sure why she didn't want Alex to know how much it still hurt. Maybe it was the pride, or perhaps it was the strange fear that Alex might see her as weak.

Alex didn't respond immediately, her eyes steady and almost searching. There was a moment of silence, and Sophia felt exposed and vulnerable under Alex's gaze. It was more than just concern—it was something else, something deeper.

Sophia crossed her arms over her chest, instinctively trying to shield herself from whatever this was. She wasn't ready to deal with it.

What the hell am I doing?

"You should get them checked out," Alex said after a beat, her voice soft but firm, like a command. "No point in risking infection."

Sophia nodded quickly, grateful for the shift in topic. Her fingers tightened against her arms, and she could feel the pulse of heat rising in her cheeks. It wasn't just the physical pain anymore—it was something about Alex's presence. The way she seemed to see right through her, the way her every word seemed to touch something buried deep within.

Alex lingered for a moment longer, her eyes never leaving Sophia's face. Then she turned, her movement smooth and fluid like everything about her was designed to catch attention.

"Breakfast is in ten," Alex said over her shoulder, her voice low and casual, but there was an undertone to it that Sophia couldn't quite place. "You'll see where it's all set up outside."

As Alex walked away, Sophia exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Her heart pounded in her chest.

What is this I'm feeling, and what the hell do I do with this?

She ran a hand through her tangled hair, her mind racing. This wasn't how she was supposed to feel. Not in this world, not with everything going on.

But there was no denying it. Something had shifted. Something deep inside of her.

And she didn't know how to take it.

The main room outside her makeshift bedroom was a whole lot busier than she'd expected. Small groups of men, women, and children were moving around with what looked like purpose. Sophia kept her head down, walking quickly toward the exit, unsure if she was supposed to be involved in some sort of activity or not. She was going to have to find someone to ask. There was a sense of urgency in the air that

made her feel like she definitely didn't belong in the place.

As she approached what she assumed was an outdoor kitchen set up in a large tent, the sharp scent of bread reached her. As Sophia took a tentative step through the opening, she was met by a broad-shouldered woman with her large hands deep in a bowl of dough. She didn't look up, not even as Sophia entered the room, her posture rigid and focused.

"I've been expecting you. Major Bebbington told me to make use of you in here today. I don't know why. My name's Ellen," the woman said flatly, her voice low but carrying an undeniable edge. Her eyes didn't lift from her work as she spoke. "Grab a knife. You can start slicing and buttering some of these loaves."

Sophia hesitated for a moment, uncertain. The tension in the air pressed against her chest, and Ellen's no-nonsense tone only deepened her unease. She obeyed quickly, privately wishing she'd been given the time to get washed up before tackling this as she reached for a knife and moved to stand beside Ellen at the large wooden table in the center of the tent. The loaf of bread was fresh, its surface warm and smooth beneath her fingers. She worked methodically, trying to keep her movements steady, her eyes flickering occasionally toward Ellen as if searching for some clue of what to do next.

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“Wash your hands first, please!” Ellen snapped, pointing to a large bowl of brownish water.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t realize...”

“Didn’t realize? Didn’t realize we don’t want filth and blood and gunge, and God knows what mixed in with our breakfast? I see. I imagine in England bread and filth is quite the delicacy, is it?”

Sophia didn’t speak for a while, but the weight of Ellen’s presence kept her on high alert. The older woman’s large, calloused hands moved quickly and efficiently, and her demeanor was as sharp as her words. Sophia’s mind wandered, her thoughts spinning as she tried to focus on the rhythmic thuds of the knife against the cutting board.

“I might have been wrong about you, girl. You’ve clearly done this before,” Ellen remarked after a while, her voice carrying a hint of approval though it was still matter-of-fact.

Sophia shrugged. She didn’t feel the need to share anything of her life with this woman after the welcome she’d received. She would keep her cards close to her chest with this one. “A little.”

Ellen grunted in acknowledgment. “Keep it up. I’ll make sure to let the major know I’m happy to have you on kitchen duty tomorrow.” Her words came out as an order rather than an offer. Sophia certainly felt that there was no room for argument.

Sophia didn't reply, though a flicker of something warm passed through her chest. Kitchen duty. It was such a simple thing, yet it felt oddly significant. It was a task she could do, a role she could fill, however small it might be. And it certainly beat running around the place hiding from the undead.

The hours passed quickly as they worked in silence. Throughout the day, people came in for a few slices of bread and a bowl of soup and left without saying much. Nobody seemed to question who Sophia was or what she was doing there. In fact, she noticed that most people had hardly even made eye contact with her.

"It's just two meals a day. You understand? We're supposed to keep a list. But God only knows where it's gotten to. We'll just have to play it by ear today. Have you got an eye for faces?"

"I don't think so."

"Hmm. Make sure you wipe up that flour over there and put it back in the bin. We can't waste flour."

As Sophia set down her knife, she realized that her arms were aching. But it felt incredible. Something about Ellen made Sophia feel like she would forever be walking on a tightrope, but she still couldn't help but feel pleased with her small achievement of a morning's work.

Ellen wiped her hands on her apron and turned to her, her gaze sharp. "You did good," she said in her no-nonsense tone. "I've got help for this evening, but I expect you to be here tomorrow at the same time."

Sophia nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips. The praise had given her a rush of blood to the head, and for a moment, it eased some of the pent-up tension in her body. But Ellen's attitude still felt imposing. The woman was clearly a force, and there was

something about her that made Sophia feel like she was constantly being sized up and judged. She knew she would have to work hard if she were ever to impress her.

As she was about to leave the tent, she heard boots approaching. The sound was familiar and unmistakable—strong and purposeful, with a rhythm that made her heart beat a little faster. She paused mid-motion and turned slowly to see Alex stepping inside. Her presence was magnetic, commanding attention in a way that made the plates, bowls, utensils, and... well, basically everything around her fade slightly into the background.

Sophia felt a tightening in her chest as Alex's gaze swept the space before landing on her with a slow, deliberate stare. Her breath caught in her throat. She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come. There was something about Alex that made Sophia feel not only nervous but also like she was being seen in a way she hadn't been for a long time.

"Got a minute, Sophia?" Alex asked, her voice low and direct, sending a ripple of warmth through Sophia.

Sophia glanced at Ellen, who waved her off with a muttered, "Go on, new girl. I'll see you in the morning."

"Hi. Everything okay?" Sophia asked, her eyes meeting Alex's as she somehow found the courage to speak.

Alex's expression was unreadable. "I just wanted to check in," she said simply. Her tone had a strange softness to it. "Ellen must be pleased if she wants you back, right?" she continued with a grin. "Come on, let me show you where you can freshen up."

They walked in silence for a while as Alex led her toward a quiet courtyard. Sophia's mind raced with questions she didn't dare ask. She had no idea why Alex was giving

her this attention, but it felt... different. It was as if Alex had seen something in her, and it had made her strangely safe.

“We have solar-powered showers behind that wall. Don’t expect hot water, though. It’s lukewarm at best.”

“Lukewarm sounds like paradise.”

“Ha! I guess it’s better than whatever you’ve had to do out there. So, how’re you finding it all so far?” Alex asked, leaning against the wall once they reached the showers. Her posture was casual, but her eyes were sharp, taking in Sophia as though trying to piece her together.

Sophia hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to communicate her feelings. “It’s different from what I’ve been used to,” she admitted, her voice quieter than she meant it to be. She hoped she wasn’t coming across as weak as she feared.

“How do you mean? Good different or bad different?” Alex prodded, her eyes narrowing slightly as she waited for a response.

Sophia shrugged. “Good, I think.” But the truth was, she was struggling with the weight of everything—the unfamiliar place, the new people she was now surrounded by every minute of the day, the unfamiliar rules and routines. And Alex. Especially Alex. “Well, actually... maybe a little of both,” she said, her arms crossing over her chest instinctively.

Alex nodded. “You’ll get used to it,” Alex said, shifting from one foot to the other as she continued to scrutinize Sophia. “It takes a while to fit in. But you will. Like how we’re all trying to get used to this shitshow of a broken world right now. It’s fucked up, right?”

Sophia didn't respond right away. Her gaze drifted to Alex's hands, noticing the roughness of her knuckles and the faded scars. Alex seemed to be comfortable in her skin. She possessed a sense of body acceptance that Sophia had struggled to claim all her adult life.



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The space between them was filled with electricity. There was something about the way Alex was standing there—so open and present—that made Sophia want to share every thought she'd been hiding, every feeling she didn't quite understand.

But she couldn't. She felt herself pulling into herself, afraid to expose too much, even as she longed for the kind of easy friendship Alex might be able to offer. Sophia had always kept people at arm's length, never quite letting them in. She had done the same at dance school. But with Alex, she felt the undeniable need to be close, to be seen and understood without having to explain.

“Why did you bring me here? Why did you take me in so easily?” Sophia asked finally, her voice trembling.

Alex's expression softened slightly. “Did you expect me to leave you? I guess I thought you looked like you needed a chance,” she said, as though she understood something about Sophia that Sophia perhaps didn't even understand herself. “Anyway, I'll leave you to it. You seem to be doing pretty well. I'll keep my distance. It's probably better that way. For your sake, I mean. You don't want the others thinking I'm giving you special treatment or anything.”

Sophia gulped, the tightness in her throat making it impossible to utter a single syllable. There was something so raw in Alex's gaze, so steady and sure, that it left Sophia feeling exposed and vulnerable. And yet, she didn't want to look away. She wanted special treatment. She wanted it all. She wanted to let Alex in, to tell her everything

But she didn't know how.

## ALEX

Fog clung stubbornly to the air as Alex struggled to pry her eyes open. The previous night's restless sleep pressed heavily on her. She blinked groggily, her vision blurry, and leaned against the gate.

God, this thing needs fixing. It's shoddy as hell.

Suddenly, the faint crunch of footsteps broke through her haze. Alex's head jerked up, her tired eyes snapping toward the approaching figure. It was Sophie.

Alex snapped into focus in an instant. The way Sophia moved was so different from everyone else. She was nothing like the soldiers she was so accustomed to. The fact that she'd been a dancer was evident from her gait and quiet grace. To look at the woman, nobody would believe the world had completely fallen apart around her. Her eyes were bright with curiosity. Alex could see that Sophia was constantly observing what was going on at the compound but never judging.

That morning, she was carrying a huge sack of grain, her hair falling loosely over her shoulder, some strands escaping the messy bun she usually wore it in. As she neared, Alex caught sight of a small cut on her arm, blood staining the fabric of her sleeve.

Without thinking, Alex started moving toward her. Her boots thumped heavily on the ground, matching the frantic beat of her heart.

"Hey there! You need some help?" Alex asked, her voice clipped. "Looks like you've hurt yourself."

A quick smile broke over Sophia's face. "I'm alright," she said, though there was a

slight wince as she adjusted the load in her arms. Alex wasn't fooled.

She gently pulled Sophia's arm down, inspecting the cut. It was small, but it still made Alex wince at the sight of it. She could feel the warmth of Sophia's skin beneath her fingertips. The sensation made her pulse flutter slightly.

"Are you sure you're not in any pain?" Alex asked.

"I guess a little," Sophia replied, her gaze fixed on Alex's hand. Neither of them moved for a few seconds. The moment felt suspended in time, like something was pulling them toward each other. "It was a bread knife. Ellen said I should be more careful."

Sophia tried to pull her arm back, but Alex's grip tightened, her fingers brushing over the cut once more. It was a small, almost intimate gesture, but at that moment, Alex couldn't let go. "I'll clean it up for you. Come on. I've got a first aid kit in my quarters. Pay Ellen no mind. She's such a grump."

Sophia, looking slightly surprised, followed her.

In her quarters, Alex set the first aid box down next to her bed, her fingers brushing against the edge of Sophia's thigh in the process. It was so brief—almost imperceptible—but the contact had an effect on Alex. She felt breathless. The warmth of the touch lingered on her fingertips, and she was suddenly aware of every nerve in her body, every inch of her skin.

Sophia's eyes flickered down to where their hands had brushed, and then back up to meet Alex's gaze. "Thank you for this," she said, her voice shaking, like she was acknowledging something unspoken between them.

The air felt heavy, the stillness between them thick with something unsaid. Alex

could hear the occasional sound of footsteps from the guards outside. But in that moment, life on the compound seemed distant. It was just the two of them, standing close, with a quiet tension that neither of them seemed willing to break.

“I can help you carry that bag to the kitchen if you want,” Alex mumbled as she cleaned the cut and gently placed a Band-Aid over the top of it. She shifted her weight, trying to ease the tightness in her chest, but it wouldn’t go away. Her mind was swirling, conflicted, torn between the need to stay professional and the pull of something... more.

Sophia didn’t answer immediately; she just gave a small, knowing smile. “I think I’ve got it,” she said, maintaining eye contact with Alex.

Alex felt her skin tingling. Heat coiled low in her abdomen, her chest tightening under Sophia’s gaze. She shifted on her feet uneasily, her fingers flexing at her sides, aching with the restraint it took not to reach out and touch Sophia.

“Okay,” she murmured, forcing herself to step back. Her legs felt like lead, every fiber of her body protesting the retreat.

Sophia’s gaze never wavered, dark and knowing, as if she could see every crack in Alex’s resolve. When the younger woman turned and started walking away, her hips swayed with a natural rhythm that seemed designed to tease Alex.

The faintest trace of Sophia’s scent lingered in the air after she’d gone, and Alex swore she could still feel the essence of her in the room—a warmth that wasn’t usually present in this cold, dingy space. As she stood rooted to the floorboards, she felt her jaw tighten with both frustration and desire. Her limbs were heavy as she let out a deep sigh.

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The following day was no different. Every time Alex passed Sophia on the compound, it was like the entire world narrowed, the space between them nothing at all. They said very little to each other, for there wasn't much to say, but there were moments, brief moments, where Alex couldn't stop herself from noticing the way Sophia's eyes lingered on her.

Later in the afternoon, as dusk approached, she saw Sophia again. This time, she was standing near the compound's eastern fence, looking out toward the horizon, her back to the hangars and various outbuildings. The air was growing cooler by the second, so Alex wrapped her arms across her chest as she approached. She thought Sophia might hear her and turn around, but she didn't.

She could see Sophia's soft neckline, the way her neck muscles shifted beneath her shirt and the slight rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, a few strands escaping and curling around her ears.

When Alex stopped behind her, the sound of her own breathing suddenly felt too loud. Even from this distance, she could feel Sophia's heat, the faint scent of the soap she had given her, mixed with the scent of hot bread. It was intoxicating.

Alex opened her mouth to say something, but as her lips parted, no sound escaped her lips. What could she say? That she couldn't stop thinking about her? Every time they were near each other, her mind raced with improper thoughts, and her body ached with longing.

She'd think you were insane.

Sophia turned at that point, her face totally unreadable. “Hey! You’re a sneaky one. I didn’t hear you coming,” she said, a smile playing on her lips.

“Sorry,” Alex muttered, awkwardly rubbing the back of her neck. She glanced down at the ground, unsure of what to do with herself.

Sophia’s eyes softened. She stepped closer, and Alex caught the faintest touch of her fingertips brushing against her arm. It was light, barely there, but it was enough to send a shock through Alex’s whole body.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” Sophia mumbled as she looked down at her feet. “You don’t have to keep your distance, you know? Not from me.”

Alex swallowed hard, her pulse racing. She was losing control; she could feel it. The rules of life as someone in command here on the compound were slipping away with every second she stood near Sophia.

Sophia reached out, her hand brushing lightly against Alex’s fingers.

“I just don’t want you to feel like you have to look after me, of course,” Sophia added, her voice barely above a whisper. “You don’t have to take on that responsibility, Alex. But don’t feel like you have to stay away either. I... kinda like it when you’re close...”

And that was it. At that moment, Alex couldn’t hold back any longer. She gasped under her breath as she closed the distance between them, her hands trembling as she reached for Sophia’s face. “What about this?” she asked, tracing the soft line of Sophia’s jaw. “Is this too close?”

“Not at all.”

The tension hung in the air like a thread between them, thick and fragile. Alex had to break it. She had to leave before she said or did something she couldn't take back.

What the fuck are you playing at, Alex?

She took one last look at Sophia, her chest tight with unsaid words, and forced herself to turn away.

Sophia didn't stop her.

Alex trudged across the compound, her feet feeling cramped in her boots and her arms swinging below her slumped shoulders. The weight of what almost happened felt suffocating.

Did I just try to kiss her? I did, didn't I?

Every step felt like walking into battle. By the time she reached one of the old supply closets tucked into the corner of Hangar C, her hands were trembling.

