



Her Shadow

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Lost, wounded, and alone in the wasteland, Kara knows she won't survive the night—until a group of nomads finds her. Among them is Sam, a wary but fiercely protective survivor who insists on saving her.

As Kara fights to return home to Fort Haven, Sam refuses to leave her side. But when they arrive, their battle is far from over.

Are you ready for more?

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KARA

The streets had returned to that eerie, deep silence Kara hated so much. All she could hear was her own deep, labored breaths. She felt her lungs burning as she fought to keep moving. The only problem was that she didn't know why she was bothering. Where else was there left to go? Nowhere. She had no one waiting for her. They were gone. Her legs felt like lead, her shoulder throbbing with every step she took.

It's no good. I can't do it. I'm never going to make it.

But she forced herself to keep moving. Every time she shuffled forward, she kicked up small clouds of dust. Buildings loomed overhead, their windows gaping like hollow eyes, staring down at her as though they could see the inevitable.

You're going to die, Kara.

Only a week ago, she had been heading up her team—people who had actually become her friends—on a routine scouting mission, one of dozens she'd led since the outbreak. The goal was as easy as they came: get in, get out, grab stuff, and head back to Fort Haven as quickly as your legs could carry you. But it would seem that the undead had other plans that day. Then again, they always did, didn't they?

I'm the only one left.

She hadn't dared think about it until now. The idea of just how alone she was was

something she felt deep in her gut. It was a mixture of grief and guilt she could in no way afford to process fully. Every last one of them was gone. The horde had torn them apart before any of them had even had time to react. And yet here she was, alive by some twist of fate. She turned her head to examine her shoulder. She could see the blood leaking from the wound, her mind spinning from the shock and exhaustion.

Was I bitten? Scratched? Fuck!

Kara had fallen. She'd tripped and torn her skin on some broken glass. She remembered now. The undead hadn't gotten anywhere near her.

Calm your shit down. You're fine.

As she leaned against the corner of a broken-down vehicle, her vision started blurring. She tried to calm down her breathing. She knew she was fading fast. Her body was begging her to rest, to lie on the ground, but to do so would be a death sentence.

Her hands trembled as she pushed herself upright, her eyes darting to the horizon where the sun was beginning to dip. It would disappear within half an hour, and the cold would come. She needed shelter, and she needed it now.

A sound drifted through the air, just faint enough to stop her train of thought—a low, guttural moan. Her heart kicked into overdrive, adrenaline forcing her to snap back into focus. She pressed her back to the nearest wall, wincing, and scanned the street. The source of the moan wasn't visible yet, but it didn't have to be. She knew exactly what it meant.

They were near. The dead. The undead.

She needed to weigh up her options. Running was the first thing that came to mind,

but her legs were barely holding her up. Could she find a hiding spot and hope that whatever was outthere passed her by? She couldn't hear any footsteps yet, just that low, desperate sound of hunger.

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the cool stone behind her head. Kara was a firm believer in mindfulness. She focused on her five senses to help block out the surge of panic threatening to burst out of her chest. But she could barely hear anything. The sound of her heartbeat roaring in her ears drowned out everything else. She couldn't cope. Not after losing to her team. Not after?—

Suddenly, she spotted a rapid movement just on the boundary of her field of vision which snapped her out of her thoughts. It was too fast and too deliberate to be an undead. She didn't have time to react before a cold hand clamped over her mouth.

“Don't say a word,” a firm voice hissed in her ear.

The hand over her mouth was strong...a woman's...but Kara somehow didn't feel under threat, yet she tensed up, her fight-or-flight response kicking in. But something about the touch held her in place—there was no malice in it.

What the hell is this?

“Don't move,” the voice said again, softer now but still commanding.

Kara's pulse quickened as the reality of the situation sank in. Whoever had grabbed her wasn't a threat. She felt it instinctively. Her racing thoughts slowed just enough for her to take in her surroundings. They had ducked into a narrow alleyway. It was dark enough to hide them from view. She could hear the soft shuffle of footsteps now, the distinctive sound of feet dragging. It was growing louder, getting closer. The undead. One or more of them. And they were still hunting.

The stranger's body pressed against hers as they both stilled. She synchronized her breathing with that of the stranger in an effort to remain undetected. Kara could hardly bear the tension in the air. Her life was hanging by a thread for the umpteenth time that day. One wrong move and it would all be over.

Then the moaning came. It grew louder and louder as the stench of decay filled the alley, making Kara's stomach churn. She bit down on the inside of her cheek, trying to overpower her gag reflex.

Don't breathe. Don't move. Just wait.

The zombie passed by, its clumsy shuffle fading into the distance. Kara let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Slowly, the stranger released her hold, stepping back just enough to give her room to breathe.

"You're safe. For now," the voice said, still low but less urgent than earlier.

Kara turned around to face the woman, her knees shaking as she looked straight into the eyes of the person who'd just saved her life. Her dark pupils met Kara's, steady and assessing. She had a strong, angular face framed by wavy, knotted blonde hair and a few streaks of dirt across her brow. Her gaze flicked down to Kara's shoulder, narrowing slightly.

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“Let me look at that. It looks bad. You’re clean, huh? You weren’t infected?” the woman said matter-of-factly, already reaching for some bandages tucked into her backpack.

“No! I’m fine. It’s a cut. It was glass...or a piece of metal or some junk on the ground,” Kara lied, the tremor in her voice betraying her.

The woman looked skeptical. She raised one eyebrow in jest as she pulled out a cloth. “Ha! Sure you are, hon,” she mumbled under her breath as she moved closer. Come here, would you? Let me see.”

Kara felt the urge to argue with this woman who had appeared out of nowhere, but her body had other ideas. The moment the stranger’s hand touched her arm, she felt a shooting pain radiate down her side.

I think this is worse than it looks.

“Sit down,” the woman ordered, leaving little room for protest.

Kara sank to the ground, leaning against the wall as the stranger crouched in front of her. Her movements were efficient and professional as she inspected the gash.

This clearly wasn’t her first time patching someone up in the field.

“Do you realize how lucky you are? I can’t believe we found you.” The woman held the cloth to Kara’s wound as she continued. “Another few hours, and you wouldn’t have made it. Hell, not even that long. I reckon you’d have bled out pretty quickly.”

We? What's with the 'we'?

Kara winced, biting back her tears as a fresh wave of pain flowed through her shoulder. "Who...who are you? There's more than one of you?"

The woman glanced up. She smiled slightly with amusement. "Sam," she replied in a relatively neutral tone. "And there's only one of me. And that's more than enough for anyone, trust me. And let me tell you something else. You're going to owe me big time when we get back."

"When we...what?" Kara's words trailed off. She was struggling to keep up with this conversation.

Sam nodded toward the street. "There's no way you're staying out here. You can't. When my friends and I saw you, we knew without even saying it out loud that you wouldn't survive your injury. They've run back to our camp just outside town. I volunteered to stay back and help you...persuade you to join us. You'll be safer there, okay? If you made it this far out, you must be a survivor, and we could do with more."

Kara blinked rapidly as she tried to process what Sam was saying. A camp? Others? She opened her mouth to respond, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she found herself staring at Sam, at the way her jaw tightened, and her hands moved with care.

"You with me?" Sam's voice broke through Kara's daze. "Let's get you up."

Kara gulped before nodding. "Yeah. I'm...with you," she said, her mouth feeling dry.

"Good." Sam pulled back, satisfied with the temporary dressing she'd applied to Kara's shoulder. "Can you stand?"

Kara nodded again, though she wasn't entirely sure she was telling the truth. Her body was drained of every last ounce of energy, her muscles aching.

I guess sticking around here isn't an option. I'll never get back to Haven in this state.

Sam offered her hand, and after a brief moment of hesitation, Kara took it.

The warmth of Sam's grip sent an unexpected shiver across Kara's skin. This was a strange sense of connection that she hadn't felt in years, maybe. It wasn't just the physical contact—though that was pretty jarring, to say the least. Rather, it was something about Sam herself. Her presence and her calm command of the situation stirred something deep inside Kara, something she definitely hadn't been ready for.

But now wasn't the time or place to be thinking about such things. Sam pulled her to her feet. Kara started swaying slightly, and Sam placed the palm of her hand on her back to steady her.

"Take it easy. Not so fast, girl," Sam whispered, her arm sliding around Kara's waist for support. "I've got you. Don't sweat it."

Kara didn't protest. For the first time in days, she allowed herself to be led. And it felt incredible.

I'm not the one in charge here. That's a relief. She's guiding me. And I trust her, for now.

They moved quickly, Sam helping Kara through the winding streets. Kara stumbled, her legs barely cooperating, but Sam refused to let her rest. The pain in her shoulder was pulling her deeper into exhaustion, but the promise of safety—of a camp somewhere nearby—kept her going.

It wasn't long before they reached the outskirts of Campdale, where there was very little left of the civilized town it had once been. Kara had been back here several times since the outbreak but could never quite get used to the untamed wilderness that had taken root there. As they ventured further into the woodlands that surrounded Campdale, Kara could make out the shapes of tents and makeshift structures hidden among the trees.

"We're finally here," Sam said, her voice quieter now, as if the camp was sacred ground not to be disturbed. "I know it's not much, but we move around a lot. It's home. A home we take with us wherever we go."

Kara didn't have the energy to speak. All she could offer the woman was a weak nod. The camp appeared small but well-organized, a collection of tents and sheets huddled close together, presumably for warmth and security. A few figures moved in the near distance. Kara found it hard to make out their faces in the fading light, but no one approached them.

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Oh, I get it. She's the one in charge of this operation. The boss bitch.

"Go ahead and take a seat by the fire," Sam suggested, taking Kara by the elbow and pulling her gently toward a smoldering pit that had been expertly dug into the ground. "Let me go grab some supplies."

Kara sank to the ground, her aching legs folded beneath her. She breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Sam disappear into one of the tents. She couldn't help but note the way the woman moved so purposefully. She leaned forward, allowing the fire's warmth to seep into her bones and chase away the chill that had settled over her since she'd been separated from her group. Since she'd lost her group. Since her group had been slaughtered.

For the first time in what felt like forever, she believed herself to be safe.

Kara stared at the fire, her thoughts a tangled mess as she tried to make sense of the events that had led her to this point. The fire crackled, releasing tendrils of smoke that curled into the night air. Kara caught a whiff of the burning wood. It stirred something distant in her mind, a forgotten fragment of her past. It wasn't just the fire—it was the earth beneath her, rich and alive, the scent pulling her into memories of nights spent beneath the stars, back when survival was something she toyed with for fun. As her mind continued to grapple with her near-death experience and the shock of her unexpected rescue, she realized just how soothing the warmth of the fire was.

The sound of footsteps drew her attention. It was Sam returning with a small medical kit and a look of deep concern etched across her features. She sat down beside Kara,

her movements careful and deliberate.

“I want to take another look at that shoulder,” Sam said, gingerly peeling away the tattered fabric to reveal the deep gash in Kara’s skin.

“It’s gone right down to the muscle. We’ll need to keep an eye on it for infection,” Sam continued, her hands steady as she cleaned the wound.

Kara flinched as Sam applied a liquid that stung her skin. “I didn’t expect to find anyone else in Campdale,” she admitted, her voice husky and weak. “I really thought I was done for.”

Sam’s dark and intense gaze met hers. “Yeah, well I guess we all have our stories.”

Kara couldn’t stop staring at Sam as she tidied up her supplies and neatly put them away in the bag. She had a striking presence with features that seemed to express strength and kindness at the same time. Kara guessed that the woman was at least a decade older than she was. She watched as she then pulled her blonde hair back and scraped it into a ponytail. Kara couldn’t help but see the older woman as someone who was not only reassuring but intriguing, too.

This one knows what she’s doing.

“Thank you, by the way,” Kara said, forcing her voice above a whisper. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. It’s not often you find kindness from strangers.”

Sam looked up, a flicker of a smile appearing on her plump lips. “We’re all supposed to be out here helping each other out. Who else have we got? That’s what this is all about now.”

Kara lowered her head and murmured under her breath. “You’re so right. But not everyone’s like you.” She could sense that Sam was more than just someone leading a group of survivors. There was a hidden strength that drew Kara in. This woman was a natural protector.

“So? What were you doing around here, anyway?” Sam asked, breaking the silence that had started to settle between them, but which had felt comfortable to Kara.

“It was just a standard, everyday mission,” Kara explained. “Can you believe Campdale was my hometown? Well, my mom’s. I know the place like the back of my hand. Well, I did. It’s barely recognizable these days.”

“Nothing’s recognizable. Nothing,” Sam interrupted with sadness in her voice.

“We were supposed to gather medical supplies. The hospital’s empty, but we’ve been trying the houses and apartments, making our way through them methodically, you know? Sometimes we hit the jackpot. But... we were ambushed. I think there were around half a dozen zombies. I got separated from everyone. The rest didn’t make it. Or at least, I’m pretty sure they didn’t make it.”

Sam’s expression softened with sympathy. “I’m so sorry. Losing people you care about is never easy.”

Kara’s heart ached at the memory of what had happened to her gang. “I can’t even deal with it right now. I need to, I don’t know, maybe eat something, get my strength up, and find a way back to my community.

“Where are you at? Fort Haven? Is that it? You look like one of them. Or is it that place farther north?” Sam asked, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I’ve heard of these places. There’s one up near Brackendale, too.”

“We’re from Fort Haven, yeah,” Kara answered.

“I see. It’s a stronghold, right?” Sam asked. “One of the best places around here, I heard. You guys have got your shit together.”

“Yes,” Kara replied, surprised. “How did you know about it?”

“We’ve crossed paths with other survivors and heard rumors on our travels. We’ve been through a vast area...and you tend to gather information as you go along. We’ve got a pretty good network of people. We may be able to help you get back to Fort Haven. It’s not that far, right? I can’t promise anything, but I’m sure someone can help.”

Kara’s eyes widened with hope. “You would do that? Really? It’s a good eighty miles from here and over rough terrain. We could give you whatever we have that’s helpful in return, or maybe you’d need some shelter with us. Whatever you need, I’ll make it happen.”

“If it’s safe and we’re able to,” Sam said with a nod. “But first, you need to recover. You’re in no shape to travel as things stand. And we may be moving on as soon as tomorrow.”

Kara looked around at the nomads’ camp. She was surrounded by people she didn’t know, yet these people were willing to have her stay with them, no questions asked. It seemed too good to be true.

“So, what’s your story, Sam?” Kara asked, curiosity getting the better of her. “I get the impression you’re the leader here?”

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Sam's eyes grew distant for a moment. "Back before...I was a teacher—a university professor with tenure, as a matter of fact. I taught tribal studies, different societies, and how people adapt to changes. And then, weirdly, when everything collapsed, I joined a nomadic group. And now, I guess you could say I'm actually applying what I've learned, what I used to teach."

Kara's eyes widened in surprise. "I have to say that's pretty impressive. And you know your stuff. It kinda shows."

"I don't think so." Sam shrugged. "I think we're all just making do. We're all adapting and surviving."

Kara recognized Sam's resilience and realized within an instant how much she admired this stranger. She felt her heart flutter under her breastbone at the mere thought of being around her. What sort of life did this woman lead—and what could she learn from her? Why did she affect her so?

Sam pushed herself up off the ground. "You really do need to get some rest now. We'll talk in the morning. We're going to have to quarantine you. I know you weren't infected...and I guess it's not very hospitable...but it makes sense that you don't share a tent with any of us tonight. I hope you understand. And I know we have been very accommodating, but trust me, you don't want to fuck with us either, got it?"

"Loud and clear." Kara nodded enthusiastically, feeling relieved that she had a place to stay, however harsh it was.

Sam turned her back and walked away. Kara couldn't take her eyes off this woman—this warrior—her unexpected savior. She didn't know whether she was imagining it, but she felt a connection to Sam. Was it attraction? Should she ignore it?

It's everything about her. The way she speaks...the way she moves her body.

Kara looked to the side of her and the makeshift bed one of Sam's group members had made out for her. The blankets looked worn and threadbare, but she knew she would enjoy a night looking up at the stars. It was just what she needed. The weather was warm enough despite the slight humidity in the air. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this at peace. The previous year or so had been spent in chaos and a sense of permanent fear and rushes of adrenaline. Her sense of safety felt almost overwhelming, as did her gratitude for these people.

As she drifted off to sleep, the slightly out-of-focus image of Sam's concerned yet gentle face stayed with her.

I feel like I know you somehow.

But as sleep came, the image ebbed away, Sam's smile fading into darkness. That night, Kara slept the sleep of a woman unplagued by thoughts of famine and horror. She was in her own cocooned world trusting the kindness of strangers.

2

SAM

The morning brought with it a crisp, cool wind that bit at the exposed skin of Sam's neck as she stood near the fire, speaking with a few members of the group. Her tone was firm and authoritative as they discussed the day's plans, but her thoughts drifted

toward Kara. She had noticed the woman stirring not far off, her body still recovering from her injuries.

A cry broke through the bustle of camp. "Ouch! Argh!" Kara's voice, strained and sounding pained, sharply pulled Sam's attention. She watched as Kara sat up, her face creasing in discomfort. Sam's eyes narrowed slightly as she observed Kara swallow back a sob, trying to compose herself. She was tough, Sam could tell, but vulnerability was there just beneath the surface.