She pushed open the door, stepping into the dim, musty room. The faint smell of oil and metal filled her nose as she turned the lock behind her with a quiet click. Finally alone. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor, her back pressed against the wall. She drew her legs up to her chest, resting her forehead against them as her shoulders began to shake.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Her mind replayed the scene with Sophia on a relentless loop. It was all too much. Alex clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. She'd felt so out of control, so exposed. Years of discipline, of training, of burying everything under layers of military toughness and stoicism, and Sophia had nearly unraveled it all. She'd almost

fucked it all up.

A desperate sob ripped its way out of her chest. There was nothing she could do to stop it. She moved a hand over her mouth to try to block the noise, but what was happening in her mind was too strong to keep under control. Stashed-away memories came popping up at an unbidden and merciless rhythm.

She was thirteen again, sitting in the back row of her middle school classroom. She couldn't remember where it was. Her father had been stationed in many places. Maybe up in Alaska somewhere. She couldn't remember. And had no one to ask. The whispers had started a few weeks earlier, small and insidious. At first, she'd paid them zero attention. She'd always been different. So what? She was built differently from the other girls. She was taller, stockier. She was stronger. She couldn't care less about the things they cared about—makeup, boys, the next dance. She'd instead go fishing, play ball games, or go out with her dad on his motorcycle on one of his rare days off.

But then the whispers grew louder.

“Did you see her this morning when she got off the bus? Why does she dress like that?”

“She's probably a lezbo. I kinda feel sorry for her. She's probably secretly in love with Kaylee. Do you think?”



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“But what about that hair? Seriously? She looks like she’s trying out for the football team. It’s gross if you ask me. She shouldn’t be allowed to come to class looking like that.”

She would pretend not to hear, but the words sliced through her like knives. She would feel the blood rushing to her neck and face every time she walked past a group of girls huddled together. They were poison. Especially that one... Jenna? Jenna Mayfield? Yeah, that was it. The name came back to her as clear as day. Whenever she crossed paths with Jenna and her little gang of mini-Jennas, she’d glance down at her worn sneakers, trying to make herself smaller. But Jenna’s mocking eyes would always find her.

One day, she’d made the mistake of confronting her bully. She’d stood in front of Jenna and said, “Hey, would you dare say that to my face?”

It hadn’t gone as she’d expected. Jenna had smirked, tilting her head in mock pity. “Um, yeah. No problem. Anyway, what’s your beef? It’s not like we’re lying. Everyone knows you’re a carpet muncher.”

The laughter that followed had cut Alex to the core.

Alex tried to shuffle into a more comfortable position, her butt cheeks cold against the concrete. She wiped her face, but the tears kept coming. The pain of those moments felt as raw now as it had then. She’d never told anyone what happened. Not her parents, not her teachers. Instead, she’d buried it deep, pretending none of it mattered. But it had forced her into hiding, even from herself. It had taught her to build walls so high that no one could see over them. Not much different from the

compound she now found herself in.

Her parents had never suspected she was queer. Or if they had, they'd never said a word to her. She guessed they were old-school, a little on the conservative side, maybe more than a little. Her mom had said how strong and independent she was—and maybe that wasn't a compliment—and had clearly worried that she never brought any friends back for sleepovers or ever asked for a lift to the mall. When it came to her dad, he had always just been pleased to have someone on hand to help fix things. And when she'd decided to follow in his footsteps and join the Army, he couldn't have been more delighted. Alex knew the truth deep down. If she'd confided in either one of them, it would've broken them.

Joining the army had been the escape she needed. And she loved every minute of it. It was a way to prove herself, to channel her mistrust of others and her fear of who she really was into something useful. But even after a few years, as she began to climb the ranks, she still kept her distance from others. She did her best to remain professional at all times. She'd had one fleeting moment with a woman—a stolen kiss in the dark barracks, followed by a hurried moment of pleasure. The other woman had taken the lead, her hands sliding with confident urgency under Alex's waistband. It was rushed, almost frantic, a blend of curiosity and unspoken need. The pressure built quickly as the woman's touch grew bolder, drawing a soft, involuntary sound from Alex's lips as she came. Moments later, Alex shuddered as she clung to the other woman for balance. Jade. That was her name. She'd lost her virginity in a matter of minutes to a woman she barely knew. Alex had never really processed it properly. She had also never allowed it to go any further. She never allowed herself for even a second to hope for more. It was easier that way. It was safer.

Alex leaned her head back against the wall, staring up at the dim lightbulb overhead.

Lightbulbs... Wow. I wonder how long they'll last. I wonder if we have any spares.

The tears had slowed, but her chest still ached. Even now, when it was the end of the fucking world, she was still hiding. Still pretending to be this brave, strong woman. It was pathetic.

She thought about Sophia again. The way her smile caused a warm sensation to form in her belly and the way she moved with such quiet strength. Alex's heart twisted painfully in her chest. For the first time in what felt like forever, she wanted something. She wanted to be close to someone, to let them see the parts of her she'd kept locked away. But the thought of actually opening herself up like that was too much to handle

"She's probably not even a—" she whispered before cutting herself off, unable to actually say the word lesbian out loud. "Oh, stop it, Alex. You're stronger than this."

But she wasn't. Not when it came to this. Not when it came to anything even remotely verging on the idea of romance.

Her thoughts spiraled again, back to the compound. She knew the others must have assumed things about her. How could they not? She was as butch as they come. It wasn't something she could hide, even if she wanted to. She'd accepted that part of herself long ago. But accepting it didn't mean she was ready to do anything about it. She'd spent her whole life denying what she wanted. The question now was whether or not she knew how to stop.

Alex's breath hitched as another wave of emotion crashed over her. She pressed her palms to her eyes, trying to block it all out. The memories, the fear, the longing. She felt like she was coming apart at the seams, and there was no one there to catch her.

She thought about what Sophia had said earlier. The words replayed in her mind, over and over. Did she mean it? There'd been some flirting, hadn't there? Or was she misreading the situation? Was it even possible for someone like Sophia to see

something in Alex? Or was the girl just being sweet? Alex didn't know. She'd spent so long second-guessing herself, pushing people away, that she didn't know what to believe these days.

She felt like she could stay in this small room forever. But deep down, she knew she couldn't keep running. She had tried to build up a wall to protect herself, but cracks were starting to appear. And Sophia was making her way through those cracks.

Alex's hands fell to her lap. She looked down at them and felt ashamed of how rough and calloused they appeared. Hers were hands that had held weapons, worked the soil, scavenged, patched up walls, and bandaged the wounds of those she cared for. She realized that those hands had done so much but had never truly reached for what she wanted. She flexed her fingers. Maybe it was time to change that.

6

## SOPHIA

The faint tang of yeast was making Sophia feel hungry. Despite working all hours in the compound's makeshift bakery, she wasn't allowed to eat any more than anyone else. Everything was rationed, and there wasn't a morsel to spare. She kneaded the dough with care, her fingers pressing into the cool, moist mass in a steady rhythm. She felt pressure working under Ellen but never hurried. For this, she was grateful. The dough yielded under her touch, warming slightly from the heat of her hands. The morning sun, low in the sky, filtered through the worn canvas of the tent, casting her forearms in a watery light.

She could hear the sparrows outside as she continued to work her forearms, shaped by years of pliés and port de bras. How strange that her fingers, once trained to hold the elegance of a perfect fifth position, were now covered in calluses. Where had she disappeared to? Where was that refined grace of hers? Would she ever need it again?

Probably not.

“Ellen?” she asked quietly, not wanting to irk the older woman. “Can you hear the birds? They’re starving.”

“Tough tits,” Ellen replied crudely. “You think I’ve got enough bread here to be feeding the goddam birds. Is that what you’re getting at, missy?”

“Not necessarily. But I’ve been thinking... There’s still a lot of life out there, right? Birds, wildlife... This infection thing hasn’t affected them.”

“And?”

“And that’s a good thing, right? It kind of makes me feel hopeful. Mother Nature is still going strong.”

“Huh? Hopeful? The entire human race is being wiped out, and you’re feeling hopeful?” Ellen snarled.

“That’s not really what I meant. And we don’t know that, Ellen,” she dared to continue. “It could just be in the States. Maybe everything’s just fine back home.”

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“Who knows? Look, we’ve got a job to do, Little Miss England. Don’t go getting all philosophical on me. Good consistency today, by the way,” Ellen remarked, her voice brusque but approving. “You’re getting the hang of it. You’re making yourself useful. That’s all you can do for now. Keep your head down, okay?”

Sophia nodded, a small smile creeping onto her lips. Her shoulders rolled as she adjusted her stance. Despite the stiffness lingering in her body from sleeping on the world’s most uncomfortable cot, she continued to knead with renewed purpose, deciding to take Ellen’s praise to heart. The woman’s acknowledgment felt like a lifeline.

The exhilaration of perfectly landing a grand jeté was nothing in comparison to getting a compliment from Ellen.

She looked down briefly at her feet. Alex had given her some newish leather boots. They weren’t quite her style, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, right?

I wonder if these used to be hers? I’d like to be wearing her boots...

She flexed her toes instinctively, feeling the phantom ache of pointe work—a pain she used to wear like a badge of honor. The disconnect between the world she had once inhabited and this one felt impossible to bridge. This compound would never offer her a standing ovation. She would never feel the burn of spotlights on her skin again. That life was behind her. Long gone. Now, she lived here. Now, the undead roamed just yards away. Now she baked bread for survival.

Her stream of thought sent a chill down her spine.

How the heck has it come to this? How did it all unravel so quickly?

She thought back to the first few days she'd spent in the hotel after the initial outbreak. She had stopped watching the news on day two—or had the power gone out? She couldn't remember. What she could remember were the grim headlines, the emergency messages, the panic once the internet went down. She still didn't know how this had all started. But the shuffles and groans that she could hear at night and the low groans carried on the wind were constant reminders that humanity had definitely fallen.

As the morning continued, Sophia found herself thinking more and more about Alex. The woman's presence was impossible to ignore, even when she wasn't actually physically anywhere near. Her influence could be seen in every corner of the compound. Her Monday meetings had ensured that food distribution and patrols ran like clockwork. Sophia could see the positive side of it, but a part of her also felt that the rules were relentless. The curfews were scary. Everyone had to be inside by dusk. A few days earlier, Sophia had witnessed a young girl, who could have only been around twelve, get caught outside the fence. The consequences were swift and severe. She had been sent to bed with no rations and no water. It had been hard to watch. When she'd asked Ellen about it, the older woman's answer had been clear enough, "The girl's disobedient. Alex won't tolerate it. If the kid doesn't watch herself, she'll be kicked off the compound."

Really? Would Alex go that far?

Then there were the patrols—the constant watching. That was usually Alex's job. In fact, it was rare that Sophia saw Alex sitting down. She made her rounds throughout the day, ensuring that every rule was being followed. The compound was divided into sections, each one assigned a specific purpose. There were the living quarters, workshops, and the kitchen. No one ventured beyond their designated areas during the day. There was a rigid structure to their routine. It reminded Sophia of rehearsals

but with less taffeta. Even casual conversations were hard to come across in the compound. It seemed that there was an unspoken rule—only necessary words should be spoken.

As Sophia stepped outside the tent to stretch her back a little, she glanced toward the main gate, hoping to catch a glimpse of Alex.

Why do I keep looking for her like this?

There she was, her rifle resting against her hip as she paced up and down in front of the gate. Sophia spotted some guards making their way over to join her. Their movements seemed to reinforce the order that Alex seemed so desperately to want to maintain in this place. Sophia knew that she had witnessed a softer side to this woman who had such a tight hold on their lives. But she didn't know why.

Sophia could sense, even from a distance, how effortlessly Alex navigated not only the physical but also the psychological demands of this new life they were leading. There was such an impressive authority about her, a confidence that radiated from her every pore. Sophia realized at that moment that the rules on the compound weren't just a matter of protocol for Alex—they were a part of her.

Sophia was mesmerized by the discipline Alex exuded—the order she had brought to the place required sacrifice. Alex made sure people respected her authority and was obviously prepared not to be liked for it. Sophia and the others felt submissive and controlled, and yet, somehow, in that order, there was a strange sense of security—a sense that they were safe. Sophia had felt as much since the very first moment in Alex's presence.

As mealtime neared, Sophia felt an odd self-consciousness, as if she were being watched. She noticed the gentle curve of her slight arms as she carried loaves of bread to the dining area, her fingers trembling slightly under the weight. The skin on



her forearms seemed tighter, stretched too thin.

I've lost weight. I can only imagine what my mother would say.

The thought lingered, heavy and unwelcome, as memories resurfaced.

There was a time—just a few years ago—when she had been obsessed with her body image. The pressure to fit a specific mold had been suffocating. At every audition, her movements had to be perfect. Every inch of her physique was carefully scrutinized. Her teachers had pushed her harder than she ever thought possible. At times, she didn't think she could handle it. Her mother, too, had been a constant reminder of the stakes.

“If you want this, Sophia, you have to be perfect. Your father and I have saved every penny for your classes.”

Sophia had starved herself. It was her silent rebellion against the criticisms that came at her from every direction. She quickly lost track of the line between determination and destruction. Her body had become a shell, brittle and fragile. Her bones had jugged out sharply beneath her skin. She got into the Royal Ballet School, but the weight she lost cost her more than just her health—it had shattered her connection with her family. Her mother had cried when she'd come to visit her in the hospital, her face full of guilt and concern, while her father remained silent.

As she went through ballet school, Sophia learned to eat, to shop, and to drink normally. She had to teach herself to balance her meals, to enjoy the food that once filled her with guilt, and to understand that she didn't have to sacrifice her health to pursue her passion. But now she had to deal with rationing on the compound. It felt like her natural inclination was to ration food. It had taken so much time, therapy, and patience to retrain her mind out of rationing mode. What if she were to slip back into it? What if she started to see food as the enemy again?

Stop thinking about it. Food isn't the enemy! There are bloody zombies out there, Soph! The real enemy!

As she pictured the infected, she became grounded in the present moment, forcing her to focus on what she could control now.

Sophia's movements as she set the bread on the table felt deliberate, her body gliding gracefully despite her fragility. She couldn't help but wonder if Alex ever noticed these details. Did she see the way Sophia moved? Would she understand the troubles of her past if Sophia were to tell her?

The thought both thrilled and embarrassed her. What would it be like if Alex took an interest in her personal life? In her past? In the real her? Sophia felt a flush of warmth creep up her neck at the thought. She had been thinking about it long and hard. Not only that day but for almost a week now. It wasn't just admiration she felt for Alex. It wasn't even gratitude. There was something more. There was a feeling she couldn't quite put her finger on that stirred deep in her chest every time she glimpsed the woman. And as much as she tried to focus on whatever task was at hand, the idea that Alex might be watching, might be noticing her, lingered at the back of her mind.

Sophia's legs ached from standing. The familiar burn reminded her of long rehearsal days. She took a moment to lean against the edge of the table, stretching one leg behind her in a movement that echoed an arabesque. Her body remembered. As she shifted her weight, the rough fabric of her trousers scraped against her soft skin. Her clothes were such a far cry from the silky, flowing costumes and outfits she used to wear on and off stage. Her fingers curled against the table's edge, grounding herself in the tactile reality of this new life.

"Hey, kid. You're drifting again," Ellen said sharply, pulling Sophia out of her reverie. "Focus, girl. Your job ain't even all that hard. You should be thankful you're in here with me and not... I don't know... digging graves, laundering stinky teenage-

boy bed linen, slaying the undead. There's a whole load of stuff that needs doing around here. Do you want me to tell the powers-that-be that I don't want you in here no more?"

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Sophia felt her cheeks burning as a sweat broke out across her brow. She started fidgeting with one of her sleeves, hoping it would distract Ellen. “No. Listen, I’m sorry,” she muttered under her breath. “I was just thinking. I’ll do better.”

Ellen gave her a sidelong glance, her hands deftly shaping loaves. “Thinking’s a luxury, you hear me?”

By the time Sophia stepped out of the tent for the last time that day, the sun was beginning its descent. She carried a final basket of bread toward the communal dining area, weaving between groups of survivors. Voices murmured in low tones as conversations blended into a backdrop of mumbled chatter.

“Sophia!” a young child’s voice called out, breaking through the noise. She turned to see Ava, a bony pre-teen with untamed curls, galloping toward her. “What’s left? Is that honey bread or normal bread?”

Sophia smiled, crouching to Ava’s level. “Did you already eat, my darling? This is the last of the bread. It’s for the final sitting. You kids should have already eaten. Listen, let me see what I can do for you tomorrow. If Ellen’s in a good mood, maybe we can make some honey and raisin loaves.”