As Kara began a series of stretches, Sam returned her focus to the conversation at hand. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kara carefully getting to her feet, testing her strength as she hobbled forward. The wound on Kara's shoulder would still need time to heal, but at least she seemed determined to power through. That was an attitude Sam could respect. Kara walked toward the fire, where Sam had started preparing breakfast. She could feel the woman's presence even before she heard her speak.

"Morning," Kara said, her voice casual.

Sam looked up, her expression purposefully neutral. "Hey. How are you feeling? Did you get a good night's sleep?"

"Better than I expected," Kara replied, though she grimaced slightly. "I woke up with a cramp. I guess...I feel as if I'm almost not connected to my body. I don't know why. It's a weird feeling. But I feel ready to start moving if that's the plan."

Sam studied her, narrowing her eyes for a brief moment. Kara was eager, maybe too eager. "I think we'll spend another day and night here," Sam said firmly. "We're going to take it easy today. We need to make sure you're strong enough before we set out."

They ate in relative silence for a few moments, pan-fried snails with flatbread filling the air around them with a delicious-smelling savory smoke. As they chewed, Kara spoke again, this time with a small, surprised laugh. “If you’d told me only a year ago that waking up to hot snails would be the best treat imaginable, I’d never have believed it. But these are incredible.”

Sam chuckled, relaxing slightly. “I know. I can see why the French do it. Or did it.” She glanced down at her food, her mind drifting to darker thoughts. “Gosh, when you think about people all over the world...that this shit must have happened everywhere...it’s so hard to wrap your head around. I imagine some countries are faring better than others. But I’ll bet half the world’s population is dead.”

Kara’s demeanor seemed to change suddenly, her earlier lightness vanishing. “To be honest, I try not to think about it,” she said, her voice distant, almost vacant.

Sam noticed the shift but felt compelled to continue. “But it’s important to think about these things.” She tucked her legs under her, finding comfort in the weight of the conversation. “It’s the future. The future of humanity is at stake, and the more we know, the better.”

Kara took a long moment before responding. When she finally spoke, her voice was quieter. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just that...it’s putting me on a bit of a downer. I’ve just lost some close friends...and...”

Sam felt a sudden pang of guilt burning in her chest, realizing too late where she had led the conversation. She reached out instinctively, her hand covering Kara’s in a gesture of apology. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. How stupid of me. Let’s enjoy these snails, and I’ll shut up.”

Kara gave her a weak smile, the pain of loss still evident in her eyes. “I don’t want you to shut up. Maybe we can talk about something else. Anything else.”

Sam squeezed her hand gently before pulling away. “I’m going to head off and collect some more firewood. This fire looks like it’s dying down, and we can’t have that. It would be best if you were kept warm today. I don’t want you moving a muscle, okay?”

“Yes, boss,” Kara said, a corner of her mouth turning upward in a weak smile.

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Sam rose to her feet, her eyes already scanning the woods beyond the clearing for where the best firewood would be. But before she left, an idea struck her, and she looked back at Kara. “You know what? I’ve got a book in my backpack. It’s a sapphic mafia novel. I treasure it. It’s part two of a trilogy, but it’s easy to get into. Does that sound like your kind of thing?”

Kara’s cheeks flushed slightly, and Sam noticed the subtle shift in her expression. Was she nervous? “Erm...I guess so,” Kara said, turning to face her, the faintest blush on her cheeks.

For a moment, they locked eyes, and Sam wondered if they were having the same thoughts. But instead of lingering, Sam smiled and turned her back on the younger woman. There was still so much to do today, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something might just be starting to soften her heart.

No, Sam. You’re imagining things. Leave the girl alone, for Christ’s sake.

Sam walked away. There was some firewood out there with her name on it. Her breath formed small clouds in the crisp morning air. She felt alert as she expertly weaved her way through the trees, spotting dry logs and smaller splinters of branches they could use for kindling. But her thoughts kept drifting back to Kara.

She must have been cold last night. She looks so tired this morning. But so...well... Wow, she’s such a pretty little thing. Oh, get over yourself, Sam.

As she gathered another bundle of sticks, a figure approached her. It was Benji, one of the older members of the group. Sam noticed that his beard had a patch of white

hair under the chin that she was fairly sure hadn't been there at the start of the outbreak. He looked as stiff and weathered as the branches he was trying to carry in his arms, his back hunched into an unnatural shape.

"Hey," he said gruffly, coming to a stop awkwardly before shuffling toward Sam. "What's with the new broad? Lara? Is that her name?"

Sam's eyes flickered in the direction of the camp, where Kara sat near the fire, her silhouette barely visible through the trees. "Broad, Benji? Ha! I haven't heard that in a while. Her name's Kara. She's healing," Sam replied, her voice measured. She didn't want to give anything away. Nobody in the group knew she was gay. The subject had never come up. "She'll need some time."

Benji gave her a knowing look as he raised a single eyebrow in what looked to Sam to be mock surprise. "Is that right? Time, huh? I reckon we should move her on. I know nothing about the girl. She could be a risk."

Sam shifted her weight. It occurred to her that Benji might know her better than she thought. She looked at him quizzically, the bundle of firewood she'd collected resting against one hip. "That's not who we are, Benji. We found her out there alone and injured." She remembered that first sight of Kara—lying in the dirt, her body battered. Sam felt tears pricking in her eyes as she stared at the older man incredulously. "Why the hell would she be a risk? She's not infected. She hardly seems the violent type. What do you want me to do? Force her to leave? She's no threat to us. She's just trying to survive. She's the same as you and I. We need more survivors."

Benji grunted, but Sam could tell he wasn't entirely convinced. "She could well be hiding something."

"Ha! Aren't we all?" Sam spluttered.

“No doubt. But we’ve seen this before, Sam. People will say anything to get protection. You sure she’s not trouble?”

Sam met his gaze, her expression hardening as she thought of her response. “I’m as sure as I can be. That’s the best I can do. I’m sorry, but I’ve made my decision. She stays.”

There had been something in Kara’s eyes when Sam and the others had first found her, something raw and unguarded. Sam had sent her crew back to camp because she’d felt sure she could handle the injured woman on her own. And she’d been right. Kara had somehow struck a chord with Sam, something profound and unnamable, driving her to act on instinct. She knew the others might question her decision, but at that moment, she also knew that she couldn’t care less.

“You know I’ll keep you all out of harm’s way,” Sam felt forced to add, avoiding eye contact with Benji as she spoke. “Any sign of trouble, and I’ll send her on her way.”

Benji sighed, dropping his bundle onto the ground with a clattering thud. “Here we go. You’ve got a real blind spot when it comes to strays, Sam. I think you need to know that some of us don’t much like it.”

Her jaw clenching in anger, Sam watched as Benji turned and walked back toward camp. She shouted out to him, unable to stop herself. “I’ll pick up your sticks, shall I?” she said with more than a hint of sarcasm. “And isn’t that what we all are? All of us here? A bunch of waifs and strays?” But she knew deep down he wasn’t wrong. She had always felt a pull toward those who seemed lost or broken—but this was different. Kara was different.

She continued gathering firewood, the memory of that first encounter replaying in her mind. The mission that had gone so terribly wrong, the screams of what she now assumed had been Kara’s friends being attacked, ripped apart. And then, stumbling

across Kara—bleeding and zapped of every last ounce of energy but still alive. There had been a moment as she knelt beside Kara when their eyes met, and something passed between them. An unspoken understanding? Was that what it had been? Or maybe just mutual recognition. Sam hadn't been sure then, but she knew now that it was more than just curiosity that had driven her to save Kara.

She returned to the tents and spotted Kara still by the fire, poking at the embers. Sam couldn't help but notice the way Kara's features softened in the dim orange light, the tense expression she was wearing earlier now relaxed. Sam felt a surge of protectiveness rise within her. She knew she had to take care of Kara, not just because of the dangers they all faced from the infected but also because she had come to understand that several members of the group clearly harbored suspicions when it came to the young woman.

As she unceremoniously dropped the piles of firewood beside the fire, Kara glanced up and flashed her a timid smile. "You're back. Great haul."

Sam knelt to arrange the wood in a tidy pile. "I've gotta agree with you there. We've got enough to keep us warm for a good few hours."

Sam watched Kara for a moment, her eyes tracing her movements before she spoke again. She was focused solely on the newcomer, not daring to look around to see if other eyes were on her. "I didn't have to save you, you know? We've got enough issues as it is." Sam paused, her hands hovering over the fire for a moment before she continued stacking the wood. "But I really wanted to." She gazed into Kara's eyes. The expression within them was unreadable but somehow familiar.

Kara sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Listen. I really appreciate it. I don't know how to thank you. But...I need you to know I can't stick around. I can't be part of your group. I need to get back to Fort Haven. I have my own people—what's left of them—and they don't have a clue what's gone down, although I imagine they'll

have their doubts by now. It's the only place I can go. I hope you see that."

Sam immediately understood the urgency in Kara's voice. Fort Haven. She'd been told that it had existed long before the virus. It had been some sort of adventure center built on the ruins of a once-thriving settlement. It was rumored to be well-protected. They had thought about venturing out there a few months ago when supplies had been meager, but she'd concluded that such a place would be an easy target.

"Of course," she said, realizing that Kara's desperation to return was evident. "But the journey won't be easy. I know you know that. I want to keep you safe. I'll come with you," Sam said, the words slipping out of her lips before she had fully processed them.

Kara cocked her head to one side in surprise. "What? You'd really do that? Come with me? I know you said you'd help, but I didn't expect..."

Sam felt her breath growing harder as her chest rose and fell with effort. She was feeling panicky but had no idea why. "It's dangerous out there. And if you're really set on going, you'll need someone to watch your back. I'll talk to the others."

Kara's lips parted as if to protest, but then she stopped, her eyes searching Sam's face for something. Sam felt the weight of that gaze, felt the unspoken questions hovering between them.

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She wants to know why I'm doing this. So do I! This woman is a total stranger. I've just met her. Why am I doing this? I'm not doing anything else, so why not?

Sam couldn't fully explain it even to herself. There was a connection there, and she couldn't deny it. And connections were rare in this broken world.

"I appreciate it. But I don't want you to get in any trouble with the others," Kara whispered, lowering her head to look at her feet and fidgeting with the cuff of her sleeve.

Sam turned back to the fire. She pulled her knees up to her chest and cradled them. This was a gesture she found comforting whenever she felt ill at ease or nervous. "We'll probably leave tomorrow morning," she said, barging ahead with her decision despite still feeling confused and anxious as to why she trusted this woman implicitly after knowing her for less than 24 hours. "I'd say pack up your stuff, but I guess you don't have any. I'll gather a few supplies. We'll have to hunt and gather as we travel. You've been through a lot. Get some rest, or you'll never heal."

Sam could see the flicker of impatience in Kara's eyes as the younger woman pursed her lips. She clearly wasn't one to sit idle, even though her body was working against her. Sam admired that. But rushing into the wasteland in her current state would be suicide. Kara was clearly going to be someone who wasn't easy to persuade.

Later, as the temperature began to drop, Sam found herself beside Kara. The fire crackled, and Sam slowly relaxed, resting her chin on her knees.

"You're quiet," Kara said, taking an unsure breath and breaking the silence between

them. “Thinking about something?”

Sam stiffened. “Nothing in particular. I’m just thinking about the road ahead.”

“I know,” Kara replied softly, scratching at her neck where a mosquito had settled to do its worst. “But we’ll get there. I have to believe that.”

Sam nodded forlornly as she crossed her arms. Her mind remained heavy with the weight of what was to come. She had been living the nomadic life for months, constantly on the move, never settling in one place for too long. The idea of having Kara as a travel companion and of having a specific destination in mind felt not only exhilarating but terrifying.

“You’re so strong,” Sam dared herself to say after a moment. “You went through a lot yesterday, and it must feel raw. But Fort Haven seems like a world away. We’ll need to be smart and take our time.”

Kara met her gaze. “I trust you guys. You brought me here, fed me, and you’ve kept this fire burning all day. I know I’m in the best possible hands. You didn’t kill me, either, so that’s something.”

Sam laughed as she felt a warmth spread through her entire body as Kara spoke. She wasn’t used to this feeling of connection, of caring for someone this much in such a short space of time, but with Kara, it somehow felt natural.

God, her voice. It’s beautiful.

“I need to tell you something,” she stated matter-of-factly. “The others don’t want to join us. I’ve had a chance to gauge the mood today, and they don’t want to go anywhere near Fort Haven. I’m sorry. But I’ll be with you. And I won’t let anything happen to you, I’m good on a trek, and I’m up for the adventure, I mean, what else

have I got to do?" Sam said, her voice filled with a profound determination.

Kara smiled. "Really? Thank you. Thank you so much."

The two women sat in silence, their unspoken bond growing stronger with each passing moment. Sam knew the road ahead would be filled with uncertainty, but she felt she had a reason in Kara to keep fighting.

What am I doing? Why am I risking everything for her? But what else have I got to do other than hunt, survive, and fight?

She didn't really know, but one thing she did know was the warmth she felt for Kara didn't come by often, and she'd be a fool to let it pass her by.

3

KARA

Kara trudged forward, every step just one more in the treacherous miles they'd traveled so far. She knew she was carrying too much weight in her backpack. She felt the strain in her lower back and prayed that Sam would suggest a rest and a bite to eat at some point in the not-so-distant future. The dirt and grime coating her clothes was so depressing. The once-vibrant green fabric of her jacket was now a dull, sludgy shade of brown stained by the blood, sweat, and tears she'd had to endure over the last few months.

Oh, God. What I wouldn't give for a day's shopping. I'd go anywhere...Target, Walmart...I wouldn't be fussy. Hot fresh food. An ice-cold drink. Wow, I miss that.

Sam walked beside her, a steady presence that Kara realized felt somewhat reassuring. The older woman had captivated her almost from the start. Her leather

jacket, though still intact, bore the marks of her travels with her tribe of nomads—scuffs, dirt smudges, self-defense tears, and an outdoorsy odor. The contours of her physique were more apparent now, her athletic build defined by the movement of her muscles beneath the fabric. Her shirt clung to her, damp from the exertion of the day.

I could watch you all day.

“Are you sure this is the right direction?” Sam’s voice cut through Kara’s thoughts, who actually welcomed the break. She was starting to feel a little ashamed of her daydreaming, mainly as she was now permanently in the company of its subject matter. Sam’s gaze swept over the terrain, and Kara took note of the woman’s sharp eyes assessing the surroundings with practiced precision.

I wish you’d look at me like that.

Kara shifted from one foot to the other, the straps of her bag digging into her shoulders. “Yes. We’re still going east. Right? I’m pretty certain we’re on track. We should make it by tomorrow evening.”

Sam’s face was set in a thoughtful expression. “I’ve been thinking about what you said about Fort Haven. It sounds like a sanctuary. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been fine with my gang. I’ve gotten quite good at roaming from one place to the next, and I felt sick when we left them, but I quite like the idea of being in the one place...of having roots, you know?”

“Does that mean you’d like to stay at Haven?”

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“Nah. I promised the guys I’d catch up with them. They’d never forgive me if I didn’t go back. I’m not sure I’d ever forgive myself. Plus, I haven’t even seen the place yet.”

Kara’s voice carried with it a note of pride as she spoke. “It’s not perfect, but I think we’ve all somehow managed to cling to some semblance of normality. I’ve found a sense of belonging there, at least. I mean, the word normality may be a bit of a stretch.”

As Kara moved through the forest, the dense foliage and rugged terrain tugged at something deep within her. It was like stepping back into a world she’d once known intimately. The way the underbrush crunched beneath her boots and the whisper of the trees against each other brought her back to the days after college when she had joined a local search and rescue team. Back then, the forest had been her training ground. Being there now with Sam felt like a reunion with her past self, a reminder of what had defined her as a person before everything changed.

“So, tell me more about your life before all of this shit,” Sam said. “What sort of person were you... before the outbreak?”

Kara glanced at Sam and laughed. “Are you some kind of mind reader? I was just thinking about that.”

“I think we all do, though, don’t we? We can’t know the future. The present is pretty dire...and so we look back to the past.”

“Well, I grew up in a small town just outside of Seattle. I practically lived outside

despite the rain. I was big into hiking on the weekends. I went to college and studied environmental science, with dreams of eventually working in conservation. But life had other plans.”

“Right, so this whole survival business must have come as a bit of a shock,” Sam asked.

“Yes and no. After college, I was in this search and rescue team back home. I learned a lot of stuff with them...and I guess it’s helped me. I was used to intense situations. Not zombie-intense, but still.”

Kara saw a hint of admiration in Sam’s gaze. “That sounds like a valuable pursuit. I guess we both sought to make a difference in our own ways.”

A small smile tugged at Kara’s lips. “Well, I don’t have the skills you have. You’re a leader. You understand life on the road. I still like my home comforts, clean blankets, and a full belly. But yeah, I guess the skills I learned back then have become even more crucial now. Who would have thought, huh?”

“Ha! Yes! It certainly wasn’t in my calendar.” Sam smiled gently before furrowing her brows, “The journey has been relatively smooth so far, but we have to be careful as we move further. We can’t drop our guard. I heard the undead had a herd by here not that long ago.”

“I hear you. I’m constantly looking for them. What else is there to look for?” Kara sighed and looked at the ground. It was easy to pretend that life was normal when lost in a good conversation, but then the stark reality of their broken world always came back to the forefront of everything. Especially when it was in the form of a snapping, rotten corpse jaw trying to take one's flesh and blood for supper.

When night began to fall, they chose a sheltered spot to rest. Kara wanted to show

Sam what she was made of. She set about preparing their camp, her hands deftly spreading out their bedrolls despite the agonizing throbbing in her shoulder. She'd collected old cans on the way to spread around their chosen spot, a subtle detector for any of the undead who tried to come close.

Sam watched Kara, the soft glow of twilight highlighting her features. "You don't look like you need any help, but can I do anything?" Sam's voice felt like a gentle caress to Kara's ears as it blended seamlessly with the soft night air.

Kara gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "I've got it," she replied with a half-shrug. "In fact, I'm actually enjoying myself. The weather's been good to us. I know you've brought snacks. I'm feeling much better than I was yesterday."

"Of course. Come on. Let's eat. I want to know more about Fort Haven—aand you," Sam said as she took a seat on the bedroll, her fingers brushing against Kara's calf as she reached for her bag and laid out some strips of dried meat on a piece of wax paper on the ground.

Kara wrapped her arms around her knees and started to rock back and forth slightly. "Fort Haven has really evolved into something much more than it was ever intended to be. We've built it up. We'd added some incredible defenses, and the aim is that we keep expanding our facilities. I like to think of it as somewhere people can find safety and purpose."

Sam inspected her nails as she listened. "It sounds incredible. I'm really looking forward to seeing it for myself. You sound so pumped when you talk about it. I've not seen anything like it since..."

Kara's heart skipped a beat at the intensity of Sam's gaze. She tried to keep her focus away from Sam's lips.

“Well...I’m quite excited for you to see it, too. It’s important to me. You’ll understand why. I don’t know what I’m going to tell them when I get back. They’ll be devastated.”

“You know,” Sam said calmly, “this journey has been so much more than a trek. To me, at least. It’s been a chance to get to know you. To see what drives you. To take a chance on a total stranger. It may sound weird, but it’s so refreshing to meet someone like you.”

What’s she getting at here? Am I imagining this?

Kara felt her heart swelling with anticipation. “I know exactly what you mean. I think?”

“Look,” said Sam as she pinched the bridge of her nose and lowered her head. “I don’t want you to feel awkward or anything, but I like being around you. Maybe it’s a little silly, and erm...”

Sam’s words meandered into a comfortable silence, a shared understanding settling between them. Kara broke the quiet with a playful grin, glancing at the strips of meat. “Well, this looks delightful,” she laughed.

“Do I sense a hint of irony in your voice? I’ll have you know that thisgourmetdelight is...well...the best I can manage.” Sam’s laughter was warm and genuine as she took a bite, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “If we were in the old world, I could’ve reallywowedyou with something super delicious.”

“Oh really? I can only dream of that now. I’m sure it’s better than it looks,” Kara teased back, giving her a playful nudge.

Their eyes locked in the moment.

“You know, you make me feel like a real person again. Being around you, and the way we get on, it’s just...different. I feel as if I’ve known you a long time.”

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Kara held her breath, her heart racing, her words mumbling. “Me too. It’s like a...connection? I’m sorry if that sounds corny. I mean, it could be any kind of connection. I’m just saying it’s...”

“I get it, Kara. I feel something for you,” Sam said, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Kara exhaled, blowing out a breath. “Well, I like to be straight to the point, and honestly, me, too. There’s something about you. Something that makes everything else seem less important.”

Sam’s eyes darkened. “God, I’m pleased you said that. I feel like an idiot, like a teenage girl with a silly crush. But in this shitty world, I don’t keep secrets. There’s no point in wasting time, so I just wanted to tell you, you know? And if you feel weird or anything, I’ll just pretend this conversation never happened and we’ll move forward.”

“I feel far from weird. Stop overthinking it. I agree we may as well just say how you feel. Tomorrow is never promised.” Kara smiled, her expression gentle and calm.

Their bodies seemed to move closer, drawn together by an invisible force. Kara reached out her hand, brushing her fingers against Sam’s cheek, feeling the warmth of her skin. Sam’s arm found its way to Kara’s waist, pulling her into a gentle embrace. There was no time for games.

The kiss they shared was soft at first, a tender exploration that quickly deepened into something more intense. Kara’s lips pressed against Sam’s, feeling the heat and

sweetness of her mouth. Sam's hands roamed over Kara's back, pulling her closer, their bodies aligning with an intuitive sense of intimacy.

Kara's breath was ragged as their kiss grew more passionate. Her hands tangled in Sam's hair, the texture of her rough curls a pleasing contrast to the softness of her skin. Sam's lips parted slightly, allowing Kara's tongue to brush against hers. The smell of nature filled the air around them. Damp earth and wet leaves.

Kara's fingers trailed down Sam's back, tracing the curve of her spine, feeling the subtle tension and strength in her muscles. Sam's hands moved to Kara's shoulders, gently pushing her jacket aside to reveal the bare skin underneath.

"Are you...sure?" Sam asked Kara, a look of concern flashing across her features.

"More than sure."

The sensation of their bodies pressed together became more pronounced. Kara's shirt rode up slightly, exposing her midriff, and the skin-to-skin contact created a whirlwind of emotions in her stomach. Sam's touch was both firm and gentle, her hands exploring every contour of Kara's body.

Soft murmurs of pleasure punctuated their kisses. Kara's fingers traced the line of Sam's jaw, feeling the subtle shifts in the shape of her face as their passion built. Sam's breath was hot against Kara's neck, sending shivers down her spine.

I can't believe this is happening...

Kara's hands moved to Sam's shirt. She unbuttoned it urgently. The fabric fell away, revealing her skin beneath. It was so soft, so bronzed. Kara was already obsessed with it. Sam moaned, taking her breath away.

“Stay quiet. We don’t want to be interrupted,” Kara whispered and gently laughed.

As they continued to explore each other, taking turns removing pieces of clothing until they were both in their underwear, the intensity of their connection grew. Kara’s lips traveled down Sam’s neck, tasting the salty sweetness of her skin. Sam’s hands roamed over Kara’s body, her touch firm and tender.

Sam’s response was equally enthusiastic. Her fingers traced patterns on Kara’s body, exploring every inch with a mix of wonder and desire.

As their passion started to reach its peak, the intensity of their connection was matched by the tenderness of their touch. Kara’s fingers explored Sam’s thighs, leading up to her wetness. Her fingers slid inside, feeling the heat and moisture of her arousal.

Kara’s touch became more deliberate, her fingers pushing softly inside of Sam, slowly curling them deep inside of her. She felt Sam’s body respond with shudders of pleasure while clearly trying her best to stay as quiet as possible.

“I want you to touch yourself as I fuck you,” Kara begged.

Sam looked into her eyes and did as asked, her fingers slowly sliding down and massaging her own clit in gentle circles.

Kara picked up the pace, fucking her deeper. Watching her body tighten up.

Sam’s hands gripped Kara’s shoulders, her nails digging in slightly as the pleasure intensified. Kara felt electrified as she watched Sam experience a series of orgasmic waves that crashed over her with increasing force.

“Don’t stop,” Sam gasped. “Please, don’t stop. I’m going to come. Fuck. Keep

fucking me.”

Kara’s heart raced at Sam’s plea, her own body responding as wetness soaked through her pants. She changed position and moved downward to press her lips against Sam’s inner thigh and replaced Sam’s fingers with her tongue, sucking and circling her swollen clit as Sam lost herself in a deep climax.

Sam’s hips bucked slightly as she reached her peak. Kara’s fingers and tongue continued their gentle, rhythmic motion, guiding Sam through the waves of pleasure.

As the intensity of Sam’s orgasm subsided, Kara’s touch grew gentler, her fingers brushing softly against Sam’s now-slick vulva. She leaned in and planted a final tender kiss on her body.

“That was...” Sam began, her voice calm. “Well...I can’t believe it. I can’t believe we just...did that. I didn’t expect it to...well...I’m just...I need a minute before...”

Kara smiled, her breath still unsteady. “You’re incredible. Just relax, I don’t need anything else,” she managed to splutter, her fingers gently tracing the outline of Sam’s body.

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Sam's gaze softened, her fingers brushing against Kara's cheek in a tender caress. "I didn't expect that to happen."

Kara nodded, her heart swelling with affection. "Nor did I. But I have been thinking about it all day. You took my mind off...everything."

As they lay together, the world outside seemed to disappear. The forest, the loss of Kara's friends, and the challenges that lay ahead were all put into perspective by the warmth of their shared intimacy.

"I didn't even know you were gay," Sam said as she looked up at the night sky, one arm behind her head. "I guess I hoped you were, but to be honest, it's been so long, I kind of forgot I was."

"I was never out as gay. Not really. I had a couple of girlfriends...or experiences...when I was younger, but I never really admitted it to myself. I think I was scared to tell my parents, which was stupid. They wouldn't have minded at all. I imagine they even suspected. I mean, come on. I'm pretty butch. I never brought a boyfriend home. Of course, they knew."

"I haven't even asked you... Did your parents make it?"

"It's not the sort of question we used to ask. But yeah...we talk about these things these days." Kara said sadly. "No is the answer to your question. They didn't. They were both infected. What about your family?"

"I'm so sorry. Mine had both died before the outbreak. I don't want to say I was

lucky...but, in fact..."

"Yeah, you were. I couldn't kill mine. It's my biggest regret. I left them," said Kara, her gut twisting into knots at the memory.

"It wasn't your fault. Just remember that, Kara."

"I know. Thank you."

"Come here," Sam said, holding open her arms to take Kara into her embrace. "Come sleep next to me. You're so brave. Let me hold you."

And like that, the two of them fell asleep under the stars, wrapped around each other, not at all aware of the cold night air or the possible dangers that lurked around them.

The following morning, Kara's eyes fluttered open, and she glanced at Sam, whose face was relaxed in a peaceful expression. The sight of her sleeping form filled Kara with a sense of contentment. And dare she admit it – hope? She gently untangled herself from Sam's embrace, taking care not to disturb her.

She decided to pack up their gear, check their supplies, and ensure they were ready for the journey. Kara's movements were methodical, each action reflecting her determination to reach Fort Haven. The sound of her activities eventually roused Sam, who blinked sleepily and stretched.

"Morning," Sam murmured. She propped herself up on one elbow and looked at Kara with a grin.

"Good morning," Kara replied. "Ready for the last leg of the journey?"

Sam laughed. "Ha! I'm zapped after last night, but sure. If my legs can carry me,

absolutely. I'm looking forward to seeing this Fort Haven of yours."

The intimacy of the previous night seemed to have laid a foundation of trust and understanding between them. They shared a moment as they gazed at each other, but the intimate moment soon became interrupted by a rustling sound nearby.

"Shit, did you hear that?" Kara whispered.

Sam looked at her, holding her hand over her mouth signaling to stay quiet. She pointed over the dense shrubs by the trees.

Kara grabbed the bat she'd just tucked into her bag. Sam looked down at her belt, slowly removing her knife. Slowly, they moved together towards the sound. The rustling turned into a deep grunting noise, and they saw the rotten zombie feasting on an animal in the undergrowth. Without a second thought, Kara grabbed her bat with both hands and in one swift motion thrust it into the half rotten head. The only way to truly finish off the undead. A brutal attack on the head.

Sam watched as Kara took charge of the situation. Impressed by the strength in her body and mind. The rotten walker fell to the ground, slumped over its own lunch.

"Well, that'll do." Kara huffed as she dragged the bat on the grass to remove the gooey mess left behind.

"Good job there. That was quick. Let's grab our bags and get going," Sam replied as she threw her rucksack over her shoulders and started heading for the way out.

"Oh shit, we need to move fast," Kara shouted as she pointed behind them.

Through the trees an outline emerged of more undead making their way toward them.

“Fuck. Run, now!”

The pair grabbed their supplies and ran as fast as they could. Each step was fueled with adrenaline as they paced out of there, desperate to get back to safety.

SAM

Sam stood at the edge of Fort Haven, her heart racing as she took in the view. The walls seemed a lot taller and more imposing than she'd imagined they'd be. It was as if they held secrets and stories they weren't ready to tell. She could see the watchtowers at each corner and the vigilant eyes of a couple of people scanning the surroundings. She felt a rush of uncertainty.

They're going to let us in, aren't they?

Kara walked beside her and grabbed her hand. It felt reassuring. "This is it. Finally, we made it!" Kara said. Sam detected a hint of pride in her voice.

"It's...impressive. I was expecting more of a welcoming party, to be honest. I know they're not expecting you, but...still. What's going on?" Sam replied, her gaze flickering over the fortified gates. There was an energy here, a pulse that felt uninviting and intimidating. "I guess maybe I'm just scared. It's so different from what I'm used to."

The corners of Kara's mouth lifted a little. "I totally understand. It's supposed to feel overwhelming. The whole idea is to put people off coming. Living and dead. But you get used to it. The structure, the routines... It feels like a sanctuary. It honestly does."

"Or maybe like a prison?" Sam mused aloud, her brow closing in together. She caught Kara's eye, and her heart fluttered as she recalled the journey together so far, the way Kara had felt in her arms, and the way their sex had deepened something between them.

Kara's expression softened. "It really is what you make of it," she said. "We all have roles here. We're trying to build something worth fighting for."

Sam recognized the determination in Kara's voice. She wanted to believe her, but doubts lingered. "When you tell them what happened to your friends...I just...I just won't know what to say."

Kara reached out and stroked Sam's forearm, sending warmth through her that lingered. "I'll tell them you saved me. They'll see you for who you are. You're not in any danger. Please believe me."

As they approached the gates, a guard stepped forward. His arms crossed, and a barely hidden aggression was etched into his features. "Stop! Arms in the air."

"It's me. I'm back," Kara announced, a note of authority lacing her tone. "This is Sam. She's a friend."

The guard's expression shifted. "Where are the others? We thought?—"

"I lost them, Danny. I was the only one who made it," Kara interrupted, lowering her arms and taking a few steps forward. "And this is the woman who saved my life."

"Saved your life?" the guard echoed. He narrowed his eyes as he scrutinized Sam. "And we're supposed just to believe that? How come she just saved you? What about Joan? Where's Joan? Is this woman holding you hostage? Don't fuck with us, Kara!"

Sam felt the deep weight of his gaze, the pressure mounting as she tried to hold her ground.

"You have every right to be cautious," she said in a firm but respectful tone. "The others were already dead by the time we reached Kara. I brought her back to you."

She's injured. I'm just trying to help. I won't trouble you, but I was promised supplies if needed."

The guard hesitated, glancing between the two women. A single tear rolled down his cheek. "Not my Joanie. Not my fucking Joanie."

"I'm so sorry, Danny," Kara sniffed, rubbing her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Just get inside," he said abruptly. "I'll be watching you two."

"Come on," protested Kara. "There's no need to be like that."

"Just get in. Go explain yourself to the big wigs." He snorted as he opened a heavy door and directed them inside with a flick of his head.

As they entered the fort, Sam felt the atmosphere shift. The energy was still intense but much more upbeat. Children played, adults were busy at work, and conversations echoed in the open air. For a moment, it felt like she'd gone back to the old world.

Wow...what are the odds? This place is thriving.

"This way," Kara said, leading Sam deeper into the fort. "You're going to have to meet some people."

As they walked, Sam caught snippets of conversations and laughter floating around them. She couldn't help but admire the sense of community that enveloped them, but a flicker of anxiety gnawed at her. Would they accept her? Would they see her as a threat? Would they kill her on the spot? Is Kara who she says she is?

Kara led her to a gathering area where a small group was seated around a fire pit. "Hey, ev...everyone," Kara said, barely able to get her words out. "I'm back. This is

S...Sam. I'm so sorry. I'm the only one left."

The group looked up, their expressions a mix of curiosity and suspicion. A tall woman with a striking scar across her cheek broke the silence. "Kara. I'm so glad to see you. What happened?"

"We were attacked. They didn't make it. I I don't know what to say, Mona,"

"There's nothing you can say," the woman replied. "They're gone. It is the risk they chose to take. I'm sorry for you, Kara. I am sorry you had to go through that."

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“Thank you, Mona,” Kara said, unable now to control her sobs. “I missed you guys so much. We lost good people.”

“The best,” Mona replied, clenching her hands together.

“I got to her just in time,” Sam ventured. “I brought her back. She’s putting a brave face on it, but she’s not doing well.”

“Sorry, everyone,” Kara interjected. “This is Sam. She got to me and saved me. She’s been protecting me. She’s a survivor, like us.”

“Protecting you?” another voice chimed in, a burly man with a braided beard. “Maybe she needs to bear in mind that it’s just as dangerous in here as it is out there.”

“Enough, Jenk,” Kara cried out, almost shouting. “You can trust Sam. She’s done what she needs to do to survive, just like the rest of us. I can’t believe you guys! I thought you’d be happy to see us. I lost five good people out there. I’ve been through hell! And this is how you react? What’s going on with you all? Give me a goddamned break.”

The tension in the air thickened, and Sam could feel every gaze on her. They were weighing her up. She glanced at Kara, searching for reassurance, but Kara was too upset to speak.

“So, what’s your story?” the woman with the scar asked, her tone softening slightly. “How did you end up finding Kara? I’m Mona, by the way. Oh, and I can tell if you’re a bullshitter, so don’t try me.”