Ava’s face lit up with a wide, toothy grin, her eyes sparkling. “Really? I’m so hungry. I swear I’ve been dreaming about food!”

Give her your portion, Soph. No, don’t. Eat. You need to eat.

“I know. Haven’t we all?” Sophia replied, ruffling the girl’s hair. “Now, go on. It

must nearly be your bedtime.”

Ava scampered off, and Sophia straightened up, her eyes wandering as if on autopilot back toward the main gate. Alex was still there, silhouetted against the fading light, her posture alert. The sight of her sent a thrill through Sophia’s chest.

“Sophia,” Alex shouted as she started to draw nearer, her voice echoing above the voices of the gathered crowd.

Oh my God. She’s coming over.

Sophia’s heart jolted in her chest, but she forced a casual tone as Alex came to stand opposite her. “Last bread delivery of the day. Want some?”

Alex flashed her a friendly smile. “Thanks. Don’t worry about me. I ate my rations earlier. She turned her head to the right and glanced toward the horizon, her expression hard to read. “So? Tell me all about your day. You look tired.”

“Yep. I’m knackered,” Sophia admitted, shifting the basket to her other arm. “But it’s... it’s been fine. Zombie-free. Flour, water, fire. The usual. I need to keep busy, you know?”

Alex nodded, her gaze meeting Sophia’s. “Knackered? We don’t use that word. It’s cute.” For a moment, the weight of the world seemed to lift from Alex’s shoulders. “You’re doing great work. People appreciate it. I appreciate it.”

Sophia’s cheeks warmed. “That means a lot. Thank you.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Sergeant Henry, who had jogged over. “Major,” he said with a hint of alarm in his voice. “We’ve got a situation. Looks like a stray... or a couple of strays. Maybe more. I don’t know. But the fence isn’t holding

up great. How are you on ammo?”

Alex’s demeanor shifted instantly to one of command. “You stay at the main gate. I’ll handle it. Sophia, I want you to gather everyone up and get into the hangars. It’s safer there.”

Sophia stood frozen to the spot as she watched Alex rush away. Without thinking, she started following Henry toward the gate.

“Didn’t you hear her? Step it up, Sophia!” Henry barked at her as she felt her stomach lurch.

Her stomach twisted with worry, but she forced herself to move. Sophia marched back toward the dining area with purpose, her voice firm but calm as she urged her fellow survivors toward the safety of the two main hangars. “Come on, let’s get inside. Lock it down, everyone. Everyone get to their sleeping quarters and we’ll do a headcount.”

A few of the younger ones didn’t seem to be moving, their nervous glances at her making her chest tighten. Sophia stepped closer, lowering her voice to a gentler tone. “You guys follow me. If we stick together, we’re safe.”

They know I’m lying. Most of these kids have lost their parents. Poor little sods.

Once the heavy doors were bolted and the last few stragglers had shuffled through, Sophia let out the long breath she must have been holding in and leaned against the wall, scanning the room to ensure everyone was accounted for. She spotted Ellen near the back of the space, glaring at her with that familiar disapproving look.

As Sophia started toward the supply crates, Ellen’s voice cut through the din. “What were you before all this? A shepherd? You’re certainly good at herding us all like

animals; I'll give you that."

Turning slowly, she met Ellen's gaze, tears prickling in her eyes despite herself. "I'm just doing my part. Same as everyone else."

Ellen raised an eyebrow, her smirk a mix of skepticism and something else Sophia couldn't place. "I bet you're doing your part. I've seen the way you are around Alex. Everyone's talking about it. If Miller gets wind of it..."

Sophia's breath caught in her throat as she struggled to find a way to respond. She had been getting on so well with Ellen. Well, they'd been tolerating each other. Why the sudden change? "I don't know what you mean by that."

"Pull the other one, girl." Ellen folded her arms across her chest. "Just be careful, is all I'm saying. This isn't the kind of world where people will look the other way about... that kind of business. We've got a lot of traditional folks here, you understand?"

Ellen's words hit too close to home, dragging her back to a conversation she'd had a couple of years ago. She'd just turned twenty, her aunt's kitchen warm with the smell of mulled wine. It was the Christmas holidays, and they'd just come back from mass. Her aunt had been the only person Sophia had felt she could confide in about her feelings for Sarah—the flutter of excitement she felt whenever they practiced together, whenever they were alone...

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Her aunt had gone quiet. Her expression turned to one of pain as she spoke to Sophia in hushed tones. “Whatever you do, don’t tell my brother,” she’d finally said. “It’s better your parents don’t know, Soso. People around here will talk. You know that. Whatever you do in London is your business, but around here, they’ll make life hard for you. You don’t want that for your mum and dad, do you?”

The words had stung then, and they stung now. Sophia understood Ellen’s veiled warning perfectly.

“I appreciate your concern,” she said, her voice tight, “but I don’t think my personal life concerns you, for a start. Secondly, you’ve got the wrong idea about Alex and me. If I understand what you’re getting at.”

Ellen shrugged, her smirk widening. “Really? It’s a perk going straight to the kitchen. I’m only in there because of my age. Why are you in there? There was no cleaning toilets for you, was there? No guard duties. No patrols. No laundry. No looking after the kids. Nope. Straight to the kitchen. Straight to one of the easiest, safest jobs on the compound. I’m just wondering why.”

As Ellen turned and walked away, Sophia let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Her thoughts drifted back to Alex—her strength, her quiet kindness. Sophia’s chest tightened with longing, a desire not just for companionship but for something more.

I guess Ellen’s right. She can see this more clearly than I can. Does everyone around here see it?



Resolve settled over her as she made her way over to her cot. Tomorrow, she would take a step closer. She didn't know how, but she had to try. What she did know, however, was that whatever her feelings for Alex were, she wasn't about to let them be the topic of compound gossip—or the reason anyone doubted her place here.

7

ALEX

“Let's talk about last night's attack,” Alex said, her voice edged with frustration as she paced the small supply room. Tromer leaned against the wall, a machete slung casually over his shoulder, but his furrowed brow betrayed his unease.

“Yep. It was bad, ma'am,” Tromer replied. “I think it was the third this week. Is that right? I heard a couple of the guys talking about it earlier. And I'm afraid I have to agree with what they were saying. These things—creatures... whatever you want to call them... they're getting bolder. They're getting stronger. It could be that they're running out of food. But the fence out there is looking weak. It isn't going to hold much longer. We don't have much in the way of materials.”

Alex stopped pacing. “Did you see the damage at the end? I know I killed at least five. But how many were there this time?”

“Too many,” Tromer admitted. “I reckon at least twenty. It was mayhem. We're low on ammo, Alex. If we keep burning through our reserves like this, we'll be out in a week or so.”

Alex ran a hand through her hair as she felt her jaw tense up. “Jesus. It's not like we can pop out and buy more. Fuck, I don't know... It's as if they're drawn to the compound.”

Tromer gave a brief nod of his head in agreement. “You’re not wrong there. I’ve been wondering about it for a while. It’s the noise, the smell, I guess. We’re a target. We’re a beacon to them out here. And if one of them gets through?—”

“They won’t,” Alex cut him off sharply, though her tone was more an attempt to convince herself than Tromer. “Not on my watch. I’ll never let that happen.”

Who am I kidding? I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing half the time.

There was a pause in the conversation. Tromer shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot before shrugging his shoulders and voicing the thought that had clearly been eating at him. “There’s another thing I’m worried about. Do you think it’s changing? The infection, I mean. I’ve heard talk of?—”

Alex’s gaze snapped to him, her eyes narrowing into slits as she cut him off. “What talk? Tromer, we don’t know a thing about this disease, so what’s the point in listening to a load of made-up crap? People are getting hysterical.”

“But we both know it’s already getting worse,” Tromer said, lowering his voice to a near whisper. “Maybe it’s spreading faster. Maybe it’s turning into something like that COVID thing we all had...remember? What if it’s airborne?”

Alex’s stomach tightened. The possibility had been at the back of her mind for weeks, but she also knew that she had to trust her experience. Bites, scratches... that’s how it was spreading. Most of the people attacked died. Their bodies were too savaged and mangled to turn. But if their brain and spine remained intact, people turned. She’d been around enough of them to know the drill. “There’s no proof of that,” she said firmly. “It’s bites. Or deep scratches. An exchange of bodily fluids. That’s what was communicated to us through official lines before all the comms went to hell.”

“Official lines?” Tromer snorted. “That was weeks and weeks ago, Alex. Who’s to

say it hasn't mutated? Entire cities have been wiped out. Have you heard the stories of some of the people here? It'll blow your mind. With something like this, do you think it's just going to stay the same? It's getting worse."

Alex could feel her fingers digging into her sleeves. It was an old habit. Something she did when she was nervous. "Speculation, Tromer. That's all it is. And it's not helping. Until we see actual evidence, we have to stick to what we know."

"And if you're wrong?" Tromer challenged, his voice rising slightly. "If it's in the air?"

"I know the risks! You're talking like I'm forcing people to stay here! Like I'm wanting people to be blocked in here like sitting ducks!" Alex yelled, her voice echoing through the small space. The silence that followed was deafening. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. "I don't like the way you're talking to me. I'm your superior. Remember the chain of command, Tromer," she said, quieter this time. "But panicking won't help. We have to focus. We'll reinforce the fences, ration the ammo, and keep the patrols tight. That's all we can do."

Tromer hesitated, then squared his shoulders and took a step toward Alex. "What's the point? What chain of command? Who are you to tell me I need to ration? More rations? Ration the goddamn rations? Really? Nobody's paid here. We're not reporting to anyone. You're no better than me. You'll die just the same as me. We'll all die. I'm going to tell the others. People need to know how serious this is."

"They know," Alex said, her voice softening. "I get it. We're all scared, Tromer. But if we lose our heads, if we lose the sense of order I'm trying to maintain here, then you're right... we're dead. Every last one of us."

He sighed and took a step back. "I don't want to keep checking supplies. There's fuck all left. I don't want to reinforce the fence. With what?"

“You calm down, Tromer,” Alex said, watching him leave. As the door clicked shut behind him, she rushed to open it again. “Or you leave. I don’t need you here if you’re not a team player.” The weight of their conversation felt suffocating. Telling the others that the infection might be evolving, becoming airborne, would turn into chaos, and she wasn’t about to let that happen.

She needed a distraction. And she knew exactly where to find it.

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The compound sprawled in front of her with chaotic disarray, its hangars and other outbuildings rising like angular fortresses. Stacks of damp pallets and coiled wires lay abandoned, their edges sharp and unyielding.

Can't we use some of this stuff to secure the perimeter? Jesus. Have I got to do everything myself around here?

The ground beneath her boots was littered with scattered gravel and fragments of broken glass, a sharp, silent reminder to tread carefully. She knew she shouldn't be here. Not tonight. Not with everything going on. But the thought of Sophia waiting for her, hidden away in a secluded corner, pulled at her with a force she couldn't resist. She glanced around, ensuring the shadows concealed her well enough. The perimeter patrols were pretty predictable—she'd hammered the schedule into the team repeatedly over the last few days—but she knew better than anyone how unpredictable the undead could be. A flashlight beam swept across the gravel not far from her, and she held her breath, willing herself to stay still.

Please don't see me. Please don't see me.

Once the guard moved on, she slipped through the gap between two storage units, her boots crunching against the cold dirt. The small supplies shed—their meeting place—came into view. Its concrete walls seemed to shine bright in the moonlight, but she knew it must be her imagination. The door was slightly ajar.

She's here already.

Her chest felt tight. The anticipation of seeing Sophia alone felt almost unbearable.

What if she's changed her mind?

Alex pushed the door open, the faint creak of the hinges causing her to break into a sweat.

"Wow... I'm about as discreet as a bull in a china shop," Alex said, biting back a curse as her boot nudged a loose can that rattled loudly against the concrete wall.

The air was slightly warmer inside. And there she was. Sophia sat cross-legged on an upturned crate, her slight frame wrapped in a scruffy blanket. She looked up, her expression softening as soon as their eyes met. "You're late, boss," Sophia said in a teasing voice.

"It was hard getting over here without anyone seeing me," Alex replied, stepping inside and shutting the door quietly behind her.

Sophia's gaze seemed to linger on Alex's face. "I was thinking that maybe you wouldn't show up."

Alex moved closer, lowering herself into a crouching position. The proximity to the younger woman sent a ripple of heat through her despite the sub-zero chill. "It was my idea, wasn't it?" she replied.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The silence was heavy but not uncomfortable. Sophia's fingers fidgeted with the edge of the blanket while Alex's hands rested on her thighs.

"Yes," Sophia began, breaking the silence. "It was a good idea to get away from the group. I don't think I have any real friends here... apart from you... so, um, why did you want to meet up?"

“Like you said... I don’t have many friends here either. It’s hard to get close to people when you’re barking orders at them all day. I thought this might be... what we both needed.”

“Yeah... it is.”

“Good...”

“Tell me something about you, Alex. Something real.”

Alex tilted her head to the left. Her lips curled into a half-smile as she rolled her eyes slightly. “What is it you’d like to know?”

“Anything,” Sophia said, leaning forward slightly and wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders. Her eyes seemed to be searching Alex’s face. The intensity of the moment felt unnerving but exhilarating. “Something you haven’t told anyone else.”

Alex hesitated. What was happening right at that moment wasn’t exactly her strong suit. She didn’t do vulnerability. But Sophia’s way of questioning made her want to start to pull back the layers, one by one.

“Okay, so, when I was ten,” Alex ventured in a nervous voice, “I wanted to be a firefighter. I can’t tell you how bad I wanted it. I had this red toy fire truck my gramps gave me, and I used to drive it all over the house, pretending to put out fires. My dad...” She paused, swallowing hard. “I was an army brat, and my father used to say I’d make a great soldier instead. He always said I was too serious to be a firefighter. I never really knew what he meant that.”

Sophia laughed softly. “I think I know what he meant. It’s in the way you carry yourself. But I also know that rescuing people is a definite skill you have.”

“Thanks,” Alex smiled.

“No, thank you!”

“You’re welcome. What about you, Sophia? Did you have any childhood dreams?”

Sophia looked down at her hands. “Well, as you know... I always wanted to be a dancer,” she explained. “And I did it. Well, I did it for a while before... It’s odd, isn’t it? The things you think define you can disappear so easily. What am I now if I’m not a dancer? The outbreak took it all away. At least you’re still doing your job in a way, right?” she shrugged. She looked resigned and tired. Alex could tell that Sophia was having a hard time processing what had happened.

Alex reached out before she could think better of it, her hand brushing against Sophia’s. The contact was brief, but it sent a jolt through her body. Sophia’s eyes darted up nervously. “You’re still you, Sophia,” Alex said, her voice steady but soft. “You’re not being punished for something you did wrong, you know? Although, I get that it feels like that. Outbreak or not, you’re still a dancer. All this shit doesn’t change who you are. I bet you’re a fantastic dancer. I’d love to see you dance.”



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Sophia's lips parted as if to reply, but the words didn't come. Instead, she leaned closer, the blanket slipping from her shoulders. Alex's breath caught, her heart pounding as Sophia's face neared hers. The hesitation was brief but electric, a moment suspended in time.

"I'd love to dance for you," Sophia said as she closed the distance between them.

And suddenly, her lips pressed softly against Alex's, tentative at first, then more certain as Alex responded. A kiss that felt like it's happened a million times before. A kiss that felt like they already knew each other for a decade. Knew how their lips liked it, how their tongues tasted.

The kiss was magical. It felt like everything Alex hadn't even known she was craving. The spark between them was real. Alex knew for sure now that they had a connection. This moment of raw, unfiltered emotion was beyond anything she could have imagined. Her hand found its way to the soft skin on Sophia's cheek, her thumb brushing lightly against her skin.

As they pulled apart, Alex searched Sophia's face. She was disappointed to find a mixture of emotions there.

"I'm really sorry," Sophia mumbled under her breath as she went to stand up.

Alex shook her head. "No, Sophia. Don't be. Why are you sorry?"

Sophia sat back down on the crate but leaned back a little. "I don't know. It's just that... well... this is nuts, isn't it?"

“Yep,” Alex admitted with a grin. “It’s completely nuts. Who cares?”

“I think a lot of people around here would care. This isn’t Brighton, you know? We’re in the Deep South, right? Ellen already warned me?—”

“I don’t even know where Brighton is. But do you care? Did you want to kiss me just now? Because it kinda felt like you did.”

“I did.”

“So, let me tell you where I’m at. That felt amazing. That felt like something I could do with you all day, all night, without ever getting tired of it.”