As Sam began to recount her journey, she noticed how Kara leaned in closer, their shoulders brushing. She realized that everyone around the fire pit had also seen.

“I’m part of a nomadic group. I suppose you could call me their leader, but we never really made it official,” Sam explained. “We moved from place to place, searching for supplies, looking for safe spots. When we were out searching, I found Kara on her own, injured. She was desperate to get back here, and I couldn’t leave her to make that journey on her own.”

“You risked your life for her,” the scarred woman said. Sam thought she could hear a hint of admiration as she spoke. “That counts for something. Are you planning on staying?”

“I’ll need to get back to my people at some point. But perhaps I could rest up here a while?” she asked, daring to hope that this wouldn’t cause an issue.

“What?” questioned Kara, her eyes widening as she wrapped her arms around her body and took a step back. “But why?”

“I’m the best chance they’ve got. I wasn’t planning to just abandon them,” she explained, knowing that she had touched on a subject she and Kara hadn’t really had time to discuss. “You knew that.”

Another man in the group coughed, drawing everyone’s attention away from Sam and Kara. He was a younger guy in his early twenties. He was clean-shaven. His clothes were neat, and his hair was carefully combed. “We all know what it’s like to fight for the ones we care about, Kara. If the lady says she isn’t staying, she isn’t staying. Just drop it. Sam, as far as I’m concerned, you can stay as long as you like...but you’ll have to run it by the captain.”

Sam decided to read his attitude as one of warmth, although a part of her still felt the

tension lingering. Would the others at Fort Haven feel the same, or would they associate her with the deaths of five of their tribe? And who was this captain guy?

Kara smiled at Sam, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. "See? I told you everything would be okay."

But Sam still couldn't shake the feeling it wasn't going to be as simple as that.

Later that evening, after they'd had a chance to wash up and change their clothes, Sam and Kara found a quiet corner near the central area in the courtyard. Everyone had gathered to share food and keep warm by huddling together, blankets wrapped around their shoulders. The laughter and chatter faded into a gentle hum, allowing them a moment to breathe.

"Thank you," Sam said, her voice low. "You stuck up for me earlier, and I appreciate it."

Kara shifted closer, their thighs brushing against each other. "You deserve it. You'll see. Everyone will come around. They need time. I want you to stay, you know? I got upset when you mentioned going back. Life would be better for you here and we could...you know, get to know each other more."

Sam looked at Kara, her heart racing as she noticed the way the evening light caught her features. She watched as Kara's lips curled into what had become a familiar, inviting smile. "I know. Let's not think about it tonight. It's a big ask."

"I have to think about it tonight," Kara replied with annoyance. "I don't want to just let you walk away and not give any of this a chance. How often do you find a connection? A real connection?"

The air between them crackled with unspoken tension, and Sam could feel the pull,

the longing that had been growing all day. “What if they don’t accept me? What if I’m just a reminder of what they lost? Who’s this captain, and why have you never mentioned him. I don’t feel at ease.”

Kara’s expression softened, and she reached out, her fingers brushing against Sam’s. “You’re not just a reminder. You had nothing to do with my gang dying. Nothing. But listen, you could be a part of this now. Don’t you want to stay here...with me?”

Kara touched Sam’s hand, and a shiver ran down her spine. The warmth of Kara’s hand was comforting but frustrating. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It won’t be easy, but it’s something worth thinking about. Will you think about it, please?” Kara replied, her eyes searching Sam’s. “And the captain’s a woman, by the way. Laetitia. You’ll meet her at some point. She’ll already know about you.”

“Really?” Sam whispered as she grabbed Kara’s hand and squeezed it. “She knows?”

“Sure. She knows everything. But you didn’t answer my question.” Kara shook her head in disappointment. “I think you’re scared of exploring this...whatever it is that’s happening here.”

Their gazes locked, the tension building as Fort Haven and its people seemed to fade into the distance. In that moment, all that remained was the undeniable connection they shared.

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“Kara...” Sam began, but the words fell away as Kara leaned in closer, her breath warm against Sam’s skin.

“Please just give me, and this place, a chance, even just for a little longer than one night. Don’t leave me yet,” Kara murmured, her voice thick with emotion.

Sam felt her heart race as Kara’s lips met hers in a soft kiss.

They pulled away slowly, their foreheads resting against each other. Sam’s heart thundered in her chest. “I want you. It’s just complicated. I have people who need me.”

“Tomorrow is never promised, Sam. Just think about it.”

“I’m open to considering it. Is that enough?” Sam replied.

They shared another kiss, this one fueled by a more profound urgency. Sam’s hands ran through Kara’s short hair, and she couldn’t help but smile against her lips. Her fingers traced the curve of Kara’s jaw, feeling the strength and softness of her features.

Kara’s hands roamed over Sam’s back. Each caress felt like a promise.

This woman. Fuck, she drives me wild.

“We should probably join in a little with the others,” she suggested, glancing toward the fire.

Sam shook her head slowly and laughed a little. “Yeah, if we must. I don’t want them to think I’m keeping you from them.”

They walked back toward the group in a comfortable silence. Their shoulders brushed against one another occasionally, an unconscious connection that felt natural to Sam.

When they returned, the atmosphere was alive with chatter and the comforting aroma of a communal meal being prepared. A few familiar faces turned toward them, their expressions shifting from curiosity to acceptance.

Kara slipped her hand into Sam’s, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “See? They’re starting to warm up. You know what it’s like in these places. Trust and respect is earned.”

“I hope so,” Sam replied. It felt good to be here, to be part of something bigger than herself.

“Do you want something to eat?” Kara suggested, leading Sam toward a large pot simmering over the fire. The sight reminded Sam of the warmth of family dinners.

God, I miss everyone. I miss them all so much.

“Hey, you two,” a voice called out. It was Mona. She was ladling food into bowls. “Care for a bite?”

Kara glanced at Sam, who felt a rush of gratitude. “Of course,” Kara replied, her smile brightening. “We’d love to. We’re starving!”

As they settled into the circle around the fire, Sam couldn’t help but notice the ease with which Kara engaged with everyone. She was so animated, and the humor and camaraderie were evident in every movement she made. Sam listened and watched. It

was refreshing to be somewhere else, somewhere safe, somewhere with walls.

“You know, it’s pretty brave of you to come here after everything,” Mona said, her expression earnest. “Most people wouldn’t have dared come back. Not after losing everyone like that.”

“Where else would I go? I need you all like you need me.” Kara sighed as she reached for Mona’s hand.

“I’m really glad you made it, and your friend seems okay, too.” Mona winked as she lightly squeezed her hand.

After dinner as the sun sank low and the fire crackled around them, people started getting up and dancing as others played well worn acoustic guitars and parts of an old drum kit. Sam hadn’t seen anything like it in years. Her group had to be quiet, vigilant, aware of limiting their sound. This place felt so free.

Kara stood up, extending her hand toward Sam. “Care to join me, ma’am?”

“What? I can’t dance! And don’t call me Ma’am. I’m not that old,” Sam protested, a mock-angry sigh escaping from her lips as she tilted her head to one side and smiled.

Kara huffed loudly, taking Sam by surprise. The younger woman’s eyes glinted mischievously. “Got it! Sorry, Sam. I can’t dance either, you know? But why would we let a small detail like that stop us?”

With a mix of reluctance and excitement, Sam took Kara’s hand, allowing herself to be led into the circle. Allowing herself to just exist in the moment.

“See, you can dance...a little,” Kara joked as she pulled her in closer.

“Don’t tease me. I’ll make you pay for that.” Sam leaned in, whispering softly in her ear.

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“Is that a threat or a promise? Either way, I’m in.”

“You know what? You come across all sweet and polite, but really, you know exactly what you want,” Sam teased, brushing her fingers over Kara’s shoulder.

“I do know what I want. You. I can’t wait to show you our sleeping arrangements. When's the last time you slept in a room, in a proper bed with real bedding? Oh, and with a total hottie.” Kara bit her lip.

“I think I’m about ready to find out. Lead the way, will you?” Sam smirked as she held out her hand.

5

KARA

Kara stood at the entrance to her cabin and looked out onto the pulsing life of the community in the daylight. At least half a dozen people were putting together another makeshift gate for the east side of the perimeter fence. It seemed to be cobbled together from reclaimed wood and reinforced with scrap metal. Like the others, it would mark the threshold between the chaotic world outside and what Kara had come to think of as the fragile safety within.

Jeez, I missed this place. The hard work. The community. A real fucking bed.

Next to her, Sam shifted from one foot to another. Kara immediately recognized this as a sign of anxiousness. She hadn’t known Sam for long, but she could read her body

language like a book. She turned her head and noted the blend of excitement and apprehension.

“Ready for the grand tour?” Kara asked, nudging Sam gently with her elbow.

“I think so. Sure. Let’s do it,” Sam replied, but Kara could hear the slight tremor in her voice.

As they walked across the central courtyard, Kara felt the familiar warmth of the fort envelop her. As a lifelong vegetarian, she didn’t want to admit that the scent of bacon simmering in the fort’s makeshift stone ovens smelled insanely delicious. The distant sound of laughter added to the homely atmosphere, but Kara knew that not everyone would embrace her return and the fact that she had brought Sam back rather than those she had left with. She had had to make a quick visit to the outdoor latrine in the middle of the night and had heard the whispers of a couple of teenage girls as she’d walked past them. Their wary glances told her everything she needed to know. She wasn’t trusted. Not by everyone. It felt like starting over.

“Okay, Sam. I say we start with the basics here. What do you reckon?” Kara said, beckoning for the hesitant Sam to come a little closer. “So, this is where we were last night. It kinda looks different in the daylight. We have different names for it. The yard, the courtyard, the common area... It’s basically where we all meet up to eat and share news. You don’t have to eat here. Everyone’s free to eat in their cabins, or not to eat...or whatever. But I like coming here. It builds connections.”

The entire area was bustling, filled with families and individuals chatting, trading stories, and sharing food. Kara spotted some of her friends and waved. Kara saw immediately that although their smiles were warm, there was something else in their expressions: their features appeared tinged with uncertainty as soon as they spotted Sam. A stranger in their place of safety.

“This place feels...like it’s got a real vibe,” Sam said as she took in the scene with wide eyes, her mouth gaping into an O shape. “It’s nothing like what I’m used to. In fact, I haven’t seen this many...live humans...since before the outbreak.”

Kara couldn’t contain a snicker. “I know, right? I guess it’s a whole lot more than just survival here. We try to actually live, you know? I think the idea originally was to make it feel as normal as possible.”

“I totally get it. It’s wonderful. It reminds me of...” but before Sam could continue her train of thought, Kara felt a firm hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Laeticia standing there with a hardened expression.

“Captain,” Kara said in greeting. Her tone remained the same even as she went to shake hands with the woman. Her gesture was refused with a brief shake of the head. She felt Sam tense up beside her, clearly picking up on Laeticia's demeanor.

“Hello. Nice to meet you, ma’am,” Sam mumbled softly with a polite nod and a timid smile.

Laeticia ignored Sam completely. Her sharp gaze never once left Kara. “You and I need to talk. And I’d rather see you alone, Kara.”

Kara shuffled a little, looking down at the floor, and gulped before turning her body to face Sam. “Don’t worry, okay? You wait right here. Or go grab a bite to eat, and I’ll come find you.”

Sam took a nervous step backward and shook her head slowly. Kara could see the unease in those deep almond-shaped eyes she found so enchanting.

Laeticia led Kara toward a secluded corner of the fort.

Oh, great. Where are her henchmen? Why is she taking me over here?

As soon as they were out of sight, Laetitia turned to face Kara. She crossed her arms across her chest moodily, and Kara noticed the fierce glint in her bright green eyes.

“What the hell were you thinking? Why the fuck would you bring her here? There’s a goddamned vetting process, you stupid idiot, or did you forget all about that?” Laetitia hissed, flicking her long black hair over her shoulder and thumping her palm with her other hand. The rage simmering beneath the surface of her questions was unmistakable.

“She brought me here, captain. She saved my life,” Kara felt her jaw tighten as she started to plead with Laetitia. “I wouldn’t have made it back without her.”

“And your entire team is dead? Is that right? We haven’t had that number of deaths since we set up here,” Laetitia snapped, her eyes narrowing. “You were their leader, Kara. They were counting on you to protect them. But no! Instead, you flounce back in here with some random woman none of us has ever before laid eyes on. How am I supposed to trust her? Or you, for that matter. You’re ridiculous, did you know that?”

Laetitia’s words struck Kara like a physical blow. Guilt gnawed at her insides—guilt she had been trying to bury since she returned to the fort. She had replayed the mission in her mind a hundred times, wondering what she could have done differently to save her team. But the truth was, she didn’t have an answer. They had been outnumbered, caught off-guard in a situation no one could have predicted. Overrun by the dead.

“You’re talking as if I actually wanted this to happen,” Kara said quietly, struggling to keep her emotions in check. “We were ambushed. They turned within seconds. It all happened so fast. I didn’t think I’d survive either, but Sam saw me and saved my fucking life.”

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Laeticia's eyes softened for the briefest of moments, but then the sternness returned. "Do you realize how dangerous it is to bring back a stranger? I've never allowed it! Not even family members get in here without my say-so. This is how it works here, and you fucking know it as well as I do. What if she's a threat? What if it was her plan all along to get in here?"

Kara knew that the living could be as much a threat as the undead, but she felt her fist curl up at the unjustness of the captain's words. "Sam isn't like that. She's been through a lot. And I've seen her. She's resourceful, and she's skilled. And the only reason she's here is because she wants to help. We need people like her. She's not trying to stay, although I want her to."

Laeticia scowled, and she stomped her heel onto the dirt below their feet. "We need loyalty. That's all that matters here. And I'm not sure where yours lay anymore. With her, it seems. You were seen last night...you and this Sam woman. Listen, I don't judge...but seriously, Kara?"

The words cut deep, and Kara pressed her palms together as tears formed in her eyes. She was having trouble believing Laeticia was speaking to her like this. There had always been mutual respect between them. "My loyalty is to Fort Haven. It always has been. You know that, Captain."

Laeticia studied her for what felt like an hour. The silence was deafening. Kara knew the woman was weighing her plea carefully, and she dreaded the response...whenever it would come. "I hope you're right," she said finally. "Because if anything happens—if she turns out to be a threat—it's all on you. And the consequences will be severe, Kara. You mark my words."

Kara felt her throat tighten. “I understand.”

With that, Laetitia spun around and walked away, leaving Kara standing alone. What had been said weighed heavily on her conscience.

Have I put Sam in danger by allowing her to come here?

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She knew she had to get back to Sam, and she wanted to straighten out her nerves beforehand.

Sam was sitting on a bench near the dining tables when Kara found her. She was looking around cautiously, and Kara felt a pang of pity for the older woman. She looked so lost and helpless. As she approached, Sam gave Kara a questioning look.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Sam asked.

Kara forced the most cheerful smile she could muster, not wanting to burden Sam with any of what the captain had just said. Laetitia’s words would have scared Sam, and that was the last thing Kara wanted. “Everything’s fine. We were talking Fort business.”

Sam looked far from convinced, but Kara could tell that, for ease’s sake, her lover was going to let this little white lie slip. “You sure, sweetheart?”

“Ooh! I like it when you call me that,” Kara repeated. “Yeah. Obviously, we were expected back with a ton of supplies. Maybe not a ton...but, you know? We have to come up with another plan. But anyway,” she concluded with a forced grin, “let’s keep going.”

As they approached the workshop, Jamie, the fort’s primary builder, waved them over with a grin.

“Hey, Kara,” Jamie called out. Kara had known Jamie before the outbreak. He was an old family friend. She remembered the day she saw him arrive at Fort Haven almost a year ago and how she’d vouched for him. He was a sight for sore eyes. She rushed over to see him, her eyes wide open, ready for one of his bear hugs. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Sam,” Kara declared, feeling a surge of pride as she said it. “She’s going to be staying with us. For now, at least.”

“Hey! It’s nice to meet you, Sam. So, what’s your story, lady?” Jamie asked, leaning against a workbench and flashing the widest, friendliest of smiles.

“I...I am...was...in this nomadic group. I’ve got lots of skills. We survived in the wild for years,” Sam explained as Kara gave her an encouraging smile.

Jamie’s eyebrows raised. “That’s impressive. We could always use more hands on deck here. Are you good at building? Carpentry? I’d love to show you how we do things.”

Sam’s eyes sparkled at the offer. Kara felt a surge of relief wash through her, grateful that Jamie was welcoming her lover. “Absolutely! I’d love to give it a go. I can put my hand to most things.”

Maybe Sam will find her place here.

“Do you see, Sam? People are naturally drawn to you. You’ll have a home here. Have you thought about it?” Kara said as she gave Sam a playful nudge.

“I don’t know,” Sam replied, one corner of her mouth turning down as she shrugged her shoulders. “I feel like an outsider, and I guess I will for a while.”

Kara couldn't help but roll her eyes as she turned to face her. She realized in an instant that it was the wrong thing to do and started wracking her brain for the right words. "You know something? You're not an outsider as far as I'm concerned. You could have left me for dead that first day. In fact, I can't work out why you didn't. The whole area was swamped with the undead. I'd have run away. But you chose to stay and save me. That means something. You chose to bring me here, to personally escort me, and now you're considering leaving?"

Sam's gaze softened, and the tension in her shoulders looked to be easing a little as her arms dropped down to her side. "You've made it all sound a lot easier than it is, Kara. I'm not saying it's a no. Let's just see how it goes, okay?"

Kara smiled and pulled Sam closer, whispering gently in her ear, "I promise it'll be worth it," before landing a gentle kiss on her lips.

Later that evening, as they settled into their room, the intimacy of the space closed in around them. Laetitia's harsh words seemed to be playing on a loop in her head. She hadn't told Sam any of the details, but she also knew that Sam could see that she was distracted, that something was wrong.

"What's up, Kara? You've gone quiet...and you seem so down," Sam asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

She moved closer, her heart aching at the vulnerability in Sam's tone. "I'm fine. Everything will be just fine. It may take time before people get used to you, take time to get used to...us. But yes. All you have to do is show them you should be here."

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“I think that’s easier said than done, and it makes me wonder if I should really stay? I am going to cause you more trouble than it’s worth?” Sam mumbled as her gaze drifted to the floor.

Kara reached out, gently lifting Sam’s chin so their eyes met. “You can’t tell me you don’t feel the same way I do. You do feel it?”

“Yes,” Sam breathed, her answer barely audible but filled with longing.

The world seemed to vanish as their lips touched. The kiss was soft at first, almost hesitant—a delicate brush that sent a ripple through Kara. Sam’s lips were warm and full, slightly parted, inviting Kara to explore further. As the kiss deepened, Kara’s mouth molded against Sam’s with urgency.

Their tongues met in a slow, sensual dance, sliding together in a rhythm that felt instinctual. It was as if they were made to fit. Kara could taste the faint hint of salt on Sam’s lips, mixed with a slight sweetness. This made her crave more. The warmth of Sam’s tongue against hers sent a jolt through her body. Her pulse quickened. Every flick and caress brought a new surge of heat as slick saliva mingled between them, adding to the intoxicating sensation.

Kara’s skin prickled as her breasts pressed against Sam’s in the bed they shared. Her heart raced in time with the kiss, and every nerve seemed to light up under Sam’s touch. It wasn’t just a kiss—it was like an electric current running through her, spreading warmth from her lips down her spine and pooling low in her belly. Sam’s soft moan vibrated against Kara’s mouth, and it took everything in Kara not to lose herself entirely in the sensation.

“You’re really good at this,” Kara remarked as she pulled back.

Sam gave her a small smile. “You’re really good at making me crave you.”

Kara’s hands slid up Sam’s sides, her fingers pressing into the warmth of her skin, feeling the muscles tense under her touch. Sam let out a soft sigh.

Sam’s hands were no longer tentative. They gripped Kara’s waist, pulling her closer, their bodies pressed hard together. Kara could feel the heat radiating off Sam, the thrum of her heart beating fast in sync with her own.

As their kiss grew more heated, Kara’s hand dipped lower, sliding under the waistband of Sam’s panties. Sam gasped against her mouth, her breath coming in short bursts. The sound sent a pulse of desire straight through Kara, her fingers moving without hesitation now, seeking the wet heat between Sam’s legs. Sam moaned softly, her body arching into Kara's touch, urging her on.

Kara's fingers found their mark, sliding through Sam's slick folds, and the shiver that ran through Sam’s body made Kara’s heart palpitate. She could feel Sam’s fingers fumbling at her own waistband, slipping past the fabric to return the favor, and when their fingers found each other at the exact same moment, both of them gasped.

Kara’s breath caught as she felt Sam’s fingers press inside of her, sliding deep and slow, matching the rhythm Kara had set between Sam’s legs. They moved together, their fingers working confidently, every motion sending waves of pleasure that left them both trembling.

Their bodies moved together, each thrust of their fingers more urgent than the last, the wet sounds of their fingers sliding into each other filling the room. Kara’s free hand gripped Sam’s waist, holding her close as the pressure built inside her, tightening her core until she thought she might snap.

When the climax hit, it was like a flood—wave after wave of pleasure crashing over them, leaving them both gasping, trembling, their bodies entwined. They stayed like that for a moment, fingers still inside each other, catching their breath as the last tremors of their release faded.

“I never thought I’d find this again,” Sam said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Neither did I,” Kara admitted, “but I want more. Take everything off and let me taste you. Let me make you stay a little longer here with me. I never want you to go.”

Sam kept her eyes fixed on Kara’s as she laid herself on her back, removing the remaining clothing that covered her hot flesh.

“Right now, you can have anything you want. I’m all yours,” Sam whispered as the world around them disappeared.

6

SAM

Sam tugged at the collar of her jacket and pulled it higher against her neck, the texture of the worn leather pressing against her throat. In the faint dawn light, she listened to the gentle rustling noises coming from the cabins and yurts scattered within the walls of Fort Haven.

She was deep in thought. Much of what was playing through her mind was the idea she’d formed of her current whereabouts. She’d started to believe the place seemed as much a prison as it was a sanctuary. The exterior walls loomed high above her, jagged and uneven, marked by patches of moss and dried vines, but even these signs of life seemed to cling desperately to the decaying remnants of a once vibrant

civilization. Sam held her breath slightly as she looked up. It wasn't just the physical walls—it was the eyes. The endless pairs of eyes followed her wherever she went.

What do these guards want with me? I don't get it.

She closed her own for a moment, trying to regain focus, but she could still sense that she was being observed. And closely. The people here weren't like the nomads she'd gotten used to. They seemed to cling to their past lives, to what the world had been before it all fell apart. None of them had a clue what it meant to live outside these walls.

But here? Here, it was like they were still trying to claw back the world they had lost, and they were suspicious of anything—or anyone—that didn't fit into what Sam thought of as their narrow vision.

Is this really living? I feel as if I'm on trial.

She heard the familiar creaking of Kara's boots before she turned around. Kara had a distinct way of moving. She only had a slight frame but was heavier-footed than was perhaps advisable in a zombie apocalypse. It was a comforting sound, though...and about the only thing in this place that didn't make Sam feel homesick. Kara knew Fort Haven much better than Sam did. She was used to the ways here. Kara carried herself around these people with ease. And they trusted her.

"Hey, babe. What's up? You sleep okay?" Kara had such a soft way of speaking, but her voice also had a subtle strength that always grounded Sam somehow.

Sam shrugged, her eyes not meeting Kara's. "I really needed some air. It was kinda stuffy in the cabin when I woke up."

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Kara stepped closer, her presence warm beside Sam in the morning chill. “Are you okay? You don’t seem okay.”

Sam wasn’t sure how to answer the question. How could she explain the claustrophobia creeping up her spine, the sensation of being trapped? Not just in the cabin, but in the place Kara saw as her home.

“I guess I’m fine,” she said, though she knew her voice was probably betraying her.

Kara’s brows hardened slightly. “Sam? You don’t have to pretend with me. That’s not what we’re about. Let’s try to keep this thing between us real, okay? You said we’re all about honesty.”

Sam let out a long breath as she scratched the back of her neck. “It’s...it’s just different here compared with what I’m used to. I don’t know how to explain it. Basically, I don’t fit with this environment. I feel trapped.”

“You’re not supposed to fit. We can’t all just magically become BFFs just because we all live together inside these walls. Who said you had to fit in, anyway? This place is safety, community, and a new life,” Kara said, leaning against the wall next to her. “You’re supposed to survive. And you know how to do that better than anyone.”

“Is that actually true, though?” Sam’s voice was tinged with doubt. “This isn’t really survival. I feel like I’m suffocating.”

Kara’s hand brushed Sam’s arm gently. “I know exactly what you’re saying. Fort Haven can feel a little like a cage at times. But the people here...they don’t have

much of a clue what it's like out there. Not really. They think they do. We all saw stuff at the beginning. We all lost people. But they haven't seen half of what you've seen. Do you really prefer being out there, where the world is your enemy?"

Sam's throat felt dry suddenly. Since the collapse of society, she had seen things that still haunted her dreams—the rapid rot of civilization and the way it became very quickly evident that the dead weren't the only ones to fear. The things people did to survive had left scars on her mind, scars that Fort Haven, with its neat little cabins and polished façade could never erase.

"I miss the road," Sam admitted, her voice quiet. "Don't get me wrong. The solar-powered showers here are a thing of beauty. I mean, congratulations on the way you guys have put all this together. But I think I miss the freedom. This isn't freedom, Kara. The simplicity of it. I knew who I was out there. I know we've not been here long, but it's as if I'm wearing a mask. Like everyone is wearing a mask. The captain? What's the deal there? Why do you all call her that? We are back to law and order, higher ranks and scum of the ground. Out there, it's just survival and freedom."

Kara nodded with understanding. "I miss it, too. But I need them, Sam. Fort Haven—this place...it's been my lifeline. And the captain? She asked us to call her that. She's the brains behind the outfit. The leader. Maybe it's an authority thing. I've never really thought much about it. It's just that there are rules here...and we need to stick by them. That's why it works."

Sam's gaze fell to the ground, her eyes searching for something to focus on. Kara was sweet and kind, and in need of a home.

"What if we don't need the rules? What if this place ends up grinding us down?"

Kara's hand slid down to grasp Sam's, her grip firm and steady. "I've not changed since I've been here. And I won't let them change you...change us. Just give it a little

longer. We can try to get the others here to try to make something more inviting for you.”

Slowly, Kara wrapped her arms around Sam, drawing her in for a tight hug.

“Come on,” Kara said, tugging her gently. “We’re heading outside today. And I need you focused.”

Sam snorted lightly. “I’m always focused.”

Kara laughed. “I know.”

The gate to Fort Haven groaned as it opened. Sam felt a familiar rush of adrenaline as she looked out onto the vast emptiness stretching out in front of them like a wound that refused to heal. The landscape was overgrown with weeds and wild vegetation reclaiming the land. In the distance, the silhouette of the mountains rose against the dark and foreboding sky.

The world beyond the walls was eerily quiet. There were no birds, no animals—just the faint rustle of wind.

What’s going on?

But she knew the silence was deceptive. The dead could be anywhere, lurking in the shadows, waiting. Sam knew better than to trust the quiet. Moments like these, the calm before the storm, could turn deadly in an instant.

Kara walked beside her, her steps confident and sure. Behind them, the rest of the group followed—five in total, including Riley, one of the captain’s sidekicks, who’d already made his disdain for Sam abundantly clear. Sam could feel his eyes on her even now, as if he was waiting for her to slip up, to give him a reason to rush to

Laticia. Or to kill her on the spot.

“Stick to the plan,” Kara said under her breath so that only Sam could hear. “We’re just scouting an old army barracks out east. We’ll be in and out. The army has long gone, of course. The last time we went up there, the place was overrun with the infected, but Laticia thinks they’ll have moved on by now. Or they’ll be weaker.

Sam nodded, adjusting the strap of her backpack. The weight of her gear was familiar, comforting in a way that few things were anymore. Her fingers brushed the hilt of her knife, the cool metal a reminder of the countless times it had saved her and her friends’ lives.

As they walked, the remnants of the old world became more apparent—rusted signs, abandoned vehicles, and homes with shattered windows.

This was once someone’s home, someone’s life.

The barracks loomed ahead. Sam’s stomach twisted at the sight of it. The army had fallen soon after the outbreak. The cities and towns were overrun with the sick and dying, and people had turned violent. They’d been unable to contain the sheer volume of the infected. Sam imagined that soldiers must have gone AWOL in search of their loved ones until there was nothing left.

They approached the entrance cautiously, weapons drawn. Sam’s eyes scanned the area for any signs of movement, and her senses were on high alert.

Kara signaled for them to split into two groups. She and Sam would take the east wing while Riley and the others covered the west. Sam was grateful for the distance from Riley. His presence had been grating on her since they’d left Fort Haven.

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As they entered the building, the stench of decay hit Sam like a wave. The air was thick with the smell of rot and mildew, the floor slick with what looked like dried blood. It never got any easier to smell the undead. She fought back the urge to gag, focusing instead on the task at hand.

“Stay close. I want you right here next to me,” Kara said. Her command was unmistakable, and Sam couldn’t help but feel slightly annoyed by it.

Sam nodded despite herself. It felt as though the air itself was resisting her lungs. For the first time in a long while, fear gnawed at the edges of her composure. It wasn’t fear of the infected. She’d grown used to them over time. It was something far more complicated. It was the fear of being inadequate, of making the wrong decision...and of Riley thinking he was right about her. And the fear of her feelings towards another human. Life was easier when others meant less. Her body felt taut, every muscle alert as she anticipated what would come next.

“How many people do you think died here?” Sam muttered, though her voice was so small it almost didn’t sound like her own.

Kara’s eyes flicked briefly toward her, scanning her face before returning to the darkened corridors ahead. “Too many,” she replied, the weight of past deaths echoing in her words. The sound of it settled like a cold hand against Sam’s spine.

The silence between them stretched out, punctuated only by the soft pats of their footsteps on the hard concrete floor. Sam’s heart was a drumbeat in her ears, loud and relentless, like a countdown she couldn’t stop. She wanted desperately to run out of there, to turn back, but couldn’t let herself. They needed the supplies. She knew Fort

Haven depended on these runs, and more than that, Kara depended on her.

This place isn't right. Something's up.

A faint, almost imperceptible noise echoed from somewhere down the hall, pulling Sam from her spiraling thoughts. She came to an immediate standstill, the sound threading through the stale air—soft shuffling, the kind only human feet could make.

“What was that? I heard something,” Sam whispered, her entire body tensing up as she crouched down to the floor, trying to make herself smaller.

Kara's jaw clenched. She nodded once, her hand instinctively moving toward her machete. “Get up. Stay sharp.”

The hallway seemed to grow narrower, the shadows deeper as they inched forward. The cold that permeated the building was different now—it wasn't just the absence of warmth—it was the presence of death. Sam's skin prickled.

When they reached the double doors at the end of the hall, Sam's hand trembled slightly as she gripped the handle. The metal felt like ice. Her breath caught in her throat as the door creaked open, the sound seeming too loud in this place of ghosts.

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and there, huddled in the corner under a blanket, was the source of the sound. A person. Alive, barely, but alive.

Sam's heart thudded louder. Her fear flipped her stomach, the jolting sensation almost causing her to gag. The woman's ragged breathing was the only thing filling the silence, each wheeze like a plea for help. As Sam took in the sight of her—the gaunt, hollow-eyed face, the skin stretched tightly over brittle bones.

Is she still alive?

She looked to Kara, who was rushing toward the woman, her face a mask of concern. The woman's lips parted, a cracked whisper escaping them: "Help...me."

Kara's hand moved forward to help her. "We need to get her out of here," she said, turning back with a confused look on her face as she spotted Sam, who had failed to make her way fully into the room.

Sam's pulse thudded in her neck. It was getting faster. Faster. Her instincts screamed at her that this wasn't a good idea. Her mind raced. What were their options here?

None. There are no options.

The woman was too weak, too far gone. And there, at the base of her neck, hidden beneath the layers of grime and blood, Sam noticed it—the unmistakable bruise-like streak of infection.

We're too late. She's infected.

Kara hadn't seen it yet, but Sam knew there was no time to explain and certainly no time for debate. She stepped forward and strode toward the frail form of a woman. The infected blinked up at her, eyes filled with desperation, a faint flicker of hope in their hollow depths.

Sam's chest constricted. She deeply felt the burden of what she was about to do. She was angry that the decision she was about to make fell heavily onto her shoulders alone. But she couldn't have the luxury of anger. Not here. Not now.

"Sam, help her up. What are you doing?" But Sam barely registered what Kara was asking of her.

Without a word, Sam pulled out her knife. The weight of it in her hand felt good. She

was momentarily in total control. Kara's head snapped toward her, eyes wide with confusion, but Sam was already in motion.

The woman's gaze shifted to the blade, and in that split second, it was clear that she understood her fate. She let out a strangled gasp, but it was too late.

Sam's hand moved swiftly, the blade pushing into the woman's throat, allowing her to drop unconscious before pushing the blade into the side of her head.

The world around Sam seemed to slow. Kara's voice broke through Sam's mental fog. "What the hell?"

"She was infected," Sam said, her voice hoarse as she held back her tears. She kept her gaze steady as she spoke. "I saw the signs. It was so obvious."

For a moment, Kara just stared at her in disbelief. Sam could feel the intensity of her gaze burning into her, but she didn't flinch. She couldn't. She'd done what had to be done.

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From behind them, Riley's voice cut through the silent tension like a jagged blade. "Tough call," he said with disdain, but there was something else there, too—a reluctant respect. "I guess you've got the stomach for this after all."

Sam's muscles tightened, bracing for the verbal assault she knew was coming. But there was nothing. Riley didn't move in for the kill as she expected. He stood there, sizing her up, his eyes hard and calculating.

"I told you this ain't my first rodeo," Sam said, shrugging her shoulders and raising her palms to the sky, "I can make tough calls."

Riley's lip curled as his eyes flicked briefly to the dead woman at her feet. His jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck tensing before he turned away with a grunt. Come on. "Let's get moving. There's no time to waste."

Sam's breath left her in a slow exhale, her body still vibrating with adrenaline. Kara's eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, searching her face for... For what? Was she looking for signs of remorse or guilt? If so, she wasn't going to find anything. All Sam could feel was the cold, hard certainty of survival.

Without saying a word to each other, they left the room and made their way back through the dark, decaying corridors. The silence between them was thick, but Sam didn't let it bother her. She'd done what needed to be done. That was all that mattered.