Alex’s heart raced as she leaned in toward Sophia, their lips meeting again, this time with more certainty and hunger. Alex’s hand slid up Sophia’s arm, resting gently on her shoulder before moving down to the curve of her waist.

Alex deepened the kiss with insistence. Her hands moved to Sophia’s sides, tracing gentle lines before slowly finding their way to her chest. Alex’s fingers lightly grazed over Sophia’s breasts, eliciting a soft gasp from the dancer.

I can’t believe this is actually happening...

Alex felt her own nipples harden as her hands explored Sophia’s body, the sensation sending a wave of heat through her core. She could feel herself getting wet, the desire building with every touch.

Alex pulled back slightly. “Is this okay? Are you sure about this?” she whispered, her eyes searching Sophia’s for any signs of doubt.

“So sure,” Sophia gasped.

Alex smiled and kissed her again, this time trailing her lips down Sophia's neck, her hands still exploring. Alex's body seemed to be responding instinctively to the situation. She shifted onto her knees and pressed her thighs together as she felt the damp heat building between her legs.

"God, you're so beautiful..." Alex murmured against Sophia's skin, her hands continuing their gentle caress. "I swear I've been wanting to do this since the moment I saw you. But I never dared even to hope that you..."

"That I what?"

"That you were gay."

"I've never really admitted it to myself. I don't know what I am. I've had boyfriends. I've thought about?—"

"Listen, don't think about it right now. Just stay in this moment with me. I want you to..."

Alex couldn't find words; she was lost in the sensation, in the warmth of Sophia's body under her touch and the way her own body seemed to come alive with every soft moan and sigh. She pulled Sophia closer, her hands gripping the younger woman's hips tightly, feeling the electric charge between them.

"I'm sorry. Maybe we could slow this down a little?" Sophia suggested. "I don't want to rush it. I'd like us to take our time, to savor each moment..."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, though the undercurrent of sexual tension remained. Alex moved up onto the crate, her hand brushing against Sophia's as they sat side by side.

“Of course. Whatever you feel comfortable with. I’d love it if you told me some more about your dancing,” Alex said, her voice muted, almost shy.

Sophia’s eyes lit up as she started to speak about her days with the Royal Ballet, the thrill of performing, the grueling rehearsals, and the friendships she’d formed with her fellow dancers. Her words painted vivid pictures, and Alex found herself captivated, not just by the stories but by the way Sophia’s face came alive as she told them.

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“I’d have loved to see you perform. Going to the ballet was never my thing, but to hear you talk about it makes me realize how wrong I was,” Alex said, the sincerity in her voice catching Sophia off guard.

“When all this is over I’ll get you a VIP ticket, okay? Best seats in the house,” Sophia replied, her smile tinged with a hint of sadness. “Do you ever think like that? About when it’s over? When we can go back to how things were?”

Alex left the question to hang in the air before replying. She knew the odds. She’d quickly come to understand the reality of their new world just days after the initial outbreak. But she didn’t want to spoil this moment. For now, she’d allow Sophia to dream. “Sure, who doesn’t want to hold on to hope, right? Do you think I want to hang around here for the rest of my life with Tromer, Henry, and Miller and a shitload of mouths to feed? No way! I wanna go see me some ballet!”

“Thank you,” Sophia said softly. “For everything.”

Alex nodded, her throat tight. “No problem, sweetheart. Let me walk you back to your hangar. Ellen will have your guts if you so much as yawn tomorrow.”

As she watched Sophia head inside for the night, Alex felt a strange mixture of emotions—hope, fear, and a growing certainty that Sophia had come into her life for a reason.

The entire day had been a blur, her mind clouded with the weight of what had happened the day before. The memory of it clung to her like a second skin, making it hard to focus on the mundane tasks that filled her day. She kept replaying the scene in her mind, her heart pounding in her chest, her breath shallow. The touch of Alex's hand, the warmth of her body pressed against hers... It had been a fleeting solace, but one that left an indelible mark.

She made her way over to where the fence stood as a tenuous barrier between what Alex had assured her was the relative safety of their camp and the unpredictable wild beyond. She'd heard a lot of mumblings about the compound not being safe over the last few days, but she knew Alex was working on it. And she trusted her new friend implicitly. The cool wind brushed against her face, and she felt, albeit momentarily, at peace

Her body ached, not just from the physical labor but from the tension she carried in her shoulders and neck. She could feel the knots, tight and unyielding, a physical manifestation of her inner turmoil. The sun had done little to alleviate the chill that seemed to have settled in her bones, a chill that only deepened with each passing hour.

Jesus, I'm in agony.

As she trailed her fingers along the rough bark of a tree, grounding herself in the texture, her mind whirled with thoughts. It had been a long day, filled with all the usual challenges, but something deeper stirred within her—an aching need for connection, for a moment of peace amid the chaos.

Her emotions were a tangled web of longing and fear. The vulnerability she had shown the night before had left her exposed, and she wasn't sure how to navigate the new terrain of her feelings. The softness in Alex's eyes, the way she had held her, had sparked something that Sophia hadn't felt in a long time—hope. Yet, that hope was

tempered by the ever-present shadow of their reality. The compound, though a refuge, was also a reminder of the fragility of their existence.

As she rounded a corner, she spotted Alex leaning against the rusted fence, her silhouette backlit by the fading light. The sight of her brought a sense of calm, a reassurance that Sophia couldn't quite explain. Alex turned her head, a small smile playing on her lips as their eyes met.

"You looked stressed. You had enough of Ellen yet?" Alex's voice was low, a soothing contrast to the tension that seemed to hang perpetually in the air.

Sophia shook her head, stepping closer. "Just needed some fresh air. What about you?"

Alex shrugged, her gaze shifting to the horizon. "Same. It's been a day."

Sophia tilted her head, studying Alex's profile. "What was the worst part?"

Alex hesitated, her fingers brushing against the fence. "It wasn't one thing, really. Just... the weight of it all. Keeping everyone safe, making decisions that could mean life or death. It's exhausting."

Sophia nodded, understanding the burden Alex carried. "You don't have to do it alone, you know. We're all in this together."

Alex turned to her, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes. "I know. But sometimes, it feels like the responsibility is mine alone. Like if I mess up, it's all on me."

They stood in silence for a moment, the sounds of the compound fading into the background. The distant clang of metal and the murmur of voices were reminders of their reality, but here, in this quiet corner, it felt like they could escape, if only for a

little while.

“You want to sit?” Alex gestured to a patch of grass nearby, her tone light but inviting.

Sophia nodded, settling beside her. The grass was cool beneath her fingers, a contrast to the warmth radiating from Alex’s body. They sat close, their shoulders brushing as they leaned back against the fence.

“It’s strange,” Sophia began, her voice barely above a whisper. “Finding moments like this, where it almost feels normal.”

Alex chuckled softly. “Yeah. Funny how we cling to anything that feels even remotely normal.” She paused, her gaze turning serious. “It’s hard, though. Pretending everything’s okay when it’s not.”

Sophia turned to her, searching her face. “You don’t have to pretend with me.”

Alex’s lips curled into a small, almost sad smile. “That’s the thing. We all put on a brave face, but inside, we’re falling apart.”

Sophia reached out, her fingers brushing against Alex’s hand. “You don’t have to be strong all the time. It’s okay to lean on someone.”



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Their eyes locked, and for a moment, the world around them faded. The vulnerability in Alex's expression was raw, a glimpse of the weight she carried every day. Without thinking, Sophia squeezed her hand gently.

"Thanks," Alex murmured, her voice barely audible. "It's nice to hear that."

Sophia smiled softly. "Anytime."

They sat in the growing darkness, their bodies close, the night wrapping around them like a blanket. The air between them was charged, a palpable tension that neither dared to break just yet. Sophia's heart raced, a nervous flutter in her chest. She could feel the warmth of Alex's thigh pressed against hers, the subtle shift of her breathing.

"I've never really done this before," Sophia admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "Not like..."

Alex turned to her, her eyes wide, vulnerable.

Their breaths mingled in the cool air, the distance between them shrinking until their lips met in a tentative kiss. It was soft, exploring, both of them feeling their way through the uncharted territory. Sophia's fingers trembled as they found their way to Alex's jaw, her thumb brushing over the curve of her cheek.

Alex responded, her hand moving to Sophia's waist, fingers slipping under the hem of her shirt to rest against the warm skin of her abdomen. The contact sent a shiver through Sophia, her body arching slightly into the touch.

“Is this okay?” Alex asked, her voice husky and uncertain. “Are we really going to do this? Out here?”

Sophia nodded, her own voice failing her. She guided Alex’s hand higher, over the curve of her ribs, the delicate rise and fall of her chest beneath her fingertips. Alex’s touch was so soft and gentle... as if she feared breaking the moment.

Their kisses deepened, each touch a silent plea for more. Sophia arched into Alex. The sound of their breathing mingled with the rustling of leaves beneath their bodies, grounding their passion in the reality of their world.

Alex’s hands found the hem of Sophia’s shirt again, this time lifting it slowly, her fingers grazing the bare skin beneath. Sophia gasped at the contact, her body shaking as she tried to anticipate Alex’s next move. She helped Alex remove the garment, and as she did so, she noticed her pert breasts rising and falling as the cool air kissed her exposed skin, and she struggled to catch her breath.

Alex’s eyes roamed over Sophia’s petite form, her expression a mix of awe and nervousness. She leaned down, pressing kisses along Sophia’s collarbone, the soft skin there eliciting a quiet moan from Sophia’s lips as she moved down to her nipples.

Oh, God. I can’t handle this.

“You’re beautiful,” Alex whispered, her breath warm against Sophia’s skin. Her hands started to travel lower, fingers tracing the curve of Sophia’s waist, the dip of her hips, and the waistband of her pants.

Sophia’s hands found their way to the buttons of Alex’s shirt, fumbling slightly as she worked to undo them. Her fingers brushed against the firm planes of Alex’s abdomen, the muscles tensing under her touch.

I didn't know a woman could feel like this.

She pushed the fabric off Alex's shoulders, her hands exploring the newly exposed expanse of skin.

They began to move together, a dance of discovery and desire, their connection deepening with each passing second. Alex lowered Sophia onto the grass, their bodies aligning and grinding, their breasts pressing together.

As their bodies intertwined, Alex's hand traveled lower, hesitating at the waistband of Sophia's pants. She glanced up, seeking permission, her eyes filled with uncertainty and desire.

Sophia nodded, lifting her hips slightly to help Alex remove the barrier. The cool air brushed against her thighs, a shiver running through her as Alex's hand explored the sensitive skin. Her touch was careful, almost reverent, as her fingers traced the delicate contours of Sophia's pelvis.

"Is this okay?" Alex asked again, her voice shaky.

"Yes," Sophia breathed, her body responding to Alex's gentle caresses. She reached out, her hands ruffling through Alex's hair, pulling her closer until their lips met once more.

The tension between them built as Alex cupped the swell of Sophia's vulva, her grip firm yet tender in the heat of the moment.

Sophia shivered, her breath catching as Alex's fingers found their way inside her before pulling them out again, spilling Sophia's wet juices over her soft outer folds, mapping out every sensitive spot with what felt like expert attention.

Sophia's hips rolled instinctively, pressing into Alex's hand, her body seeking more. The sensation was overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and vulnerability. Alex's touch grew more confident, her thumb pressing against her clitoris as her fingers ventured back inside her vagina, deeper and curling with intent. Each movement sent waves of pleasure coursing through Sophia's body, her moans slipping out of her mouth freely. She quickly tried to quiet them, but they were far from the others.

Alex shifted above her, bringing their bodies flush together. She pressed an open-mouthed kiss to Sophia's throat, nipping lightly at the delicate skin before soothing the spot with her tongue. Sophia clung to her, her fingers threading through Alex's hair, tugging just enough to make Alex groan against her neck.

The rhythm between them built as Sophie rubbed her naked vulva against Alex.

"Put your fingers inside me again, Alex."

The pace of what was happening between the women quickened as Sophia's vaginal muscles tightened around Alex's fingers. Every breath, every moan, and every desperate plea fueled the fire between them until the tension reached its peak. Sophia cried out, her body arching as pleasure crashed over her in shuddering waves, Alex holding her through it, whispering her name like a prayer.

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“Oh, Sophie. You’re so fucking beautiful. You were so fucking wet too.”

Afterward, they lay entwined, Sophia’s body still humming from the intensity of what this woman had just done to her. She traced patterns on Alex’s arm, her fingers lingering on the scars that lay there. She marveled at the contrast between the strength in Alex’s body and the tenderness and passion she had shown.

Alex smirked, her fingers still lazily tracing along Sophia’s spine. “I can’t believe we did that. Look at my pants. You got them all wet.”

Sophia let out a breathless laugh, pressing a soft kiss to Alex’s shoulder. “I feel embarrassed, a happy kind of embarrassed. That was... so fast for me. And so, so good.”

Alex chuckled, tightening her arm around Sophia’s waist. “Don’t be embarrassed. I can’t help being that good, right?” She pressed a slow, lingering kiss to Sophia’s temple as she let out a soft laugh. “Just joking. But you know what? You brought it out of me. I loved every second of it. Watching your face... Christ, it was worth it.”

Sophia hummed in agreement, her fingertips skimming along Alex’s ribs. “God, yes. We took one hell of a risk doing that out here. What if someone had... I suppose we shouldn’t have...” She exhaled sharply, her lips brushing against Alex’s jaw. “Actually, being out here like this... with you... just made it even more exciting.”

Alex grinned, shifting so their bodies pressed even closer. “You liked that, huh?”

Sophia nipped at Alex’s bottom lip before murmuring, “Oh, Ilovedit.”

“Do you ever think about how strange this is?” Sophia’s voice was soft, her breath warm against Alex’s shoulder.

“What? Liking women?”

“No. Not that. I mean this. This life we’re living. It’s so surreal.”

Alex sighed, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm as she sat up and put her shirt back on before handing Sophia’s clothes back to her. “All the time. It’s like, we’re living in a nightmare, but moments like now could make it bearable, I guess.”

Sophia propped herself up and, in turn, started to slip her still-quivering body back into her clothes, her gaze fixed on Alex’s face the whole time. “Tell me something. Something real.”

Alex hesitated, her eyes clouding over. “You want real? Okay.” She took a deep breath and laid back on the grass, staring up at the sky. “A couple of weeks ago, I was on a patrol. We came across a group of zombies—nothing unusual, right? But there was this one... it was a kid. Couldn’t have been more than ten years old.” Her voice wavered, the memory clearly haunting her. “It was mangled, half its face gone. But the worst part? It was holding a teddy bear.”

Sophia’s heart clenched; the image Alex painted searing into her mind. “God, Alex, that’s horrible. Not the post-orgasm chat I was hoping for.”

Alex nodded, her jaw tightening. “Yeah. Sorry. You wanted real. And I had to end it. It’s just, every time I close my eyes, I see that kid. And I wonder how much of who we were stays with us when we turn?”

Sophia reached out, cupping Alex’s cheek. “You did what you had to. It’s not fair, but you’re still here, and you’re still fighting. That’s what matters. You didn’t let it

suffer.”

Alex leaned into the touch, her eyes closing briefly. “Thanks. It helps, hearing that. I feel there is nobody here who I can talk to about emotions. There is nobody like you.” Her body felt so warm beneath Sophia’s fingertips, her skin still slightly damp from exertion. She pressed a soft kiss to Alex’s shoulder, then another, savoring the quiet, the closeness.

Alex let out a slow, contented sigh. “That feels nice.”

Sophia smiled against her shirt. “Good.” She let her hand wander, sliding down Alex’s forearm. The air between them was calm now, softened by the aftermath of their union, but there was still a weight hanging over them—the ghost of Alex’s memory, the child with the teddy bear.

Sophia shifted, propping herself up slightly so she could see Alex’s face in the dim light. “I do know that feeling,” she murmured.

Alex turned her head, watching her. “Yeah?”

Sophia nodded. “There was this one time, back when I first got separated from my dancing crew.” She hesitated, the memory sitting heavy in her chest. Alex’s hand, strong and grounding, slid up her thigh. That simple touch made it easier to go on. “I was holed up in this hotel for days, maybe weeks, and first the power was gone, then the water stopped working. I had collected what I could from the hotel. But I was thirsty, exhausted. Oh, I remember the thirst. I knew I couldn’t wait much longer. I had to get out. I had to go scavenging. When I got outside, I very quickly met this guy, a cab driver—Caleb. He was...” She searched for the right words, her hand coming to rest over Alex’s heart, feeling its steady rhythm. “He was sweet. Kind of young, eager to prove himself. He told me to stay close, to keep quiet.” Her breath hitched, just slightly. Alex noticed—of course she did—and reached up, running her

fingers through Sophia's hair, coaxing her to continue.