KARA

Kara sat cross-legged on the wooden floor of their small cabin, her back against the rough wall. Every muscle in her body seemed tight with tension. Her fingertips lightly brushed the ragged scar running along her wrist. It was only the slightest, faintest of lines but a reminder of one of many close calls. How many battles had she fought since the outbreak? There are too many to count. But she had memorized each scar on her body—etched into her skin like a roadmap of survival. She never forgot the faces, either. The faces of those she couldn't save.

She glanced at Sam, who was quietly sitting on the edge of the bed across the room. Sam wasn't making eye contact with her, but Kara could still feel her watching. It felt as if there was a storm brewing.

God, we're going to have to talk about it at some point.

Kara inhaled, slow and deep, but the air felt thick and soupy as if the room were full of smoke or fog. The small space was barely big enough for a bed, a small table, and their scattered gear. It was true that it often felt too confining, but it was safe...and still. And that meant they were the lucky ones. Out therein the wilderness, in the land of the undead, you didn't have time to sit and just be still. Every second was spent watching, scanning, and moving. Here within Fort Haven's walls, her mind had nowhere to go but inward.

"You've been quiet since yesterday," Sam said with no discernible emotion in her voice. "And I guess I have, as well."

Kara hadn't realized how much she'd needed to hear Sam's voice. Her nerves were raw, and she needed Sam to acknowledge what had happened at the barracks.

Kara didn't respond immediately. She shifted her weight, her fingers absently tracing

the old, jagged wound along her arm. “I guess I’ve just been thinking,” she finally muttered, her voice coming out harsher than she intended.

Sam tilted her head. “Really? About what?”

Kara wanted to look away. She couldn’t handle the weight of Sam’s questioning gaze. But she couldn’t back down, either. She held it in, letting the silence stretch between them. The truth was right there in front of her, threatening to suffocate her if she didn’t let it out. And Sam... Sam needed to give her answers.

“Listen. It’s about yesterday,” Kara finally whispered, her voice cracking at the edges. “That woman. I don’t know how you knew she was infected. What if we’d been able to help her? Did you just kill her for the sake of it? I don’t know what gives you the right to make that kind of decision. I couldn’t sleep last night. The image of what you did kept playing through my mind, Sam. I haven’t seen many people kill like that.”

Sam’s expression didn’t change, but there was a subtle shift in the way she moved as if bracing herself for a fight. “Really? You’ve come this far and never seen anything like it? You’ve been fucking lucky if that’s the case. The only regret I have is that I should have been faster,” Sam continued, her voice low and tight. She pressed her palms against her thighs as if trying to ground herself. “I should have been stronger. I saw the infection. I could see it under her skin. You don’t know the signs? Are you naïve, or what? You think I go around slaughtering people for fun, is that it? Jesus, Kara! I’m not a monster. I’m a survivor, and I tried to protect you.”

Kara crossed the short distance between them. She knelt down in front of Sam, who was seated on the bed, resting her hands gently on her knees. “I’m sorry. I know you did what you had to,” she said softly. “I know the only reason you’re here is because you survived. And yes, I’ve killed before. I’ve killed time and time again. But I guess I’ve only killed them when they’re really gone, you know? Like...full-on zombies.

And I guess that woman still seemed human somehow. It just never gets easier for me.”

Sam’s breath hitched, and she shook her head. “But she wasn’t,” she choked out. “She would never have made it, Kara. You’re not the only one who’s been thinking about it, okay? Every goddamned night I dream about them. I dream about the looks on their faces right before...” She trailed off, her voice breaking.

“I know,” Kara offered with a sympathetic smile. She shifted from her standing position to a sitting position and crossed her legs. She pulled on Sam’s wrists slightly, inviting her to join her on the floor.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” Sam explained as she settled down by Kara’s side and placed her head on her lover’s shoulder.

“Nor do I. I have sleepless nights, too. I think we all do. All those times when I should have done more,” Kara whispered, her throat burning with the effort of holding back the sob that wanted to break free. “Battles I’ve been in where I should have done better. I should have fought better.”

Sam’s hands slid up to Kara’s arms, her touch warm and grounding. “You did everything you could to help your friends. And that’s more than most people would have been able to do. You’re still here because you fought like hell to stay alive. Remember...I saw what happened before I found you.”

Kara squeezed her eyes shut, tears burning behind her lids. “Do you ever feel like you don’t deserve it?” she whispered.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sam replied with a quizzical look in her eyes.

“I often feel as if I don’t deserve to be here...when they’re not. My parents, my

friends...”

The silence that followed felt suffocating, but Sam didn't let go of Kara. She stayed there, her hands firm and steady on Kara's arms, not pulling her in but not letting her pull away either. Kara could feel the tension in her body, the strain of holding everything in for so long, and it felt like she was going to shatter under the weight of it all.

Sam leaned closer and whispered in her ear. “Kara. You're alive because you fought for it. That doesn't make you guilty. It makes you strong. You know, with my group, there were more of us at one point. And we lost a lot along the way. I've looked after people who had to kill their own kids. Can you imagine what that does to a person? This reality we're in now is...”

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“It’s like hell on earth sometimes, isn’t it? I know I go on about how great it is here at Fort Haven, but half the time, I’m trying to convince myself. I didn’t help my own mom and dad. Can you even believe that?”

“Shhhh,” Sam said quietly, stroking away the tears running down Kara’s cheeks. “You’re making yourself upset. We’ve all been through it. Who’s come out of all this with their families intact? My bet is nobody. Everyone’s lost someone. The whole of civilization has collapsed, honey. Who isn’t emotionally or physically scarred?”

Kara opened her eyes and stared at the worn floorboards beneath her. The memories of the outbreak, the day it had all happened, flooded her mind and started playing on a loop—running, bleeding, hearing the screams of her parents, friends, and neighbors as they fell one by one. She could still hear the sounds of their voices, the desperation in their final moments.

“I was supposed to protect them,” she said, her voice trembling. “I was supposed to get them out of there. And I didn’t. I let them down, Sam. I couldn’t even put them out of their misery when they turned.”

Sam’s hands slid up to cup Kara’s face, tilting her head gently until their eyes met. Kara’s breath caught in her throat as she saw the raw emotion in Sam’s gaze—compassion, understanding, but also something stronger. Something unbreakable.

“You didn’t let anyone down. You’re talking about the first day! You weren’t who you are today,” Sam said, her voice firm but gentle. “You fought to keep yourself alive, and who could ask you for anything more than that? It’s what your parents

would have wanted.”

Kara leaned back slightly, wiping her eyes, shifting into a more comfortable position.

“I can’t remember why we’re down here on the floor. Can you?”

“I think you wanted to make out with me or something like that,” Sam laughed. She reached up, cupping Kara’s face in her hands, her fingers brushing over her cheeks.

“Thank you for communicating with me,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

“For what? For wanting to make out with you?”

Sam’s smile was soft and genuine, her hands still resting on Kara’s waist.

“Absolutely. You’re hot when you’re mad.”

Kara pressed her lips to Sam’s in a soft, lingering kiss. Sam’s hands slid up to Kara’s back, pulling her closer as their lips moved together in a slow and deliberate motion.

Kara’s fingers tangled in Sam’s hair, pulling her closer as their breaths quickened, the soft sounds of their lips smacking together turning her on more and more by the second. She traced the lines of Sam’s face, memorizing every curve.

“Take your clothes off. I want to see you,” Sam whispered.

Kara smiled as she started to unbutton her jeans. Anticipation thrummed through her veins, and she couldn’t help but ache for what was to come. The heat between them had her body pulsing with pure desire. She wanted to feel Sam’s hands on her—and in her—exploring, claiming. Every touch from Sam ignited something deeper in her, a desire she hadn’t let herself fully embrace until now. Wetness built between her legs, her body practically begging for Sam to take control, to make her forget everything but the two of them. She wanted Sam to possess her completely, to make

her surrender to the raw, urgent need between them.

“I need you to fuck me so hard that I forget about everything,” Kara whispered as she hastily removed her jeans.

Sam smiled at her, getting on top and pressing her body deeply onto Kara. Her lips made their way to her mouth. Their tongues entwined, rolling around in circles.

Sam’s hand slipped in between Kara’s legs. They parted instantly, exposing her hot wet folds. Two fingers slid inside with ease, thrusting harder and deeper. Fucking her as hard as she could. The gushing wetness dripped down to the floor.

“I need more of you. I want you to fill me up,” Kara moaned.

Sam adored how she moaned. Without another word, Sam pushed in a third finger, curling them up as she continued to fuck her harder and harder into the wooden floor.

The weight of her past still lingered in the back of her mind, but it was fading. Sam was here. She was solid and real. Kara felt safe.

8

SAM

“Come on in,” said Laeticia. “This way. Find a seat. Welcome to our council.”

Council? Seriously? This is all a bit much, isn’t it?

The stale air inside Fort Haven’s makeshift council chamber felt heavy.

“Jesus, Kara. What is this all about? Have we travelled back to the 1800s?” Sam

muttered under her breath as her thumb rubbed against Kara's palm.

Sam could feel the oppressive weight of suspicion pressed against her chest as she took a seat. All eyes in the room seemed to be on her. But she straightened her spine. Laetitia, otherwise known as the captain, and the other so-called council members appeared hardened. It certainly wasn't what you'd call a warm welcome. But maybe they had a good reason. In this new world, trust was a scarce commodity. As scarce as food or water. And perhaps Sam hadn't made the best first impression. But she also knew that if Fort Haven didn't evolve or change the way they thought about the outside world, and the infected, everything they'd built would come crashing down. No fortress was impenetrable.

Sitting next to her, Kara exuded a quiet calm. Sam could sense her partner's support like a steady pulse and felt grateful for it. The certainty of Kara's closeness, her warmth in a world so cold, still felt strange. They had shared a great deal recently, and Sam was far from used to such a level of support. But today, this wasn't about them. It was where they lived.

"So, I hear you're a killer. Everything eventually gets back to me," stated Laetitia in a cool, stern voice as she made direct eye contact with Sam.

"Oh, right? Riley, I imagine," responded Sam with a confidence that surprised even herself.

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“Yes. He said you were incredible. Maybe we’ve got a thing or two to learn from you. I’m not proud. I’m willing to say we may not have things right here. You’ve been out there longer than any of us.”

“That’s true. To be honest, this is a nice place. You’re organized,” she uttered with an easy confidence. “But you’re weak. And it’s your job to keep this fragile community standing. I’ve got that right, haven’t I? You’re the boss.”

Sam shifted her weight on her chair, planting her boots more firmly on the floor beneath the table to steady her nerves, and cleared her throat. “The infected...the undead...whatever you want to call them—they aren’t the same ones we dealt with at the beginning of the outbreak, or even a year into it,” she said, her voice clear. “They’ve adapted. The virus has changed them. I’ve seen it, especially over the last few months. Not all of them. But some of them are faster now. Slicker. It’s as if they’re using their brains.”

“What total garbage,” scoffed a man sitting opposite her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are we even listening to this woman? She’s an imposter. She doesn’t belong here.”

“You should listen to her,” chimed Kara, squeezing Sam’s hand under the table. “If we don’t start changing the way we defend ourselves, Fort Haven won’t last. When we got attacked out there, when Sam saved me, the dead were...different.”

Her words hung in the air like a sharp knife, slicing through the quiet murmurings of the council. Laetitia, tall and commanding, sat at the head of the table. Her eyes were sharp as steel, her lips set in a tight line.

“Laetitia, your leadership has saved Fort Haven. So far. You run a real military operation here. You’ve got a tactical mind. We can all see it. I know this place from before the virus. But what you’ve done to it is incredible. You’ve turned it into a real place of hope. But Sam had seen enough of the world beyond these walls to know that’s all we’ve got. Hope.”

Laetitia leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. “Sam? What are you saying exactly? They’re getting smarter? But we all know the infected don’t think. They react.”

Sam was unflinching as she turned to face the captain. “I’m not a scientist. But I think what you’re saying was true before. Not anymore.”

A ripple of uncertainty passed through the room. The men and women gathered around the table shifted in their seats, exchanging unsure glances.

“I know what she’s talking about,” said a young woman with a gruff voice. “I’ve seen them out east near Brighthouse. It was as if they were moving in coordinated packs, flanking their prey. More animated. I suppose it’s hard to believe. And it could have been my imagination. Missions can be exhausting. I often wonder if I’m seeing things. But all I can say is it wasn’t like other behaviors I’ve seen before. I totally freaked out.”

One of the older men in the room, a grizzled man with sunken eyes grunted. “I’ve heard people talking in here and out there. The infected are changing, they say. They’re getting faster. But it’s all fear talking. There’s nothing more to it. It’s bull.”

Kara stood up from her seat and started slowly circling the table. “It’s not just fear. We’ve seen it firsthand. And my bet is that you’ve seen it, too. They’re learning. And the infection itself—it’s definitely mutating. Like most things, mutations happen.”

Laetitia raised an eyebrow. “Really? Mutating how?”

Sam took a deep breath. This was the hard part, and she knew she needed to come to Kara’s aid. “We don’t know. I suppose we can’t know. And there’s not likely to be any information coming our way. But we’ve encountered infected people that seem to be taking longer to turn. And when they do turn, they’re harder to kill. They’re stronger. It’s like the virus evolving and becoming more efficient at spreading. This is what happens with viruses and with bacteria as well. The opposite will also be happening. There’ll be people out there who have been exposed to the virus and haven’t turned. Immune systems find ways of fighting these things over time. Some people will become resistant. There may be something there—something we can work with...”

Laetitia crossed her arms across her chest. She looked impatient. Sam felt a little nervous as she recognized the sound of the captain’s foot tapping furiously under the table. “Work with how? We don’t have any resources. We’re struggling to feed everyone. How exactly do you think we can go about conducting goddamned scientific experiments?”

“I’m not talking about a professional lab,” Sam countered, feeling the tension coil in her chest. “When I was with my, well...tribe, for lack of a better word, we’d already started experimenting with natural remedies. I know which direction they were headed. We could catch up with them. Or send a mission after them. I’d love to see them again, and... Listen, we nomads speak to more people than you do in here.”

“That’s not true,” interrupted Laetitia. “There are nearly a hundred people here.”

“Yes, but it’s the same hundred, isn’t it? Look how you were when I arrived. We’ve met more people. News travels throughout the traveling community.”

“She’s right, captain,” smiled Kara. “Please give her a chance to explain.”

“There are herbs and plants that can boost immunity and slow the virus’s progression,” continued Sam. “We had packs full of the stuff. We’d make tinctures, and I think they worked. Barry, one of our people, got scratched in a fight. We made him drink the stuff three times a day, and he never turned. He was fine. We need to start thinking about more than just killing the infected. We need to understand this virus.”

The silence that followed was thick, like the oppressive heat that had descended over them that summer. The sun seemed harsher than it had prior to the outbreak, as if the earth itself had turned its back on humanity. Outside the walls of Fort Haven, the infected roamed—sometimes just a few of them, sometimes in great numbers. It was a constant reminder of just how fragile life had become.

Laetitia's jaw tightened. “Are you actually saying you think there’s a cure for this?”

Sam hesitated, then shook her head. “No. Once a person has fully turned, it’s too late. I don’t think we’re going to find a cure anytime soon. Not us, at any rate. Maybe somewhere, scientists are working on this. There must be. And at some point, we’ll get there. I believe in that. What I think we can do is build our immune systems to stop ourselves from getting infected if we catch it soon enough. Almost like a vaccine, something preventative.”

“Yes, I’ve heard rumors of vaccines,” agreed the captain.

“But we can’t rely on rumors,” blurted out the woman with the gruff voice. She sounded both panicked and annoyed. Sam had taken an instant dislike to her.

“I don’t want to ignore them, either. There’ll be people all over the world trying. That’s humanity for you.”

Laetitia’s eyes narrowed. “Shelly’s right about this. Rumors? That’s what we’re supposed to bet our lives on now? The whole idea here is that we patrol. We stop

them from getting in. Why did you kill that woman if it would have been just as easy to give her some of your magic tea, huh?"

Sam's gaze hardened. "She was too far gone. I could see her veins under her skin. Her blood had stopped pumping. I know what to look for. And as for my magic tea, that's what I'm saying. You don't have any. I'm proposing meeting up with my people, learning from them, getting a supply of these herbs."

"You wouldn't be able to persuade anyone from Haven to go running after a bunch of hippies who supposedly have some magic forest potion that's probably a load of bull." Shelley scoffed.

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“We—you—can’t afford not to act. Do you know something? Out there, I’ve seen whole towns rotting from the inside out, entire streets clogged with bodies that no one’s there to bury. Their stench draws the infected for miles. If they can’t find anyone living to attack, they eat the corpses. They thrive on decay. These are the sorts of things we need to be talking about. We need to beat them, not hide from them. That was our motto when I was with my tribe.”

Another council member, a younger woman with deep-set eyes, frowned. “Go back to your tribe. Nobody wanted you here except Kara. And I think we all know what’s going on there. Fort Haven is all about the living. Those of us who haven’t turned yet and who don’t particularly want to spend much time with those who have. Why don’t you two go off and play with the zombies and leave the rest of us to it?”

“I don’t think you realize just how much people have suffered out there,” Sam said, unable to hide her anger as she banged her fist down on the table and threw her head back. “Everything’s gone. There’s no infrastructure. Nothing. No power. No clean water. I’ve seen pregnant women giving birth out on the street with no medical help. I’ve met families who are starving. Literally starving! It all happened so fast. And there’s no one left to pick up the pieces.”