"What happened?" Alex asked softly.

Sophia exhaled, finding a moment's peace in Alex's touch. "I was willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. What choice did I have? He kind of put himself in charge, and I was fine with that. We were in a house somewhere, going through some stranger's fridge, when we heard it—a scratching sound coming from behind a door. Caleb went to open it. I couldn't stop him."

Alex's hand slid from Sophia's hair. "One of them, right?"

Sophia nodded. "A woman. Or what was left of one. Her face was ruined, just shreds of skin hanging off. I can't even begin to describe the shock. But she was wearing this necklace—this silver locket, the kind you keep pictures in. She was clutching it even as she lunged for Caleb. Like, when you said about that teddy. It's like maybe they still remember something from before?"

Alex's fingers tightened slightly where they rested on the small of Sophia's back. "Shit. Yeah, maybe they do."

Sophia sighed, pressing her forehead against Alex's shoulder. "Caleb was gone. He tripped. She was on him in a heartbeat." She swallowed, her hand pressing flat against Alex's stomach like she needed something solid to hold onto. "I killed her, but it was too late for Caleb. I can't even remember how I did it."

Alex's arms came around her, pulling her closer. Sophia let herself be held for a moment, inhaling the scent of Alex's skin, the lingering salty scent of her sweat.



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After a while, Alex spoke, voice quiet but steady. “Did you look in the locket? You know... after?”

Sophia lifted her head just enough to meet Alex’s gaze. “I opened it, yes. There were two tiny pictures inside—her and a man, and her and a little boy. At least, I assumed it was her. And I just kept thinking... Who was she? Who was this woman who loved those people? Were they out there somewhere? Were they waiting for her to come home?”

“You’ve never talked about this before, have you?”

Sophia shook her head, tears pouring down her cheek. “What would have been the point? Didn’t seem like it mattered.”

Alex frowned slightly, like she disagreed. But she didn’t argue. Instead, she tilted her head up and pressed a slow, lingering kiss to Sophia’s jaw. “It mattered. It all matters,” she murmured against her skin. “And you know something? You matter, Sophia. You matter to me.”

Sophia closed her eyes, leaning into Alex’s warmth, letting herself get lost in the feeling of being anchored to someone.

“You’re still here. We found each other in all this,” Alex said, her voice firm. “And I think this thing we’ve just got going is worth something. It matters. We’re still fighting, you and me.”

Sophia let out a little giggle. “Yeah,” she said. “We’re still here. Getting naked out in

the open and?—”

“Absolutely! What better way to fight the zombie apocalypse than with your pants off and grass up your ass, right?”

Alex’s arms tightened around her, and Sophia let herself sink into its comfort as she let out a loud laugh.

Neither of them spoke again for a long time. There was no need. They lay in silence; the weight of their stories hanging between them.

“We should get back,” Alex murmured after what felt like an age, her voice laced with reluctance. “People will start wondering where we are.”

Sophia nodded, a pang of regret settling in her chest. “Yeah. But thank you. For tonight. For this. It was incredible.”

Alex smiled, a rare softness in her expression. “No, thank you. I needed this more than I realized.”

9

ALEX

The first sign of trouble was the dogs.

Alex had been patrolling the perimeter, as she did every morning, when the compound’s two mutts—scrappy survivors just like the rest of them—began barking and whining at the eastern fence.

Why’d Miller let the kids keep those things? They’re probably desperate to get out of

here. Someone should let them off the compound. Poor things.

Their hackles stood on end, teeth bared, their growls vibrating through the air. The pitch of their howls sent a shiver down Alex's spine. The dogs were in a panic.

Then came the pounding.

A deep, resonating thud against the metal fence, followed by another. Then another. The rhythmic hammering of something massive and relentless. A sound so heavy, so unnatural, that Alex's gut twisted with recognition.

They're in.

The scent of rot hit her next—a sickly-sweet stench that made her stomach churn.

Then the moans drifted through the air—low, hungry, relentless. A chorus of suffering, of insatiable need. A sound that never stopped haunting her dreams. Alex's heart clenched as dread slithered down her spine. She pivoted on her heel and sprinted toward the guard post, her boots hammering against the packed earth.

“Contact!” she barked, her voice sharp. “We’ve got a breach forming! Look! Eastern side!”

Henry was already sprinting toward her, rifle in hand, eyes wide with urgency.

“How many?” he demanded, skidding to a halt beside her.

Alex squinted into the light. The sky was a bruised orange, casting long, grotesque shadows over the land. The figures beyond the fence twitched and writhed, pressing forward in a tide of decay. Sunken eyes, hollow and clouded, stared hungrily from rotting faces. Torn lips peeled back over yellowed teeth, some blackened, others

chipped down to jagged stumps. Their hands, some missing fingers, others reduced to gnarled bones, scraped against the metal in mindless desperation. Flies swarmed open wounds, crawling through congealed blood and gaping flesh. Some of the creatures had been dead for weeks, their bodies swollen with gases, skin stretched taut like overfilled balloons. Others were fresher, their deaths recent enough that their faces still resembled the people they once were.

“Too many,” Alex admitted, her throat dry. “We need everyone. Now! Move! Help!”

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As she continued to scream, she watched as a growing number of survivors rushed out of the various hangars and outbuildings.

Then, with an earsplitting shriek of metal, the fence gave way.

The undead poured through the opening like floodwater through a broken dam. The first wave tumbled forward, limbs tangled, their decomposing bodies piling atop one another before lurching upright again. Some were missing eyes, their sockets black and weeping, while others had their jaws hanging loose, snapping ineffectively at the air. One had no lower half at all—just a trail of guts dragging behind as it clawed forward.

Alex's felt like she was about to be sick, but there was no time. She had to act fast.

“Shit!” Alex roared, raising her rifle. “Hold the line!”

She squeezed the trigger. The recoil slammed into her shoulder, but she held steady. The first bullet cracked through a zombie's skull, sending a spray of bone and gore into the air. The next hit a woman in a tattered floral dress, her ribs visible through a gaping hole in her side. She dropped, twitching as her fingers scraped the dirt.

Gunfire erupted. The air around her lit up in bursts of muzzle flashes. Henry's shotgun blasted holes through torsos, sending chunks of rotting flesh flying. Dorian's blade flashed as he fought at close range, slicing through tendons, severing limbs. The putrid smell of death mixed with gunpowder and blood, coating Alex's tongue, burning in her nostrils.

She pivoted, dodging a grasping hand as a particularly large zombie lunged for her. Its skin sloughed off in sheets, revealing slick muscle beneath. Its breath reeked of decay, a putrid exhale of death and filth. Alex swung the butt of her rifle up, catching it beneath the jaw, then followed up with a bullet through its forehead. It crumpled instantly, but three more lurched forward to take its place.

She kept moving. Fire, pivot, fire again. Her hands worked on instinct, muscle memory taking over. But it wasn't enough.

More kept coming.

To her left, Henry took down three in rapid succession, but a fourth lunged at him, and he barely had time to shove it off. Dorian stumbled, his blade slipping from his grasp as he tried to reload. Screams rose in the air as the compound's defenses buckled.

Alex's mind went to Sophia.

She wheeled around, scanning the chaos, her stomach dropping when she spotted her. Sophia was near the storage shed, frozen in place as a lone zombie broke free from the mass and lurched toward her.

In that moment, something deeper than fear struck Alex—something undeniable. Sophia wasn't just a fleeting thrill, a bright spark in the darkness of this new world. What they had shared a few nights ago was the most passionate thing she had ever experienced, but it was more than that. Sophia was warmth, resilience, and sharp-witted kindness. She made Alex laugh when she believed she had forgotten how, challenged her in ways no one else did, and saw through the walls she had spent most of her life reinforcing. The thought of losing her now was unbearable.

Adrenaline surged through Alex's veins, but beneath it was something even

stronger—a desperate need to protect what she had barely begun to understand.

“Move!” Alex shouted, sprinting toward her.

Sophia snapped out of her paralysis at the last second, twisting away just as the thing reached for her. Alex reached her, grabbing her wrist and yanking her back. She drove her knife into the creature’s skull, shoving the body aside before turning to Sophia.

“Are you hurt?”

Sophia was trembling from head to toe, but she nodded. “I-I think I’m okay.”

Alex didn’t have time to process the relief that flooded her. “Go. Get inside. Find somewhere safe. Now.”

Sophia hesitated, eyes darting between Alex and the chaos. “But?—”

“Now, Sophia! Go!”

Finally, Sophia turned and ran, disappearing toward the nearest hangar where the women and children were taking shelter. Alex exhaled sharply, pivoting back toward the fight.

The battle raged on for what felt like hours. But finally, after what seemed like an eternity, even though it was probably no more than a few minutes, the last of the undead fell. The remaining bodies twitched before going still. They had won this battle, but just barely.

Alex started barking orders. “Secure the fence again with whatever we have. Check the wounded! Burn these goddamn stinking bodies.”

She was running on pure adrenaline when she heard a quiet, broken voice behind her.

“Alex.”

She turned.

Sophia stood a few feet away, her face pale, her hands stained a strange pinkish color. She looked down at her own arm, and Alex followed her gaze...

A bite mark. Ragged. Red. Deep.



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Alex's world stopped.

Sophia let out a choked sob. "I-I don't know. It happened so fast. I didn't even feel it. Not at first..."

Alex felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. Her knees almost buckled.

No. No, not Sophia.

The breath rushed from her lungs. The sounds around them faded into a dull roar in her ears. It was just her and Sophia, locked in this terrible moment.

Sophia met her gaze, and Alex saw it in her eyes—the acceptance. The quiet resignation. She knew what this meant.

"I don't want to die," Sophia whispered. "But if I—when I turn, you have to?"

"No," Alex cut her off, stepping closer, her hands clenching into fists. "You're not going to turn. Stop, Sophia. We'll—We'll figure something out."

Sophia's eyes filled with tears. "Please, Alex. We both know what happens next. I really... I really just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for everything. Fuck. I can't believe this happened to me. I thought I'd moved quickly enough."

The words twisted in Alex's chest like a knife. This was the moment. This was when she was supposed to do what she'd done so many times before—what had to be done. She had put down countless people after they'd been bitten. Friends. Fellow soldiers.

People she'd lived and worked alongside for years.

But this was Sophia.

Sophia, who laughed when it all seemed so bleak. Who made Alex feel something real in a world that had stolen so much from her. Who had become the only thing that made this life worth living.

Alex's fingers brushed the hilt of her knife. Her mind screamed at her to do it. To end it before Sophia became something else. Before she became something wrong.

Do it, Alex.

Now.

But she couldn't.

Her body refused to move; her muscles were locked in place.

"Alex," someone barked. She barely registered the voice.

A hand gripped her shoulder. She turned sharply to see Ellen staring at her with hard, expectant eyes.

"Alex," Ellen said again, quieter this time, like she was speaking to a child. "You know what has to happen."

Others who were now standing around the two women in a circle murmured their agreement.

"She's already dead," someone muttered. "Do it before it's too late."

“It’s the rules,” said Ellen.

Alex swallowed, her throat raw. She turned back to Sophia, whose face was damp with sweat, but her eyes were steady. Steady and afraid. This was a cut-throat ending. But it was a game of survival now.

She knew.

She was waiting for Alex to do it.

The pressure of the knife in Alex’s grip felt unbearable. This was her job. This was survival.

Sophia squeezed her eyes shut. Her breath came out ragged.

Alex raised the knife.

She stared at Sophia, memorizing every detail. The sharp curve of her jaw, the softness in her lips, the defiance in her posture even now, standing at the edge of the inevitable.

No.

No, she couldn't. Of course she couldn't.

She let out a shaking breath and lowered the knife.

"Alex," Ellen snapped, what little patience she had thinning.

"No." Her voice was firm. Strong. "I won't."

A beat of silence.

Then chaos.

"She's a risk?—"

"You're putting all of us in danger!" yelled Ellen. "Someone else has to do it!"

"She's one of them, Alex!" shouted a small child who Alex didn't even recognize.

"I said no," Alex snarled, stepping in front of Sophia like a shield.

Then they waited.

Every second that passed felt like an eternity.

The tension was suffocating. The people around them kept their weapons drawn,

watching Sophia like a predator waiting for its prey to make one wrong move. Alex felt the weight of their stares, the pressure of their expectations. Usually the signs of infection spreading would happen fast.

She held Sophia's gaze, searching for the first sign of change.

She should have changed a little by now...

The clouding of the eyes. The twitch of fingers. The tremor of breath that would eventually turn into a growl.

The minutes continued on.

Sophia didn't change.

She remained herself—breathing, warm, alive.

The whispers continued.

“She should be different. She should be changing by now.”

“She should be one of them.”

“But she's not.”

Sophia stood in silence. Shocked. Confused. Terrified of her fate.

Someone ran to inform Henry.

Henry arrived in what felt like a flash. He paced in front of Alex and Sophia, his expression unreadable. “What the hell is going on? We need to test this.”

Sophia's hands curled into fists. "Test? Huh?"

"She's not changed at all? How long has it been? What's going on? If she's immune, we need to understand why," Henry continued. "We need to know if this is real."

The murmurs of agreement spread through the gathered crowd.

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Alex's shoulders tensed. "And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

Henry's gaze was cold. Calculating. "We need confirmation. A controlled bite."

A wave of nausea crashed over Alex.

"Are you insane?" she barked. "She's not a fucking experiment."

Henry didn't flinch. "This is bigger than her, Alex. This could change everything. Look at that bite! She should have shown signs of change about ten fucking minutes ago!"

Sophia let out a sharp laugh, brittle with disbelief. "Henry? You want to throw me back to them? Just to see if I live?"

"You're alive now, aren't you?" Henry said simply. "We need to know if it's a fluke."

The words made Alex's blood run cold.

Others were nodding. Whispering. If Sophia was the answer they'd been waiting for, they couldn't afford to waste the opportunity. This hadn't been seen yet. There had been the odd whisper about stories of the rare few who didn't change. But everyone thought it was fake hearsay.

"Maybe we should contact Redford. There's stuff going on out there. Government scientists or something, I heard," snarled Ellen, who was still towering over Alex, her

arms folded across her chest in defiance. “They’d know what to do with her.”

Alex moved closer to Sophia, her body taut with fury. “She is not some miracle cure for people to poke and prod at. She isn’t going anywhere. She’s staying here. With me.”

Henry met her gaze, his jaw tightening. “I knew it. I could tell you were a?—”

“A what?”

“Listen. This isn’t your call. We’re going to have to get Miller here and...”

“Miller’s been gone for days,” a younger soldier said.

“That’s right. I guess it is my call then, Henry. Until Miller gets back, I’m in charge, right?”

The days following Sophia’s survival were suffocating.

Alex had spent years building her reputation, solidifying her command through trust, discipline, and sheer force of will. Now, with every whispered conversation, every sideways glance, she felt it all crumbling beneath her. They didn’t trust her anymore.

She saw it in the way Henry spoke to the other soldiers in low tones just out of her earshot. In the way Ellen had started lingering outside Sophia’s quarters with the guards, their hands resting a little too casually on their weapons.

The members of the compound had made their stance clear—Sophia was a variable. She needed to be that contained, controlled. Studied.

“If we can figure out what makes her immune, we could save lives,” Henry argued in



front of Major Miller when he'd come back from a fruitless expedition looking like someone who'd escaped a concentration camp. "We can't afford to let sentiment cloud our judgment."

Sentiment. As if Sophia was just some specimen. As if she weren't a person.

"You want to keep her locked up like some lab rat?" Alex had shot back, barely keeping the snarl out of her voice.

Miller had given her a long, measured look. "We need to keep people safe. You can see that, can't you, Alex? It's what you used to want too. I need to get some rest."

The shift felt palpable. She wasn't just fighting for Sophia anymore—she was fighting to keep herself from being pushed out entirely.

Tromer and Henry came to Alex's quarters at dusk.

"She's coming with us," Tromer said, his voice flat.

"No, she's not."

Henry sighed. "Alex, you know how this goes. Miller's orders."

She shifted her stance, tensing. "Miller's orders? What does he know? He looks half dead! If you want her, you'll have to go through me."

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The two men exchanged glances, uneasy. They clearly didn't want to fight Alex. Not directly. But they didn't need to—because she was already losing. She could see it in their faces.

The Alex they followed had been a leader. A protector.

Now? Now she was just a woman who had let her emotions cloud her judgment. A woman who cared a little too much about Sophia.

“I won't let you take her,” Alex said again, but this time, her voice lacked the weight it once carried. The threat sounded empty, even to her own ears.

Henry studied her for a long moment. Then, with something like regret, he nodded to Tromer, “We'll be back. You keep her in your quarters, Alex. We'll be back in the morning. Make sure you put security outside in case she turns on you or something.”

And then they left.

But Alex knew they'd be back with reinforcements.

She knew they couldn't wait around to see how the next confrontation would play out.

\* \* \*

“Fuck. You're my savior. I can't believe this. I feel fine,” Sophia's voice was raw, urgent as she lay back on Alex's cot, examining the bite mark that seemed

unchanged.

“Of course I am.” Alex sat down next to her, her hands finding Sophia’s hips, fingers digging in as if to reassure herself that this was real, that she hadn’t already lost her. “Listen, we’re going to have to make a run for it. You can’t stay here. You can’t become a lab rat to those fuckers.”

Sophia sat upright suddenly and swung her leg over Alex, pinning her down on the mattress. Her head fell forward as their lips met. The kiss was bruising, full of desperation, of everything they hadn’t said, everything they didn’t know how to say. Sophia’s tongue brushed against Alex’s lip, and when Alex opened her mouth, she was immediately met with a fierce, consuming heat that sent a shudder down her spine.

Alex had spent years being in control. She knew how to take charge, how to command, how to dominate. But now, with Sophia pressing her down, forcing her to yield, she found herself unravelling.

When Sophia’s hands slid down, gripping Alex’s wrists before pinning them above her head, Alex let out a quiet, surprised gasp.

“Oh,” Sophia murmured against her lips, her voice laced with amusement. “I’m not going anywhere tonight. I’ve been through hell and back. I’m going nowhere. New plan. I want to do this instead. I want to feel alive with you.”

Alex’s breath hitched. “I don’t?—”

But she didn’t get the words out before Sophia rolled her pants down, the friction sending a shockwave through her, making her arch up with a sharp intake of breath.

“You don’t what?” Sophia teased, but there was something darker in her tone,

something almost possessive.

Shit? What's happening here? Is she a horny zombie?

Alex turned her head, trying to catch her breath, but Sophia wasn't having it. She leaned in, lips brushing the shell of Alex's ear. "You don't like letting someone else take control, do you? But I want to try this. I need it..."

Alex's pulse pounded in her throat. "Sophia? Are you still... you? I just never imagined you like this?—"

"Don't panic. I'm still me. But today reminded me how short life is, and I'm still alive somehow."

Sophia bit down gently on Alex's neck, and Alex whimpered. The sound was foreign to her own ears. She had never whimpered for anyone.

Sophia moved one of her hands, dragging her fingers down Alex's stomach, slow, deliberate. Alex felt her entire body tense in anticipation, heat pooling low in her stomach. She wasn't used to this—to being the one under someone else's power.

And yet... she wanted it. More than she could admit.

"Say it," Sophia murmured, her fingers teasing Alex's wet inner labia. "Tell me you want this. Tell me you want to see this side of me."

Alex swallowed hard. Her pride warred with her desire, but there was no winning this fight. Not against Sophia. She already liked her a lot, but this was making her wild for Sophia.

"Oh God, I want it," she admitted, barely above a whisper.

Sophia smiled against her skin. “Good.”

She didn't let Alex hide, didn't let her retreat into the safety of dominance. She made her feel every touch, every stroke, every slow flick of her tongue, every deliberate motion designed to keep her right on the edge, trembling, desperate. Determined to feel alive.

10

SOPHIA

Sophia lay on the cot. She could barely move. Instead, she stared at the peeling ceiling. It felt as though her mind was just as trapped as her body. Alex was nowhere to be seen. The weight of the silence around her felt so oppressive. She could hear the faint rustle of movement, the soft shuffle of boots on cracked concrete, and the muffled buzz of voices. It wasn't Alex. They were male voices.

She had been ready for death, for the moment when her body would betray her, when the fever would become too much to bear, and her soul would depart, leaving only hunger behind. Everyone else had expected it too. And Alex. Alex had been almost ready to end her.

Her skin had burned. She remembered the sensation. Her bones had ached, a fire racing beneath the surface, fierce and unforgiving. It was as though she had tasted the sharp bite of infection—the kind that had taken down so many people. She had felt it. She knew the hunger would follow soon after. She remembered wanting Alex to see it through.

But then it hadn't happened.

The heat that had consumed her body had slowly faded, leaving her drained, hollow, but still very much herself. Still Sophia. As she had later proved when she and Alex found themselves alone.

She wasn't sure if or how well she had slept, and time had become a blur. Her thoughts seemed to be slipping between moments of clarity and the haze of what she believed were memories. All she knew was that...

She wasn't one of them.

But it was when they realized she wasn't turning that the panic set in. The real panic. Not turning was almost worse somehow.

She could hear it again—rising voices outside, frantic and disjointed. The news had, of course, spread like wildfire. Sophia wasn't dead. She hadn't become one of them. How?

Some people thought it was a miracle. Maybe even a blessing. Some whispered about a cure, about hope. She had heard the wordcurespoken in hushed tones the night before, like a prayer, like a lifeline. Maybe they had seen her survival as the first sign of something more, something that could lead to salvation. Who was it they'd wanted to send for? Some scientist?

But others? Ellen and her cronies? Tromer? Henry? Miller and the other soldier-types? Sophia could only imagine that fear must be clawing at them, growing like a weed in the dark. How would they ever accept that someone had survived, that someone had made it through the transition?

But Sophia wasn't a miracle. She was an anomaly, sure. An error in the system, maybe. But she no longer believed in miracles.

Alex's quarters felt like a cage. She knew there'd be people standing guard outside the door. She could sense the tension in the air as the powers-that-be were obviously trying to figure out what to do with her. She no longer felt like one of the survivors. She felt like an experiment about to happen. But where was Alex? Alex would never

let it happen. Would she?

“Has anyone tested her blood? Back at Redford, we—” She heard a woman’s voice, cold and analytical, demanding answers.

“What are we even testing for? She’s different. We don’t even know what happened to her. The fever broke?—”

“Then it’s a miracle. Let’s see what she’s capable of,” the woman replied. It wasn’t Ellen. So, who was it?

“I’m not some lab rat,” Sophia whispered to herself so that nobody would hear. She wanted to scream it, though. She wanted to shout it into the silence, but her throat felt like it was filled with glass. If they believed she was a miracle, what would they do to her? Was she one?

She closed her eyes in an attempt to steady her breathing. It wasn’t her fault that she was alive. She had expected to fall into the abyss. But somehow, the disease had slipped past her, as if it had found no purchase in her veins.

And now, those in charge wanted to know who exactly, or what, she was. Could they figure out how to replicate it? Is that what they saw her as? A tool? Something to be used in their quest for control... or power?

“Keep her under watch,” a voice said just outside the door. She recognized it. It sounded just like Henry, and there was no mistaking the authority in his tone. “Orders are that we need to learn more about this. Whatever she is, she can’t leave until we know what’s going on here.”

Where the fuck are you, Alex?



\* \* \*

Sophia woke up, no longer in Alex's room, but in what she imagined was once a sterile, white room, with a dead fluorescent light just above her head. The walls around her were a blank canvas of coldness—a small window above the door was the only source of light.

Have I been drugged? How did I get here? Where are you, Alex?

She felt like she had somehow entered a place beyond time itself, where seconds and minutes meant nothing. As she lay there, the last twelve hours or so came back to her.

They must have moved so quickly, isolating her under the pretense of precautionary measures. She had been too stunned by the suddenness of it all to question it at first. All she could think was, Where's Alex? Where's Alex? They'd promised her she would be treated for her injuries and that they were making sure she was okay. But it had quickly turned into something else. The first tests had been simple—blood work, temperature checks, and samples taken with clinical efficiency. But where were they even getting these things tested? She had agreed to them without hesitation. She hadn't dared refuse.

The first few rounds of questions had seemed like nothing beyond what she would have expected.

“What exactly did you feel when you were bitten?”

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Her throat tightened at the memory. She hadn't felt the bite at first. But then it felt like an electric shock, something she could only describe as such. She remembered the way it burned. She remembered how it had felt like her very blood was fighting to stay human. But they didn't need to know that.

“Do you think you've always been immune? Have you been bitten before?”

A bitter laugh escaped her lips. Immune? How would she have ever known such a thing? And sure, she just ran around getting bitten as often as she could...what a stupid question. It felt more like an insult than anything else.

“Did your parents ever mention anything strange about your health?”

They were really reaching now, weren't they? The questions were probing deeper, like sharp fingers clawing beneath her skin. She had answered each one as truthfully as she could, even though every answer seemed to only lead to more questions. The curiosity in their eyes, the quiet exchange of glances, was beginning to gnaw at her resolve.

Where the hell is my Alex?

The prodding continued, both physical and psychological. The cold of the metal beneath her, the way the hands on her body felt too clinical, too impersonal. It made her skin crawl. She had been moved to a smaller room. The surface she was lying on was hard and unforgiving. The walls around her had no sense of space. There was no warmth in her world now. She hoped if she complied, she'd stay safe.

The next round of tests was harsher—fragments of flesh ripped from her with a scalpel so sharp it almost felt like it was cutting into her very soul. Her skin stung, the red liquid pooling into sterile vials, but the doctors or scientists or soldiers—whoever they were—barely seemed to notice. Their eyes were trained on the instruments in their hands, not the person they were violating.

The sharp sting of pain was ignored because it wasn't about her pain. It wasn't about her. It was about the data, about understanding. She had stopped being Sophia. She had stopped being a person. She had become a specimen—a thing to be studied, analyzed, and dissected.

No one had asked for her consent. Not once. Was that not a thing anymore?

The smell of antiseptic clung to her skin, to her hair. She couldn't tell if she was clean anymore or if she was just being scrubbed raw. Time had no meaning here. She was no longer sure if it had been hours or days she had spent in their hands. All she knew was that she was experiencing an ever-growing sense that her life was slipping away with every test.

Food was brought, but she couldn't eat it. Not because it didn't smell or look good (because it did), but because she couldn't bring herself to consume anything in this place. The hunger gnawed at her. It left her feeling sick, helpless, unable to do anything but stare at what had been placed in front of her.

Each hour bled into the next.

“We could try controlled exposure,” one of them said matter-of-factly.

Sophia's breath hitched; the implications of their words slamming into her like a wrecking ball. She'd heard this before. Back on the compound. Controlled exposure. They weren't trying to help her. They were using her as a living experiment.

Nothing more.

That was when she knew. These people had no intention of ever allowing her to leave this place. Not unless she made a choice. Not unless she took control.

Her thoughts turned again to Alex, to her voice—strong, sure, unwavering. “I won’t let this happen.” Alex’s words echoed in her mind, a lifeline that kept her tethered to who she really was.

And in those moments, when she could no longer feel her own body, when the weight of their hands on her skin made her feel like nothing more than a hollow shell, she held onto those words and the thought of the woman she was beginning to have genuine feelings for. She clung to the idea of her lover because it was the only thing that made sense anymore. The only thing that felt real.

Out of nowhere, there was a rise in the tension in the air—a shifting tone. She overheard the guards arguing somewhere outside the room, their voices sharp and full of fear.

“She’s valuable,” one guard muttered, his voice strained. “Could we not make some use of that? Imagine what we’d get for her.”

“No. She’s dangerous,” came the reply, tinged with uncertainty. “I don’t think she is immune. I think she’s one of them. She’s changed, but she’s hiding it well. Zombie Version two-point-oh.”

“What if she’s the key to all this, though?” another voice chimed in.

Sophia’s heart skipped a beat as she blinked away her tears. The final realization burned through her like fire. They had made their decision. They were going to use her until there was nothing left, until the data ran dry, until they had squeezed every

last ounce of usefulness from her body. She wasn't a survivor. She was a test subject. And no matter how they saw her, she couldn't stay here.

Not anymore.

Sophia found the energy to sit upright on the edge of her cot, her body aching in the aftermath of the last endless round of prodding and poking. Her hands rested limply in her lap, fingers trembling slightly from exhaustion. The compound was so much better than this place. This place was an actual cage. The fact that she had survived changed everything—not just for her, but for everyone inside these walls. She had to get out. But how?

Then, raised voices. Arguing.

Sophia flinched, the sound slicing through the stagnant air like a blade. It came from somewhere down the corridor—outrage. Alex. She'd come.

Her stomach twisted, nausea creeping up her throat. She had learned to endure pain in silence, to swallow every cry, every gasp, because weakness only made things worse. But what was happening with Alex?

Sophia's breath came in short, uneven bursts. She wanted to move, to do something, but all she could do was sit there, nails digging into her palms, helpless rage curling inside her chest.

The angry voices faded.

Silence.

A shudder ran down her spine.

She barely had time to steady herself before there was a soft knock at her door.

She barely had the strength to answer, her voice a strange, weak murmur. “Alex?”

“It’s me,” came the low, firm reply.

Sophia opened the door just enough to see her, her heart stuttering at the sight of the woman who had come to mean so much to her. Alex’s expression was tight, her eyes sharp with determination. There was something different about her tonight. A weight in her stance, a finality in her gaze.

“Where have you been, Alex? How long have I been here? What are they doing with me?”

“A couple of days. I’m so sorry, Soph. I had to make my way here on foot. They drugged me. I had to find my way on foot.”

“Oh my God. Are you okay?” Sophia’s crackled voice mumbled.

“Yes. Just about. I’m happy I’ve found you. I’m going to get you out of here.”

“No. I don’t think they’re going to let me leave. Like ever,” Sophia whispered, the words barely escaping her lips. “I’m not sure this is real life anymore.”

Alex's jaw clenched. "I know. That's why I'm here."

Sophia blinked. "What?"

Alex stepped closer, lowering her voice, as if the very walls might betray them. "I've seen this before. In the forces. When someone is too valuable to let go, they just don't let them go. They won't stop. Whatever it is they've been doing here. The tests, the experiments—they'll keep pushing until there's nothing left of you. Jesus. What have they done to you?"

Sophia swallowed hard, looking away.

A gentle touch on her arm brought her back to reality. Alex's hand was warm, grounding. "We need to leave. Not now. It's too risky. Tomorrow night. I've got to make it seem normal for now."

"Will they let you stay here?"

"Yes. They'll let me stay. That's been negotiated. They need me back at the compound. Shit's gotten out of hand, and I bargained with them when I arrived, that if I couldn't stay with you, I'd try to end them all. And that I would never enter the compound, and they will need me there. We're valuable to them. So, nothing will happen to me here. I had to go along with it to see you; I had to tell them I agree with their choice to experiment with you. It was the only way. They think I'm on their side, but I promise, I'm not."

Despite Alex's words, fear curled in Sophia's stomach, but beneath it, something else flickered.

Hope. A way out. She met Alex's gaze, something unspoken passing between them. It seemed too good to be possible.

She nodded. “Okay. I’m just relieved you’re here.”

That night, the weight of their plans pressed on them. There was an unspoken tension hanging in the air, thick with fear and need as they lay together.

In the stillness, Alex kissed her.

It wasn’t soft. It wasn’t slow. It was urgent and desperate—a collision of lips and breath that carried with it so much longing, fear, and an unyielding desire to remind themselves they were alive.

Alex’s hands traced the bruises on Sophia’s arms. She could see the anger bubbling up in her eyes. They had taken too much from Sophia already. But she knew Alex was here and wouldn’t let it happen anymore.

Alex was going to take Sophia back.

\* \* \*

The next night, they moved through the empty corridors in silence, their movements fluid and synchronized, as if they had been doing this their whole lives. Alex explained to Sophia that she had studied everything—the security routines, the guards’ shift pattern, the weak spots in the perimeter just outside the building. Sophia trusted that Alex knew exactly where to go and exactly how to move.

But at the same time... nothing ever went as planned.

The building was eerily quiet as they slipped through the exit, their footsteps muffled by the concrete floor. Sophia’s hand felt so cold; her fingers gripped Alex’s tightly as they neared the outer fence. The faint scent of woodsmoke filled Sophia’s lungs as she inhaled deeply, her eyes scanning the darkness beyond. The promise of freedom



was now so close, so tangible, that she could almost taste it.

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Then, the alarm blared.

Alex cursed under her breath as Sophia's body froze in fear. "Run!" Alex hissed, pulling Sophia with her.

As they started to sprint, Sophia could feel the rush of adrenaline pumping through her veins. She could almost hear her heart thudding in her chest, echoing in the still night air. They bolted for the fence. Sophia, despite years of ballet training, felt her body pushed to its limit.