Laeticia tapped her fingers against the table, her expression unreadable. “We saw it ourselves, you know. You show up here acting as if none of us knows what’s going on. We’ve heard the stories. Some people say it all started in a lab. It’s a bioweapon gone wrong.”

Sam nodded. “I think they could be right. Perhaps it’s a virus that escaped from a research facility. Something maybe to control the population? Or maybe it was just

nature, a virus that jumped from animals to humans in some remote corner of the world. Who knows? Maybe they meant to contain it, and they fucked it up.”

“We weren’t prepared. That’s all I know,” Kara added. “By the time people realized what was happening, it was too late.”

Sam’s thoughts drifted for a moment. She remembered the early days of the outbreak and how quickly everything had spiraled out of control. She remembered the emergency broadcasts which only served to fuel the growing hysteria. The infected were like an unstoppable force.

“The problem is,” Sam said, dragging herself back to the present, “and I hope you don’t mind me saying this—you’re all still clinging to the old ways. What are you doing here? What’s the long-term plan? Are you hoping that someone will come and rescue you all? Because the truth is, we’re on our own. No one’s coming.”

Laetitia’s angry eyes flicked over to Kara, then back to Sam. “I think we’ve got a great set-up here. Are you saying we don’t?”

Sam hesitated for a second before she spoke. She didn’t quite know how to word what she wanted to say. All she knew for sure was that she was pissing these people off. And they didn’t want to admit their faults or consider evolving. “I’ve seen entire settlements wiped out. People who thought they had it sorted. Fort Haven is one of the last places left standing around here, but if you don’t start adapting, you’ll fall, too. It’s just a matter of time.”

Another murmur rippled through the room.

“What we need to be working on are outposts. You’ve got gates, you’ve got security, and it works fine up to a point.” Sam said, her voice gaining strength. “But we need to be outside these walls. I’m talking about small, mobile teams that can track the

infected, study them, and take them out before they get too close. We need to learn how they move and how they think—if that's what they're actually doing. Plus, and this is really important, we need to start working with natural medicines."

Laetitia frowned. "How, though? I'm not sending people out to join your nomadic tribe, Sam. It's too big an ask. I'm sorry. Like it's been said, if you want to leave, you're welcome to."

Sam glanced at Kara, then back at the captain. "I've seen survivors who've been exposed to the virus but haven't turned. We're talking about immunity here. If we can understand how their bodies are fighting the infection, we can find ways in nature to replicate it. I'm sure we can. Okay, so it's not a cure, but it could buy us all some time. And thanks. I get it, it's definitely something I'll consider, but honestly, I just want you to hear me out and really listen to what I'm trying to say. I have respect for you guys, and I care deeply about Kara, but I can see where you're heading."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the group processed her words. Sam could feel their reluctance to believe her, but she also saw the flicker of admiration in their eyes. They wanted to trust her, even if they were scared to admit it.

"We've listened to you, Sam. We've heard you out. Give us a couple of days to talk it over, will you? In the meantime, perhaps you could gauge the mood of the others. See if you can find people who may be willing to take on board what you've said here today," Leticia said as she nodded her head and gazed around at the others, their expressions deep in thought.

Kara glanced around the room, her face contemplative. "Definitely. We should start by talking to some of the hunters. They know the land around here better than anyone. They let us know where some of the safer routes are. It could help us gather what we need to test."

“Good idea,” Sam replied, her mind racing. “If we can gather the right plants and herbs, though I don’t know how much I can remember. I wish there was an easy way to get in touch with my people. But maybe we can develop something that boosts immunity. Something to give people hope. We need everyone to believe that change is possible. Thank you for trying, and if it doesn’t work, you can turf me out into the dead.”

As they made their way back to their cabin, they passed a group of children playing with scraps of wood. The sight warmed Sam’s heart, reminding her of the innocence that still existed amid all the horrors. She wanted these children to have a future, a world to grow into rather than one left in ruins.

“Do you really think there are some bigwigs somewhere working on a vaccine?” Kara asked Sam tentatively. “I’d love to find out more if we can. I think there must be. Someone somewhere must be trying to sort this out. I don’t have any concrete evidence or anything. But I’d like to believe that nerds still rule the world. So we have to keep our eyes and ears open. If we can establish a connection with anyone who may have useful information, it could save us.”

They made their way to the communal area. Several community members were gathered there. The wooden tables, battered and worn, were strewn with a handful of paltry supplies. Sam felt a pang of loss as she thought back to how easy it used to be to walk into a mall and get everything you could possibly need, how supermarkets were overflowing with fresh produce, and how friends and families could gather together without any sense of fear.

As they approached the group, a tall woman with shaggy hair and sharp features looked up. It was Marla, a seasoned hunter and a fierce protector of Fort Haven. “Sam. Kara. Hey. So, how did the big meeting go?” she asked, her voice low and gravelly.

“It had its ups and downs,” Sam began. “We’re hoping to find out more about the lay of the land around Fort Haven. We have a couple of ideas about using some natural remedies to help with immunity, but we need access to the right plants. And my knowledge is kind of scrappy.”

Marla’s eyes widened with interest, and she scratched her forehead with fingernails caked in dirt. “Natural remedies, huh? You mean like what people used to do before all this?” She nodded toward a nearby table where a small collection of herbs lay drying in the sun. “I’ve been trying to keep some of the old knowledge alive. You’ve definitely come to the right woman.”

Kara stepped forward, her eyes bright with curiosity. “Wow! I don’t believe this. We want to build on your knowledge, Marla. If we can find a way to create something that boosts immunity or helps slow the progression of the virus, we could really make a difference. That’s what Sam’s just been talking about. They helped someone fight off the virus when she was with her nomads.”

Marla studied them for a moment, a frown creasing across her forehead in a ripple. “You realize that it’s a dangerous game, though, right? Some plants can be super toxic if misused, especially around here. You can’t always trust a mushroom, for example. Not at this time of year. I wouldn’t want to go making people sick. Or dead.”

Sam flashed the older woman an earnest smile. “I understand. We won’t rush into anything. We want to take this slowly and know what we’re doing. But we have to do something. If we sit back and do nothing, we’re dooming ourselves.”

Marla let out a long sigh and shuffled from one foot to the other. “Fair point. I guess things are kind of at a standstill here. You know, if people get infected we leave them outside. It makes me feel crazy just thinking about it. You kill them, don’t you, ma’am?”

“I do,” replied Sam bluntly, for what else could she say?

“Right,” interjected Kara. “Let’s start by scouting some of the nearby areas where we can find herbs and plants. We’ll go in small groups—less chance of running into the infected that way. And thank you, Marla. This is perfect.”

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“No probs, lady,” Marla said with a grin stretched from one ear to the other.

As they continued to make plans, Sam’s heart swelled with hope.

This is the start of something.

9

KARA

Kara looked around as Fort Haven buzzed with excitement. The community festival brought the people together under an old battered canopy of twinkling lights.

“This looks wonderful,” Sam cried out, laughing. “Have you done this sort of thing before here?”

“Yes,” replied Kara. “We try to do it every year. It’s a great idea and really brings us together. The captain started it. She aims to foster community spirit and all that jazz.”

Children ran through the open square, their laughter mingling with the melodies of a roughly put-together folk band. The band consisted of a female singer and two guitarists, each with only four strings on their instruments. They didn’t have much in the way of quality, but it didn’t stop them from trying.

“Hey!” said Sam, looking surprised as she moved closer to the musicians. “They sound pretty good, seeing as they haven’t got a decent guitar between them.”

“I know. Actually, I may pick up some strings for them on my next mission to town. I’ll bet the music shops weren’t raided. Who looks for spare picks during the zombie apocalypse?”

While the tables weren’t exactly brimming with food, there was enough to go around, with fresh vegetables and berries from the settlement’s gardens. Kara stood on the edge of the gathering, watching as Fort Haven’s people—herpeople—gathered in celebration. She wasn’t quite sure what they were celebrating, but who needed an excuse when life gave you cards like these, right?

Beside her, Sam’s arm brushed Kara’s as they both took in the scene. Sam had always been a little aloof, unsure of her place in the community, but tonight there was a difference. For the first time since they’d arrived, it felt as if Sam belonged.

“So, are you feeling better since the captain got back to you?” Kara asked, nudging her lightly in the ribs with her elbow. “It’s great news that she’s taken on what you said. Onward and upward, right? What do you think, babe?”

“Yeah, I guess it looks as if they finally warmed up to me,” Sam said, glancing up at Kara with a playful smile. She then chuckled, the deep hum of her voice sending a pleasant shiver down Kara’s spine. “I think it’s because of you, though,” she continued. “You vouched for me. You made them listen. And it feels great that we’re putting plans in place.”

Kara shook her head. “No, you’ve earned it. Your ideas, your strength—they see you now, Sam. For whom you are. That’s why things are changing around here. And you’re right. It feels so much better to be proactive, and not just be sitting ducks behind a big, high wall. Have I convinced you to stay for good?”

A slight smile tugged at Sam’s lips, and her eyes shone. “You’re right. I’m feeling pumped! But I think they see me as part of us, not just me alone. And I’m okay with

that. Sam and Kara. Or Kara and Sam. I don't know which way sounds best. And yeah, maybe I will. For now anyway."

"Ha! I don't know. We'll have to work it out, and I'll have to make that a certain yes," Kara giggled, and she brushed her hand against Sam's.

This is it. This is as close to peace as I'll ever get.

A familiar voice called out to them, disrupting the moment. "Kara! Sam! Over here!"

Kara turned to see Joanna, one of the teachers who helped school the kids, waving them over to a circle of people gathered around one of the fire pits. The flames cast an orange glow across everyone's faces as they passed around cups of fermented mead, which Kara had joked with Sam earlier tasted like ass, but she accepted a cup anyway.

Kara hesitated for a moment before passing a cup to Sam.

"Am I really ready for this?" Sam joked, her nose screwed up and eyebrows raised in mock horror.

"Absolutely not. You don't know what you're letting yourself in for, but it's the most fun you can have outside of our cabin, so get it down you," Kara replied with a wink.

They found seats on a weathered plastic bench, Kara leaning into Sam as the group welcomed them into the fold. As the evening wore on, the stories they shared grew more lighthearted, tales of childhood mischief and near-misses with the undead that were somehow funny in hindsight. Kara found herself laughing more than she had in a long time. She couldn't remember when she had last felt this relaxed.

At one point, Joanna leaned over, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and pulled Kara

close to her. “I want to tell you a little secret. You two make such a cute couple,” she said, her voice warm with affection (and mead). Isn’t it such a great story that you found each other in the way you did? I mean, what are the odds? I think even Captain likes Sam now.”

Kara blushed, glancing at Sam, who returned Joanna’s smile with a nod. “You’re not wrong. I hear you,” Sam said, her voice low and sincere. “I could have picked up anyone that day. But no! Who do I rescue? The West Coast’s last surviving cutest lesbian, that’s who!”

The tempo of the music changed, and the trio played a slow, lilting melody. Couples began to move to the center of the communal space, swaying together under the open sky. Kara felt a tug in her chest, and she couldn’t resist asking the question.

“Dance with me?”

Sam didn’t hesitate. “Why not?”

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They joined the others, Kara's arms winding around Sam's neck as Sam's hands rested on her waist. The music was soft, and the connection between them was electric. Kara could feel the steady thrum of Sam's heartbeat against her chest, and it made her feel alive in a way that nothing else could.

"I wanted to tell you something. It's not the mead talking, and It's not just a way to keep you here for good. It's just the truth of how I feel."

Fuck, am I really going to say this?

"What's that?" Sam asked innocently.

"I—I think I love you," Kara whispered, her voice almost lost in the night air.

Sam's eyes darkened, her hands pulling Kara even closer. "Oh, that's okay because I think I love you, too. What's the point in waiting around to say these things, right?"

They danced until the song ended, the world around them fading into the background as their love took center stage. When the final note played, Sam leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to Kara's lips, a promise of more to come.

"Let's go back to the cabin," Sam murmured, her voice low and full of intent.

Kara nodded, desire pooling in her belly at the look in Sam's eyes.

When they reached their cabin, Sam wasted no time, pressing Kara against the door as soon as it closed behind them. Her lips were on Kara's in an instant, the kiss deep

and hungry, a release of all the pent-up tension from the night. Kara moaned into Sam's mouth, her hands pulling open Sam's shirt as she pulled her closer.

Sam's fingers worked their way under Kara's bra, tracing the sensitive skin of her breasts before venturing down over her belly, and then lower. Kara gasped as Sam's fingers slid between her legs, the slickness there betraying just how much she had wanted this all night.

"Sam..." Kara breathed, her voice shaky with need.

Sam didn't respond with words. Instead, she sank to her knees, her fingers finding Kara's clitoris and rubbing in slow, torturous circles. Kara's head fell back against the door, and she moaned with pleasure as Sam continued to work her. The pleasure built inside her, spreading through her body like wildfire until all she could feel was Sam.

Her beloved Sam.

"Please..." Kara whimpered, her hips bucking against Sam's hand. "Keep going...just like that..."

Sam's response was to increase the pressure, her movements steady and sure, pushing Kara closer and closer to the edge. When Kara finally came, it was with a muted scream, her body shaking uncontrollably as waves of pleasure rippled through her.

Before Kara could even catch her breath, Sam was on her feet again, pulling Kara's shirt off her body and guiding her toward the bed. Kara's body was still buzzing with the aftershocks of her orgasm, but they both knew this wasn't over yet.

Ah! I know...

“I found something the other day when I was trying to clean up in here. You know what, Sam? I can’t believe how messy you are, but we’ll talk about that some other time. Anyway, look what I found...”

She reached for the strap-on dildo in her bedside drawer, quickly fastening it in place with ease before turning her attention to Sam. Sam’s head tilted to one side as she watched Kara, desire and love shining in her gaze. Her mouth slightly open in surprise.

“Oh, fuck. I didn’t expect that...but I’m not against it.” Sam bit her lip.

Kara pressed Sam down onto the bed, her hands running over Sam’s body. She positioned herself between Sam’s legs, guiding the strap-on to the entrance of her dripping-wet vagina. Sam let out a long sigh as Kara pushed inside, her body arching upward as Kara filled her. Wasting no time, she fucked her deep and hard, pressing her body into Sam’s with every thrust.

They moved together in a rhythm they had both quickly perfected, their bodies in perfect sync. They knew each other in every sense of the word. Kara’s thrusts became slow and deep, each one drawing soft gasps of delight from Sam’s lips. The heat between them was unbearable, and the connection was undeniable. Kara loved seeing Sam like this—so open, so vulnerable, so wholly hers.

“I love you,” Kara whispered again, her voice thick with emotion as she moved faster, her clitoris throbbing under the strap-on as she chased their shared release.

“Fuck me, Kara. Fuck me harder!”

“Oh, God, Sam! Don’t say that. I’m going to come. It’s as if I can feel being inside of you. You’re so fucking hot!”

Sam's hands gripped Kara's hips, her body trembling with the intensity of their sex.

"I'm coming. I'm going to come right now," she gasped, her voice raw with passion.

"Me, too. I'm coming now. Oh, God, fuck... Yes!"

They came together, their bodies collapsing into each other as they rode out the waves of pleasure. Kara stayed inside Sam, their bodies still connected, their breathing heavy as they lay together in the aftermath of their love.

10

SAM

Kara had gone out scouting with a small team of hunters, leaving Sam to help organize what little supplies they had left. Sam wanted to go on the expedition, but Kara thought it was better if she stayed back and continued to try to make acquaintances with the people of Fort Haven. There had been improvements, but there was still a long way to go. Kara had told her it was all in her imagination, that she was too sensitive, but Sam believed firmly that no matter how much she gave, it was never going to be enough.

Sam entered the main marquee, where a few of the captain's right-hand people were gathered. Her stomach tightened at the sight of Riley and Marla whispering in the corner, their faces grim.

What are they muttering about? Me again? I thought Marla was my friend.

The familiar ache of being an outsider crept into her chest, but she squared her shoulders. She wasn't about to back down. She had every right to be here and was working her ass off to help this community. Even if some days she felt like packing her bag and heading back to the tribe. Even if that had stopped feeling like home.

I wonder if they even miss me? I doubt it. Most of them didn't like me in charge. I miss them, though. Well, I miss some of them.

But as she approached, the uneasy looks they exchanged immediately told her something was wrong.

“What’s up?” Sam asked. She realized that she was perhaps speaking a little too loudly when she heard her voice cutting through the murmurs and echoing around the room.

Riley turned to face her. She couldn’t read his expression. However, when she glanced at Marla, she immediately saw that her eyes were hard as they settled on her. There was no warmth there, no hint of empathy.

“Sam, do you have a minute?” Riley began, his tone clipped. “We need to talk.”

A prickle of dread ran down her spine. “Sure. What would you like to talk about?”

“The storeroom,” he said in a low grumble. Sam had the impression he was choosing his words carefully. “We’ve been through everything twice and it seems there’s some supplies missing. A lot of supplies, as a matter of fact.”

Sam’s stomach felt off as if a knot were forming in her intestines. “Really? That’s weird.”