The first guard appeared before them; his weapon raised. But Alex was fast. She lunged, slamming the butt of her knife into his temple with a sickening crack, sending him crumpling to the ground. Sophia didn't hesitate. She kept moving, hand firmly in Alex's, her eyes wild with fear but filled with a sliver of hope.

Oh, Jesus! She killed him! He was human! Shit!

More guards flooded the perimeter, their shouts barely reaching Sophia's ears as she gaped at Alex, whose instincts had clearly kicked in. It was chaos—blades flashing in the moonlight, fists colliding with flesh, bodies tumbling to the ground. Alex moved like a force of nature, precise and lethal, cutting through the guards with brutal efficiency. Blood splattered across her hands, her face, as she took down one man after another, her breath ragged and fast as Sophia stood, motionless, in complete disbelief.

But then a gunshot rang out.

“Sophia, move! We need to get out of here! What are you doing?”

Sophia’s vision blurred for a moment, but she stepped forward and grabbed Alex’s hand, her grip unyielding.

“Let’s go! Now!”

11

ALEX

The world outside was no kinder.

Each step Alex took felt like an insult to the earth beneath her. Her boots sank into cracked ground, scraping against the rough, uneven stones or catching on jagged debris that threatened to twist her ankle.

Keep it together.

The streets of the abandoned city stretched endlessly in every direction, a labyrinth of scavenged buildings and forgotten histories. It was a place that had begun surrendering to nature’s cruel reclaiming. The once-proud streets were becoming overgrown with tangled grass and scattered remnants of a world gone to dust.

There was no mistaking that this place was no sanctuary—it was a battlefield. The quiet was suffocating, the kind of silence that unsettled the soul, like the calm before a storm. The undead wouldn’t be far away. They never were.

Alex glanced sideways at Sophia, her companion—and her partner—in this fractured world. Sophia’s face was drawn, her features sharper than they should have been, the shadows beneath her eyes a testament to the toll of this endless chase. Her

movements had become sluggish, as if each step took more from her than the last. She was leaner than Alex had ever seen her, the hunger and exhaustion of the past days eating away at her strength. But it wasn't just that. There was something more profound—something unspoken—that Alex could see in the droop of Sophia's shoulders, the lost look in her eyes. They weren't just running from the undead. They were running from the other survivors who knew that Sophia was different. They were running from an unrelenting enemy who would stop at nothing to track them down.

For what felt like days, they had been pursued, never staying in one place long enough to rest, constantly aware that their hunters were closing in. The soldiers had nearly cornered them twice, and both times, they had barely slipped away, relying on luck, instinct, and the city's endless hiding spots. They had darted through apartment buildings, crawled through drainage tunnels, and even waded through waist-deep, stagnant water in an old canal to throw off their pursuers. To Alex, every breath felt borrowed. She had no clue where to take Sophia. Only that they had to remain hidden until she could devise a plan.

But now, their bodies were rebelling against them. Their mouths were dry, their throats raw with thirst. When they stumbled into an old gas station, they barely exchanged words before Alex started searching and scrabbling around for something, anything, to eat. It took only minutes to find a vending machine in the corner, its glass long since shattered. Most of the contents were gone, looted, but as Alex dug through the wreckage, her fingers closed around an intact, unopened can.

“What is it? Did you find something?” Sophia asked, her voice hoarse with exhaustion.

Alex turned it over in her hands, wiping away the dust. She felt a vast smile start to spread across her lips. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this elated. “Jesus! I can't believe this! Root beer!”

Sophia frowned. “Root beer? I don’t even know what that is. I’ve never had it. Is it alcoholic? I’m not sure this is such a great idea.”

Alex snorted, cracking open the can. “You were touring in the U.S. for how long and never had a root beer?” She took a sip, the carbonation burning her throat in the best way possible. “Here, baby. I can’t wait to see you try this.”

Sophia hesitated, then took the can and drank deeply. Her eyes widened as she swallowed. “It tastes... weird. Oh, God! You people are so odd. Who would drink this? But at the same time, wow, this is really good. Just about anything would taste good at this point.”

“Weird?” Alex huffed in mock offense. “This is an American classic, I’ll have you know, missy.”

Sophia handed the can back with a wry smile. “Well, I grew up drinking Ribena and tea.”

Alex shook her head dramatically. “Tea. So predictable.”

Sophia smirked. “Says the woman clinging to her capitalist soda.”

Despite everything—the hunger, the fear, the relentless chase—they shared a chuckle, the sound foreign but oh-so welcome to Alex’s ears. For a moment, just a moment, the world outside didn’t exist. There was only the taste of something sweet, the warmth of their giggles, and the silent promise that, together, they would keep running.

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Alex glanced at Sophia, her smile fading slightly as reality crept back in. “Come on. I saw a coat back there behind the counter. I think you should put it on. You need to keep clean-ish clothes on. And then, we should keep moving.”

Sophia nodded, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “Yes, ma’am. One step at a time.”

Alex stretched her arms above her head and let out a breath. “Alright, princess, that’s enough cheek from you.”

Sophia raised an eyebrow. “Princess? I don’t recall being called that before. Is that another American thing?”

Alex smirked. “I just assumed that you, kind of... You enjoy being told what to do.”

Sophia tilted her head, considering. “Well, sometimes. Yes, I suppose I do, sometimes. Miss Walking Wounded here is definitely pleased to be following your lead.”

Alex chuckled. “Not always, though. Definitely not between the sheets, right?”

Sophia scoffed, but her cheeks darkened slightly. “You have a selective memory. I think we both enjoy everything we’ve done so far.”

“Mmm,” Alex mused, feeling the muscles in her vagina tighten a little at the thought of the two of them together. But then she grew serious, her expression hardening as she glanced toward the door. “Listen. We need to get north of the city. We might

have a real shot once we get out of here. We can't stay here forever. It stinks. We can't sleep. It's full of them... shuffling around. And we can't go back. We need to find people. Different people."

Sophia frowned. "What's up north, though? What makes you think it'll be any better up there?"

"A place," Alex said, hesitating slightly. "I've heard about it. I believe in it. Trust me. It's hidden in the forest. It's not military. No soldiers. No patrols. Just people who keep to themselves. If we can get there, they might let us stay with them. I don't know what else to do. I've burnt most of my other bridges, but at least I have you."

Sophia chewed on her lip. "Might let us stay?"

"Look, they might not, okay? But they won't be the only people out there. Some of us made it. Some of us are still fighting to exist. Look at us! Look how far we've come. It's better odds than anything else we've got right now," Alex said firmly. "We can't keep on like this. We need somewhere safe, even if it's just for a little while. We need to change up your appearance. A haircut, new clothes, maybe a piercing? Maybe that's too far. But we need to make you unrecognizable, and me too."

Sophia met Alex's gaze, then nodded. "Alright. Let's go find it. Let's do it all. What else have we got to lose?"

Alex gave a slight nod in return, determination settling over her like armor. "Then we head north, get a haircut, and hide our true selves?"

"I'm in. We've got this, right? One step at a time."

"One step at a time," Alex echoed, and together, they walked back into the wasteland, their footprints the only proof they had ever been there at all.

\* \* \*

“How much further?” Sophia’s voice cracked, hoarse from the strain of constant movement. It was a question Alex knew all too well, but one she didn’t have an answer for.

Alex scanned their surroundings—yet another city with the same desolate cityscape that had surrounded them for days. Derelict buildings, streets littered with remnants of lives once lived. Everything felt trapped in time, stuck in a moment of irreversible decay. She couldn’t tell how much more they had to go. They weren’t as far north as she believed they needed to be. She knew they had some way to go. At the same time, she couldn’t see the point in discussing the finer details with Sophia. The distance was no longer measured in miles. Not really. There was uncertainty in every turn. Shadows seemed to follow them. Talking in miles, yards, kilometers... all those measurements belonged to the old world.

“Not much,” Alex lied. She wasn’t sure of anything anymore, but she couldn’t bear to voice the doubt that lingered like an unwelcome companion in the pit of her stomach. “Just a little more.”

Sophia didn’t seem convinced. She glanced at the empty buildings, her eyes darting nervously from side to side. The wind howled, rustling old papers and dried leaves, but the noise wasn’t enough to mask the fear that seemed to escape from their weakened bodies with every exhale. They were exposed, vulnerable, and still, the soldiers from their past—those faceless captors, the ones who had marked Sophia—remained a constant threat. Alex felt like they were never far behind.

“I can’t help but feel like they’re still out there,” Sophia moaned, her voice thin with the kind of exhaustion that made everything feel heavier. She hesitated as if speaking it aloud might make it real.



“I know. I guess they’re always out there,” Alex murmured back, her voice low but firm, steady. “They won’t stop until you’re back in their custody. And they know how to hunt. They won’t give up. I think this is all about outsmarting them. We’ll find a way.”

Sophia’s shoulders sagged under the weight of that truth. She didn’t speak, but the tension in her body said everything. The question wasn’t if they would be found—it was when. The thought of it gnawed at Alex, too, gnawing like the gnashing of teeth at the back of her mind. It was a relentless reminder that, no matter how fast they ran or how far they pushed themselves, there was no real escape. They were being hunted, and time was running out.

Alex hesitated before speaking again, her voice softer this time. “How are your injuries?”

Sophia blinked, as if she had been pulled from her thoughts. She flexed her fingers slightly, then touched the area near her ribs. “Better,” she admitted, though there was something guarded in her voice. “It doesn’t hurt as much anymore.”

Alex studied her closely, noting the way Sophia avoided her gaze. “You never really told me what happened in that place,” she pressed gently. “What do you remember? What did they do to you?”

Sophia gulped. She licked her lips, her eyes scanning the area around them as if searching for something unseen. “I thought I was done for,” she said finally. “The way they swarmed me—first the undead... then those scientist guys... I should be dead, Alex.”

Alex tensed. “And yet, here you are.”

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Sophia nodded slowly. “Yeah. Here I am. And I’ve ruined your life in the process.” She exhaled shakily. “I was certain I was infected. I was sure you knew it, too. But then the fever never came. Nothing.” She finally met Alex’s eyes, something unreadable flickering in her expression. “They’re all so sure I’m immune? Do you think so, too? Is that even possible?”

Alex’s stomach twisted. Of course, they’d all thought about, talked about it. Immunity was more myth than reality, a desperate hope whispered in the dark corners of a dying world. She’d seen too many people cling to that belief, but when it came to it, she’d always witnessed the same thing. They bite you, you die, you turn—end of story. And yet... Sophia was still here.

“You didn’t ruin anything. And... I don’t know. Do you?” Alex asked carefully. “All I know is that I stayed with you that night and you were alive... more than alive.”

“I remember. I surprised myself that night. Listen, I don’t know,” Sophia admitted. “But I’m not scared of them the way I used to be. So that must mean something, right?” She glanced down at her hands, flexing them as if testing her strength. “I should be dead. I almost feel guilty. Why me? Why do I deserve to be here when my friends and probably my fam?—”

Alex put a hand on her arm to stop her. But she didn’t answer right away. The idea that Sophia was immune was a dangerous one—hope was a dangerous thing.

The first raindrops came like a murmur pattering softly against the broken sidewalk. Then, without warning, the sky tore open. Sheets of icy rain crashed down, turning dust to mud, pooling in the cracks of the road. The wind lashed against the two

women with a brutal force. Within minutes, their clothes were soaked through, clinging to their skin like a second, merciless layer.

Sophia shivered violently, wrapping her arms around herself as they stumbled toward the nearest shelter—an old shed, its door barely in place, its interior gutted by time and scavengers. Alex dragged a metal rack toward the entrance, blocking most of the wind, but the rain still found its way in, dripping through cracks in the ceiling, pooling in uneven patches across the floor.

They crouched in the dimness, their breaths coming in quick, shuddering bursts. Cold sank deep into their bones, making every movement stiff and sluggish. Alex rubbed her hands together, then reached for Sophia's, her fingers icy against Sophia's equally frozen skin.

"If we don't get dry soon, this could turn bad," Alex murmured. She could hear it in Sophia's breathing, the way it sounded shallow and tight. The dampness clung to them, pressing into their lungs, making every inhalation feel heavy.

Sophia nodded, teeth chattering. "Pneumonia," she managed to say, and Alex's stomach twisted. Out here, an illness like that was a death sentence. No medicine. No doctors. Just fever and weakness until there was nothing left.

"We'll figure it out," Alex said, though even she could hear the thin edge of uncertainty in her voice. She scanned the dark corners of the shed, searching for anything—old rags, discarded plastic, anything that could serve as insulation. They needed warmth. Fast.

Outside, the rain pounded relentlessly like a deafening, never-ending drumbeat.

Eventually, Sophia broke the silence. "How do you keep going like this, Alex? I mean, with everything. The soldiers. Me being bitten and finding me. Escaping. The

fucking world we're living in. I'm not sure I have it in me anymore."

Alex's heart tightened at the rawness of Sophia's words. She stopped digging in the pile of garbage she had been searching through, her gaze turning to the woman beside her. It was as if she had started to lose sight of what they were fighting for.

"What do you mean? Please don't say these things, Sophia," Alex said quietly, stepping closer, her voice softer than usual.

Sophia's gaze lifted slowly, locking onto hers with an intensity that felt like a challenge. "I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you keep pushing through. Every day is harder than the last. It's like we're just stuck in this cycle. No matter how far we run, nothing ever seems to get any better. I'd love it if I could spend one more day with Ellen glaring at me for not sieving the flour right. You know what I mean? Anything but this."

The pain in those words hit Alex like a blow to the chest. She felt the weight of it, the crushing sense of inevitability that Sophia had so plainly voiced. She reached out, taking Sophia's hand in hers, squeezing it gently. "I don't know, either. Some days I feel like I can't do it, either. But then I think about how far we've come. I think about you. We've made it this far. And yes, I actually miss Ellen a bit. I'd love to see that grumpy old bitch again. But her bread wasn't that good, okay? So, come on. Chin up. Let's get ourselves out of this mess."

Sophia's eyes softened at the touch, and a tremble ran through her lips. The walls around her began to crack, just a little, and Alex saw the vulnerability she had been hiding. "I don't know if I can keep being strong. I'm not sure I have it in me."

Alex closed the distance between them, lifting her other hand to gently stroke the side of Sophia's face, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "You don't have to be strong. Not with me. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Alex held Sophia's gaze, her thumb brushing lightly against her cheek. For a moment, the weight of the world seemed to lessen, if only slightly. The silence between them wasn't empty—it was filled with something unspoken yet deeply understood.

Then, a sound carried through the air. This time, it wasn't the eerie shuffle of the undead. It was something that sounded so confusing. It was laughter. Light, genuine, unmistakably human laughter.

Alex stiffened, her hand instinctively reaching for her weapon. Sophia inhaled sharply, her body tense beside her. They stepped out into the rain and turned in the direction of the sound, their hearts pounding.

Beyond the road and the few sparse trees in front of them, nestled against the horizon, stood a handful of small, makeshift yurts and wooden buildings. Smoke curled lazily from a chimney, drifting into the dark rainclouds in soft, barely visible tendrils. Figures moved in the distance—people running with baskets in their hands, shouting to one another, holding up pieces of tarp and umbrellas to protect themselves from the downpour. It was a sight so lively and almost colorful that it didn't seem real.

Sophia's grip tightened around Alex's hand. "Do you see that?" she said in a barely audible whisper, as if speaking too loudly might make it disappear. "Or am I imagining it? It's that mirage thing people see in the desert. I read about that once. I've gone nuts."

Alex nodded slowly. Relief, warm and overwhelming, surged through her. "No, babe. I see it." The weight she had been carrying for so long—the fear, the exhaustion, the constant battle to survive—eased just a little.

As they stepped forward, the distant figures began to take shape. A man broke away from the group, his strides confident yet cautious as he approached. His voice carried

across the space between them, filled with something Alex hadn't heard from a stranger in a long time—genuine kindness.

“Hey there! You ladies need any help? You look like you might need to sit by the fire. We could maybe find you some dry clothes. We've got nettle and sorrel soup on the stove. Come on, come on. You look, well, if you don't mind me saying... You look terrible.”

Sophia let out a breath that was half a laugh, half a sob. The rain stopped suddenly. Alex felt her chest tighten, then loosen, as if for the first time in forever, she could finally draw a deep breath.

Had they made it?

Maybe, just maybe.

### EPILOGUE

#### FIVE YEARS LATER

Laughter rang out light and carefree, a melody of resilience. Children raced past Sophia, their bare feet kicking up golden dust as they weaved between the wooden and stone homes, their voices rising in playful shouts. A trio of boys argued over the rules of some game, while a girl with matted hair attempted a daring backflip, landing in a crumpled heap of giggles. Their joy was unburdened, untouched by the darkness their parents had known not too long ago.

The scent of roasted vegetables and simmering stew drifted from the kitchen house, rich and savory as it curled through the air. Someone had set wildflowers in a clay jar by the well—yellow sunbursts of goldenrod and delicate blue cornflowers, their petals swaying in the breeze.

God, that well took us months to dig. Who would have thought that would be a skill I'd have to learn?

Somewhere in the distance, a homemade wind chime clinked softly, a delicate melody threading through the low murmur of Sophia's surroundings. She inhaled deeply, savoring the moment. She sometimes found it hard to believe that she now associated the smell of cooking with comfort again, rather than just survival. The sound of knives chopping against wooden boards and the occasional burst of laughter from the kitchen only reinforced the true sense of peace they had all managed to create here.

She strolled over to the kitchen house and opened the door. She found Olwen hunched over a pot, stirring the thick stew with practiced ease. The older woman glanced up, her sharp blue eyes softening. “Sophia,” she greeted. “You checking up on me, or are you just hungry?”

Sophia smirked, leaning against the edge of the table. “A little of both, I guess. It smells amazing, but the way. Olwen, what would we do without you and your stew-making abilities?”

Olwen chuckled, shaking her head. “You say that now, but wait until you taste it. I had to improvise with the seasoning—gotta stretch what we have left. The wild garlic will be sprouting soon enough, though! And then it’s a whole new ball game, let me tell you!”

Sophia reached out and plucked a slice of roasted squash from a nearby plate, popping it into her mouth before Olwen could swat her hand away. The sweetness of it melted on her tongue, balanced by the charred edges. “If the stew is half as good as this, we’ll be just fine. And you’re so right! I remember the wild garlic last year! I can’t wait.”

Olwen huffed but looked pleased. “You keep sweet-talking me like that, and I might set aside an extra bowl for you.”

Sophia grinned, watching as a few chickens darted past the door. She wondered how they’d escaped again, but decided she’d leave someone else to deal with it this time. Chickens were supposed to be stupid birds, weren’t they? But the ones they bred here seemed to be geniuses. A few years ago, a scene like this would have been impossible. Now, it was their reality. Hard-won, but real.

She glanced back at Olwen, lowering her voice. “How’s the food supply holding up?”



Olwen's expression shifted, her stirring slowing. "Could be worse," she admitted. "Could be a hell of a lot better, too. But I'm not going to complain. Complaining doesn't do any of us any good. The last foraging team brought in a decent enough haul, but we'll need another run before the month is out.

Sophia nodded, already calculating. "I think I'll go with them next time."

Olwen shot her a look. "No, young lady. You've got enough on your plate. Let someone else do their fair share of the hard work."

Sophia only smiled, rolling another piece of roasted squash between her fingers. "What kind of person would I be if I didn't pull my weight?"

Olwen sighed, shaking her head, but there was warmth in her voice when she said, "A smart one."

"You remind me of someone. But a much nicer version. No, that's not true. You're nothing like her. We had a cook in the last place, and she... well, never mind. Thank you for being you."

"Really? What a nice thing to say! You're welcome, honey! Some things, some people, are better left in the past."

The wind shifted, carrying the scent of the stew through the air, mingling with the golden hues of the setting sun. Sophia let herself soak it in—the food, the comfort, the quiet hum of this new life.

It wasn't perfect. But it was theirs. And for now, this is what they had.

Near the wood workshop, the rhythmic clang of metal against logs rang out, sparks dancing like fireflies in the dimming light. A group of settlers gathered around the

woodpile, trading quiet words as they watched the blade of the axe smash into the pine trunk. Closer to the center of the village (for Sophia often thought of it as a village), a group of youngsters, both male and female, sat on a wooden bench, sewing patches onto well-worn jackets, their fingers moving with efficiency.

Above it all, the first stars flickered to life, tiny pinpricks against the darkening sky, as if the universe itself was watching over this fragile, hard-won peace.

Sophia made her way over to their small cabin and leaned against the porch railing, her arms crossed loosely over her chest. She let her gaze sweep over the village, drinking in the simple beauty of it.

It still amazed her, even after all these years, how much had changed. How much they had built. She remembered when she and Alex had first arrived, and this place had been nothing more than a handful of survivors clinging onto some semblance of hope, barely scraping by. Back then, fear had ruled their days—rationing supplies, reinforcing weak points in the walls, planning escape routes they prayed they'd never have to use. The undead had been an ever-present threat, their moans drifting through the trees at night.

Now, the settlement stood firm, not just surviving but thriving. Scouts patrolled the perimeter at all hours, their watchful eyes ensuring nothing slipped through unnoticed. They had figured out patterns, learned how to bait the dead away and how to cull them when necessary. The old world's technology was mostly useless now. Still, ingenuity had kept them alive—tripwire alarms, trenches lined with sharpened stakes, and torches that burned with thick, acrid smoke, which the undead seemed always to avoid.

Even more delicate decisions—whom to let in and whom to turn away—had become part of their survival. They had rules now. The rules weren't too harsh. This was far from a military operation. But everyone who arrived at their gates was questioned and

searched. Newcomers had to earn their place, to prove they were more than just mouths to feed. But none of them here were heartless. She and Alex had fought to ensure that.

They had learned how to manage their resources and make this land yield what they needed. They had a working water system, thanks to the well they'd dug deep, and a network of rain collectors that fed into their filtration setup. The fields beyond the main wall grew crops in neat rows—corn, potatoes, beans, anything hardy enough to withstand the unpredictable weather. Their livestock pens were small but well-maintained, holding goats and chickens that provided milk and eggs. The solar panels they salvaged from a long-abandoned facility sometimes held enough charge to power essential parts of the settlement, including lights in the medical room, radio equipment that rarely worked, and the grain mill.

It wasn't perfect. They still faced shortages. But when she looked at the village lined with little homes, when she saw children playing without fear, when her family's bellies were full, she knew they had done something right.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:30 pm*

She exhaled slowly, her fingers tightening around the railing as she let the moment sink in. Five years ago, she wouldn't have believed this future was possible. Five years ago, she hadn't even been sure she'd ever live to see something like this.

She didn't need to turn around to know Alex was there.

The shift of footsteps on the wooden planks, the barely there inhale, before a soft, familiar presence settled at her back. Then warmth—Alex's arms wrapped around her waist, the solid press of her body against Sophia's spine.

"Long day?" Alex murmured, her lips brushing against the shell of Sophia's ear.

Sophia sighed, leaning into the embrace. "Not bad. Just exhausting. The kids were relentless today. You should've seen Lily trying to teach them spins. She nearly took out half the class."

Alex chuckled, a low, affectionate laugh. "She's got your talent. And your fire."

"She's stubborn, you mean," Sophia said, tilting her head slightly to meet Alex's gaze.

Alex smirked. "Same thing. Right?"

Sophia huffed, shaking her head. She turned in Alex's arms, looping her hands behind her wife's neck. "I reckon you like a little fire, though."

A slow, lazy smile spread across Alex's lips. "Damn right, I do."

Their foreheads touched, the world narrowing to just the two of them. For so long, their love had been a fragile thing—something easily lost, hard to hold onto. But now, with Alex’s hands resting at her hips, it felt solid. Unshakable.

Sophia traced her fingers along Alex’s jaw, brushing over the faint scar just beneath her chin—a reminder of battles fought, of sacrifices made. “We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?”

Alex nodded. “Jeez. Understatement of the decade, babe. I’m so glad I found you.”

A slight tug at Sophia’s skirt broke the moment.

“Mama?”

The soft voice of Lily. A young girl who arrived at camp without anyone had become their adopted daughter.

“Honey! Did you eat?”

“Yes! Mummy fed me. Beans on toast! Yummy!”

“Beans on toast, huh? That’s my English influence if ever I saw it! I’m so proud of you both.”

Lily stood there, barefoot and bright-eyed, her curls wild from the wind. “You said you’d tell me a story before bed.”

Sophia smiled, crouching to tuck a stray curl behind Lily’s ear. “I did, didn’t I?”

Alex ruffled the little girl’s hair, grinning. “How about we both tell you one?”

Lily gasped dramatically, as if this were the most exciting thing in the world. “Two stories?!”

“Two people telling it,” Sophia corrected, tapping her daughter’s nose. “But just the one story.”

Lily giggled, grabbing their hands and tugging them inside. Their home was small, but full of books they’d salvaged on their travels, stacked in every available corner. Wildflowers rested in mason jars, and the scent of lavender lingered in the air from the homemade beeswax candles Sophia had lit earlier.

Lily clambered onto the bed, pulling the blankets up to her chin with a practiced routine. “Tell me the one about the brave warrior and the lost queen.”

Sophia and Alex exchanged a glance.

“That’s our story,” Alex murmured.

Lily grinned knowingly. “I know! I know! It’s my absolute favorite! The story of when you were little!”

“Well, we weren’t that little!” Sophia giggled.

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Sophia lay beside their daughter, pulling her close. “Once upon a time, in a world much different from this one, a warrior met a queen who had forgotten how to dance...”

Alex settled on the other side, their voices weaving together in the telling. It was a story Lily had heard countless times, but she never tired of it. And neither did they.

By the time the last words were spoken, Lily’s breathing had evened out, her tiny body curled between them.

Sophia pressed a soft kiss to her daughter’s forehead, then met Alex’s gaze over the sleeping child.

“Come on,” Alex whispered, reaching for Sophia’s hand. “Let’s go to bed.”

The cabin was quiet as they moved through the dark, the only sounds the creak of the floorboards.

Sophia followed Alex into their bedroom, closing the door behind them. The moment the latch clicked into place, Alex turned, pressing her body against Sophia’s, trapping her against the door.

The kiss that followed was slow at first, then deepened, hunger simmering beneath the surface.

Sophia gasped as Alex’s fingers traced up her sides, slipping beneath the thin fabric of her shirt. “Someone’s impatient.”

Alex's mouth brushed along the curve of her jaw. "Just the thought of you has been driving me crazy all day."

Sophia's breath hitched. "Oh?"

"The way you move when you walk, the way you smile when you're out there talking to people..." Alex nipped lightly at her collarbone, her voice rough with need. "It wrecks me."

Sophia shivered, tilting her head to grant Alex more access. "Then do something about it."

A low growl rumbled from Alex's throat before she lifted Sophia effortlessly, her strong arms tightening as if she would never let go. Sophia gasped, caught between surprise and anticipation, her fingers gripping Alex's shoulders as their bodies pressed together.

The bed met them in a tangle of limbs, sheets twisting beneath them as they moved—urgent, hungry, aching for more. Alex's hands skimmed up Sophia's sides, pushing her shirt higher, fingertips grazing the bare skin beneath. A teasing touch, a silent promise.

Sophia arched as Alex's mouth found her throat, lips brushing, biting, her breath hot against her pulse. Every kiss sent a ripple of heat through her, coiling low in her belly, tightening with need.

"Tell me what you want," Alex murmured, her voice rough with restraint, her fingers already tracing lower, over the waistband of Sophia's pants.

Sophia shivered, already undone by the anticipation, by the way Alex's body hovered over hers, controlling, commanding. "You," she whispered. "Everything. I want to



feel your fingers deep inside me. I want your mouth on my nipples. I want you to fuck me like only you know how, Alex.”

Alex exhaled sharply, her control snapping. With deliberate movements, she stripped Sophia bare, taking in every inch of her with dark, hooded eyes. The heat in her gaze was enough to set Sophia ablaze.

Alex kissed her way down, slow, torturous, lips and tongue exploring, teasing, claiming. Her breath ghosted over Sophia’s abdomen before she trailed lower, pressing open-mouthed kisses along the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

Sophia writhed, her breath coming in shallow, gasping breaths. “Alex?—”

“Patience,” Alex murmured against her skin, tracing her tongue in a languid line that had Sophia arching her back off the bed. “I want to take my time.”

But patience was impossible. The tension between them built like a storm, desire tightening, coiling, a desperate ache neither of them could hold back for long.

Sophia’s hands found purchase in Alex’s hair, tugging her closer, her voice breaking on a moan as Alex’s mouth finally met her where she needed it most. The first flick of her tongue against her clitoris sent a shockwave through her, pleasure spiraling, unraveling her inch by inch.

Alex’s touch was both reverent and possessive, her fingers splayed against Sophia’s trembling thighs, holding her open as if she were something to be worshiped. Her tongue moved in slow, deliberate strokes at first, teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves with feather-light flicks before pressing more firmly, the wet heat of her mouth sending jolts of pleasure through Sophia’s core. She alternated between long, languid licks and quick, insistent circles, her breath warm against slick, sensitive flesh.

Sophia's fingers clenched the sheets, her knuckles white as tension coiled tight inside her, a fire licking up her spine, white-hot and unbearable. Her hips lifted instinctively, seeking more, but Alex's firm grip anchored her down, keeping her exactly where she wanted. The pleasure mounted with every stroke, every teasing pull of Alex's lips, building into something dizzying, something inevitable.

"Come for me," Alex murmured, her voice dark and commanding against the slick heat of Sophia's skin. Without hesitation, she slipped two fingers inside her, the stretch effortless, the glide slick and deep. She curled them just right, pressing insistently against the spongy spot that sent Sophia reeling, her breath stuttering into a sharp cry. The rhythmic thrust of Alex's fingers matched the relentless pull of her mouth, her tongue lapping hungrily as she sucked, sending waves of electric pleasure surging through Sophia's body.

Her thighs quivered, her stomach tightened, every muscle locking as the pleasure sharpened to an unbearable peak. The pressure swelled, flooding her senses, until there was nothing left but the inevitable collapse into release, her body arching as she shattered beneath Alex's relentless devotion.

Her release crashed over her in waves, her body trembling beneath Alex's relentless touch. She gasped, moaned, fingers tightening in Alex's hair as the pleasure consumed her entirely.

But Alex wasn't done. She dragged her lips back up Sophia's body, kissing away the aftershocks, swallowing her soft, breathless cries.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:30 pm*

Sophia barely had time to recover before Alex pressed her down, their bodies aligning perfectly, heat against heat, slick and desperate. She reached between them, guiding Alex's fingers inside her, her moan swallowed by Alex's lips as they moved together, pushing, pulling, giving, taking.

The friction, the connection—it was almost too much.

Sophia's nails raked down Alex's back as the pleasure built again, sharp and unstoppable. Their bodies moved in perfect rhythm, breathless, fevered, until Sophia was once more spiraling, this time taking Alex with her.

They broke apart only to come back together, gasping, clinging, lost in the wreckage of pleasure.

When it was over, they lay tangled in each other, skin damp, hearts racing.

Alex pressed a lazy kiss to Sophia's shoulder, fingers tracing nonsense patterns over her hip.

"Promise me something," Sophia murmured, still breathless.

Alex hummed, pressing another kiss to the hollow of her throat. "Anything."

"No matter what happens—no matter how hard things get—we fight for this. For us."

Alex lifted her head, meeting Sophia's gaze, her expression softer now, but no less intense.

“Always, because I will love you, forever.” she vowed.

“And I love you, you big softie,” Sophia whispered.

Outside, the night was still, but never silent. The world beyond their walls was dangerous, but in moments like this, it almost felt distant, as if they existed in a space untouched by ruin.

This was a life they would never let go.

Sophia nestled closer, her hand splayed over Alex’s ribs, feeling the steady thrum of her heartbeat. In the quiet, her mind drifted—to the child sleeping just a room away, their daughter, their miracle. She thought of the future they were carving out for her, of the lessons they would teach her, of the world they hoped to rebuild, if only piece by piece.

One day, it might be safer.

One day, they might be able to share the truth.

Sophia was immune. The infection had once tried to take hold of her, sinking its teeth into her flesh, flooding her veins with death. But it had never claimed her. Her body had resisted, had fought back, had refused to succumb.

Only a handful of people knew—Alex, of course, and a few trusted others. It was a secret they guarded fiercely because knowledge like that could turn their lives upside down. It could turn Sophia into a target again.

But maybe, when the world was ready—when their child was older, when they were confident it wouldn’t cost them everything—they could share what they knew. They could help others. Perhaps, just perhaps, Sophia’s blood could be the key to something greater than mere survival.

Alex sighed contentedly, her lips brushing over Sophia's forehead, pulling her from her thoughts. "What are you thinking about?"

Sophia hesitated, then smiled. "The future."

"We have one now. Because of you."

"Because of us."