“Weird? Yeah, it’s weird. We did a check this morning,” Marla said, stepping forward, her eyes locked on Sam. “The medical kits we assembled last week, quite a few canned goods—stuff we found out in Eastborough a few weeks ago. It’s all gone.”

“River brought all those medical supplies over for us. She made the journey all the way over here. She’s got better stuff to do, you know? They have a baby,” said Riley.

“I know. I’ve met her. It’s wonderful that you guys help each other out. But none of

this sounds right to me,” Sam said, shaking her head. “I counted all the stuff River brought over. I was helping inventory everything yesterday. It took all day.”

“We know. And we’ve been told that you were the last one in the storeroom,” Marla snapped, her voice sharp with accusation. “Did you lock up properly?”

Sam’s mouth went dry. “Of course I did. And I gave the key to the captain. I didn’t take anything. Is that what you’re trying to get at? I was doing my job. Jesus!”

Riley exchanged a glance with Marla before turning back to Sam. “What are we supposed to think?”

Sam stared at them, heart pounding in her chest. “You’re supposed to trust me. Why would I steal from you? Why would I steal a load of bandages? Antiseptic creams? What are you even talking about?”

Marla crossed her arms over her chest, her face twisted in disgust. “It wasn’t just River’s medical supplies. There was a ton of food, as well. Maybe you’re wanting to steal all our gear and take it back to your nomads.”

“A ton of food? Really?” snapped Sam in a snarky tone. “I doubt it. There were about ten cans of soup, for God’s sake! You know that Kara was a friend of River’s, right? Before all this fucking mess? Why would I do something like that? I live with Kara. She’d know if I snuck in boxes of fucking medical supplies from her friend, wouldn’t she? Why would I do it?”

“Because you’re not one of us,” said Riley. “You never have been.”

The words hit Sam like a punch to the gut. “For fuck’s sake, Riley!”

“Less of the language, please. There are kids around,” said Marla as she looked

toward the door.

“No, there aren’t. I’m not the swearing type, butfuck me! You guys are a nightmare. I’ve done nothing but try to prove myselfsince I got here. I’ve risked my life for you fucking people. You can’t honestly think I’d steal from you.”

Riley sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Sam, it’s not just this one incident. People have been talking. This has been going on since you arrived. And as far as I can see...it just confirms what people have feared.”

“Feared?” Sam’s voice cracked as her frustration caused her throat to tighten. “What have I actually done to make anyone fear me?”

“It’s not about what you’ve done,” Marla said, her voice laced with contempt. “Well, apart from killing that woman no questions asked. Everyone knows about that.”

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“Jesus! That again? You’re still not over that? It’s the fucking zombie apocalypse. The idea is to kill zombies. Or is that not the plan here? Should we be inviting them in? Making them tea and iced buns? Just tell me what you want from me, and I’ll do it.”

“You’ve shown we can’t trust you,” concluded Riley.

So that’s it? It’s as simple as that? They never even wanted to try.

The room felt like it was closing in on Sam. Her pulse roared in her ears as she tried to process what they were saying. The accusation, the distrust, it all felt so suffocating.

“You’ve made a big mistake,” Sam whispered, barely capable of holding her voice steady. “I didn’t take anything.”

But she could see it in their eyes. The decision had already been made. It didn’t matter what she said. They had already condemned her.

Riley took a deep breath, his expression softening, but only slightly. “I wish there was another way, Sam. But we can’t afford to lose what little we have.”

“You can’t afford to lose me, either,” Sam shot back desperately. “I’ve been pulling my weight around here. I’ve been helping secure this place. I’ve been in meetings with the captain all week about trying to get a lab up and running. I’m not the enemy here.”

Riley hesitated, but Marla's glare silenced whatever uncertainty might have flickered across his face. She stepped forward, her voice like ice. "I've tried to be nice to you. I can see how you and Kara feel about each other. But this just isn't working for the rest of us."

There it was. The truth. So blunt and absolute. Sam couldn't believe what she was hearing. This is how they saw her. They wanted her out. It was obvious to her that this was where this confrontation was heading.

And then the door burst open. Kara rushed in, her face pale with confusion and her hair flying behind her. It looked like a dream sequence to Kara. Her knightess in shining armor. "What's going on?"

"Kara! Thank God you're here. You need to talk to these guys." Sam's heart leaped at the sight of her girlfriend. Kara's eyes darted between the people gathered, her expression growing darker by the second. She looked as if she was about to explode.

"They're saying I stole supplies." Sam started crying. "Tell them. Tell them I'd never do that. They don't believe me."

Kara's eyes widened in surprise. Sam started to panic when she realized Kara wasn't going to say anything.

Speak up for me, Kara! What are you doing?

The silence seemed never-ending, but finally, Kara opened her mouth and sputtered. "What? That's insane! Sam wouldn't?—"

"Kara, please. Hold up," Riley interrupted. "We found the storeroom more or less empty, and she was the last one there. What the hell are we supposed to think? You bring this newbie here and then shit starts going down. You're getting taken for a

mug. She doesn't even really want to stay here."

"You're supposed to believe her," Kara said, stepping closer, her voice rising with frustration. "Have you not been paying attention to this woman? Have you guys not witnessed what she's been doing for us? She's helping us."

Marla scoffed and rolled her eyes as she took a few steps toward Kara. "Helping herself, more like, and helping you sleep better."

Sam's jaw clenched. She could feel her back teeth grinding against each other. These people were turning against her. Well, were they ever really with her? There was no way this was just about the supplies. This was about who she was, what she was doing here, and what she represented. The outsider. She was the nomad who didn't belong.

"Riley, what are you doing? This is madness, right?" Kara said, almost shouting. Seeing her in such distress made Sam feel sick to her stomach. "You can't just accuse her without proof."

"She was the only one with access, the last one in," Marla said, her voice cold and sharp. "That's proof enough. Duh!"

Kara looked at Sam, her expression pleading. "Tell them you didn't do this, babe."

"I have. But they've already made up their minds. I knew this was all a stupid fucking idea."

Kara's face twisted with frustration, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "This isn't right. What are you going to do? Have you told the captain?"

"Not yet, but we will. I'm going to see her now. I don't have a choice," Riley said.

“We can’t take the risk. She has to go. If we lose more supplies, people here will die.”

Sam’s stomach lurched. She’d seen it coming, but hearing it still made her breath catch. “You’re throwing me out for something I didn’t even do?”

“That’s the number one rule here. If someone threatens the safety of the rest of us, they’re out. And you’re a threat,” Marlaspat. “We can’t keep you here. We don’t have room for people like you.”

Sam turned to Kara. She felt desperate. “Kara don’t let them do this. Will you go and talk to Laetitia? I’ve done everything I can to prove myself.”

“We call her the captain. A little respect, please,” barked Riley.

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Kara's face softened. "I know you have." Sam could see the pain in her eyes, though. Something was conflicting between her body language and what she was saying. "But I..."

Sam's heart sank. "But what?"

Kara looked down at her feet, her hands trembling. "Fort Haven needs me. This place...it's my home. I can't go against the captain. That's not what we do here. She..."

Sam felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath her. "So you're choosing them...her...over me."

"No! Please don't make it sound like that. That's not what I mean," Kara said, her voice breaking. "I'm not against you, Sam. It's just that this place needs me, and I need this place. I'll try to sort this out."

Sam shook her head, disbelief coursing through her veins. "You can't be serious. So, if the captain says I have to go, that's it? It's over between us?"

"I don't know. I'm just confused. I mean, fuck. This is a lot. I've lived here for a long time now and..."

Sam couldn't breathe. She couldn't think straight. The room was spinning.

Am I about to pass out?

Kara's betrayal was like a knife to the gut, twisting deeper with every second that passed.

"You don't believe me," Sam said, her voice hollow. "Do you? I thought you loved me. I thought you trusted me."

"I do! But I?—"

"That's all I need to hear to know the truth," Sam interrupted, her anger boiling over. "If you believed me, you wouldn't let them do this. You wouldn't even care what the fucking captain has to say. But you're just standing there. And you seem to think it's fine that they're about to throw me to the wolves. Or the zombies."

Kara flinched. "I don't want that but, I can't live out there. The group comes first. These people have kept me alive."

Sam let out a bitter laugh. All eyes in the room were on her, waiting for her reaction. She didn't have the energy to fight her corner. She would go before they exiled her. She refused to give these people the satisfaction. "You always have a choice," she concluded.

But Kara didn't respond. She just stood there, her shoulders slumped and her back leaning against the wall.

It was over. Sam could see it now. The trust, the bond they had built—it was all slipping away, crumbling into dust. And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Riley stepped forward, his expression grim. "It's time."

Sam turned away from Kara, her throat burning as she tried to hold back her tears. "Don't bother taking me to see your captain. I'm going. Let me pack a bag, okay?"

“No, please, just talk to her. Let’s try and sort it out first?” Kara begged.

I’ll find my tribe. I’ll go back to them. My real home.

“It’s too late. Don’t follow me, Kara. I need some space,” Sam spat as she headed to the cabin.

As she was packing her few clothes and shoving them into a backpack, there was a loud bang at the door of the cabin.

“Sam, you’ll need this,” Riley said suddenly, handing her a small pack filled with basic supplies.

“What’s this?”

“Some supplies. A little food, a knife, some ointments...”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Look in my bag! Can’t you see the massive hoard I stole from your storage room? I don’t need any more.”

The sarcasm was clearly lost on Riley.

“Take it, Sam. You’ll want to keep yourself safe.”

“Safe from what? The infected? I’ll feel safer out there with them than I do here with you, I can tell you that,” she stated, unable to suppress her bitterness. “You’re a cruel man, Riley—a danger, in fact. And too many people around here listen to what you have to say. But you know what? You’re not too bright, kiddo. You’ll trip up somewhere along the line. I only wish I could be here to see it.”

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Riley's expression was hard to read as he fidgeted with a loose bit of wool on his jacket. Sam would have liked to think he looked guilty, but she didn't believe him capable of such an emotion. "You know how it is. We can't take any risks. If something happened..."

"I would never steal from you," Sam interrupted, her voice rising. "I was fighting for you. And you're throwing me out as if I'm nothing."

He stepped back, frustration flashing in his eyes. "It's not personal, Sam. Maybe the captain will have other ideas?"

"Forget it. I'm out of here. I'm not being hauled in front of her. My fate doesn't lie in your hands or her hands. Not even Kara's. You're low-key psychos, I swear."

Sam turned away, exiting the cabin and heading towards the exit. The anger and hurt coiled in her stomach as she walked toward the main gated entrance. She screamed up to the guard in the watchtower.

"Open the gate. Let me out!"

He shouted back down to her, waving his arms about his head in a crisscross motion. "No! You can't go out there rightnow. You need to wait a couple of hours. There's a whole herd of the undead in the area."

"Open it. Now!"

He did as he was told, shaking his head in disbelief as he lifted the barrier. Sam

stepped onto the path that led away from Fort Haven. With each step, she felt another part of herself shatter. She was a broken woman.

A distant call came from behind. She turned to see Kara running down the track toward the gate.

“No, Sam! Just wait, please let’s talk to the Captain and sort this out. Please, wait!” Kara yelled as the gates closed her in.

Sam carried on moving forward, willfully ignoring her lover's plea.

As she walked into the woods, the trees closed in around her, the shadows growing longer and darker. Sam could hear her own breath, the thud of her heartbeat drowning in the quiet that surrounded her. The weight of loneliness pressed down on her like a heavy cloak, wrapping her in isolation.

Where will I go now? Where will they be? South. I’ve got to head south. A couple of days, maybe a week? I’ll find them. I’ll find them. Will they want me back? What have I done? Left the people who I trusted for love. A love that shat all over me.

The question echoed in her mind as she shuffled forward, her feet heavy. It had been some time since she’d felt this alone. She didn’t have a single soul to lean on. The thought of the journey back to her tribe on her own without Kara felt like standing on the edge of a void.

Sam’s shoulders were tight. Tension coiled deep inside her. Her steps were uneven, each one jarring through her body and causing cramps in her calf muscles. But she pushed forward. She was driven by anger. It fueled her every move. Her hands flexed and curled around a branch she was using as a walking stick. She was gripping hard, as if trying to wring out the betrayal that gnawed at her. The pain in her body was real, but it couldn’t touch the ache in her heart that came from leaving Kara behind. What

she'd thought was love had been exposed as a lie. Had Kara been playing her all along? Had she meant nothing to that woman?

Suddenly, a low growl came from behind her, sending a jolt of adrenaline coursing through her veins. Sam spun around, her heart racing as she reached for the knife at her belt. The growl intensified, and she could see movement in the shadows—shuffling figures emerging from the underbrush.

Shit! Shit!

She was outnumbered, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

11

KARA

Kara's fingers throbbed from the impact of her fist against the wall, but she welcomed the pain.

Owww. Jesus!

It grounded her. It anchored her to the physical world. This was a good sign because her head was threatening to spiral out of control.

I let her go! What the fuck have I done? The first time I've felt this way in years, and I just let her walk out the gate.

She was trapped, stuck in her regret and shame, unable to rid herself even for a moment of the knowledge that she had betrayed the one person who mattered most to her. It wasn't just that she hadn't stood up for Sam—it was worse. She had doubted her. And punching the wall of the cabin was going to do nothing to bring her back.

She kicked at the small wooden stool near the bed, sending it skidding across the floor. The sound was harsh, causing her to wince as it traveled down her ear canal, but the action did nothing to ease her agony. The stool clattered into the wall and wobbled before toppling over. Kara gritted her teeth and turned away, forcing herself to move, to do anything other than stand here feeling helpless.

Her bare feet slapped against the cold floor as she paced the room. She hadn't slept in days. Maybe she'd dozed off for a few minutes here and there, but it never lasted. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Sam's face. Not the kind, caring, funny, brave Sam she'd fallen hopelessly in love with. No. What she saw was the broken, helpless, betrayed Sam who'd walked out of her life forever. Her mind replayed the moment she'd just stood there like a bystander in her own life and watched her Sam go.

She ran her fingers through her hair, tugging at the tangled strands in frustration, her nails scraping against her scalp.

Why didn't I try harder to stop her? I chose this place over her, and for what?

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The thought looped endlessly in her head. Sam had needed her, and she had done nothing. She'd let fear win. Fear of the others, of the community, of what they would think, of what they might do. It had been safer to side with Riley. But why had she felt that way?

It was unbearable. She felt sick.

She shoved her hand into her jacket pocket, her fingers brushing against an old note from her father she kept in there. It was just a handwritten reminder to pick up some milk from the store. But at the bottom, he'd drawn a dozen kisses. It was her source of security. But now, it felt like a taunt. She didn't deserve kisses. She didn't deserve the love of any kind. Even the love of her dead father. He'd be ashamed of her.

Kara dropped onto the edge of the bed, burying her face in her hands. She needed to do something. Anything. If she stayed in this room one second longer, she was going to scream.

Sam's out there. She's probably dead already. And it's your fault.

She shot up from the bed, her knees wobbling under the sudden rush of movement. The latch jammed as she yanked on it, and she cursed under her breath, throwing her weight against the stubborn wood until it finally gave way with a creak.

Outside, Kara felt disconnected from what was going on around her. But at the same time, she needed to move her body.

The smells, sounds, and sights of people going about their daily tasks were blurred at

the edges, as if she was watching from the other side of a thick, murky glass.

She wasn't sure how long she had been walking when she reached the small cluster of huts near the outer perimeter. These buildings were more dilapidated than the ones near the center of Fort Haven. Over time, they had been abandoned as people built better, more robust structures and moved closer to the inner sanctum, where it was safer. But this place was quiet for now.

Moving forward, Kara pushed through the door of one of the huts, her heart hammering in her chest as anxiety built inside of her.

Inside, the air was stale, the floor strewn with discarded wrappers, broken tools, and empty cans. And there, in the far corner, hidden beneath a tangle of blankets and crates, she saw it—the stash. Medical supplies, boxes of food, jars, bottles, packets...

It was so obvious now, so painfully obvious. How had she missed it? Rage bubbled up inside her as she moved toward the pile, her hand trembling as she lifted the lid on one of the crates to reveal the stolen supplies. Her stomach turned at the sight. This was it—this was what had damned Sam. And the culprits? A group of goddamn kids. Or a setup.

The reckless little pricks. They had no idea of the consequences of what they'd done.

A sharp cough behind her broke the silence, and she whirled around, still clutching the crate. One of the teens stood there, a defiant smirk playing on his lips.

"I knew it! It's Pete, isn't it? You're Kenny's kid, right?" she spat, her voice shaking with disgust. "Iknewyou guys were up to something. I saw you a couple of nights ago running out here. I didn't think much of it then. I thought you were horsing around. But now?" She gestured to the pile of stolen supplies. "Do you realize what this is? This is what got Sam exiled, you little jerk."

The teen shrugged. “What? Everyone's just trying to survive. We don’t get enough to eat in this shithole. And we need stuff to trade! No one even wanted her here anyway.”

“Trade?” She stepped forward, the fury bubbling up to her throat. “Who are you fucking trading with? You let her take the blame for this because you want to play shop? She did nothing to deserve this.”

The teen rolled his eyes. Sam wanted to grab him but knew herself to be better than that. “It’s not as if it was our idea to get rid of her. The community decided that. And so did you, right?”

She felt a pure sense of outrage as she strolled across the room, her hands balled into fists. “No. You’re wrong. It wasn’t like that. You and your friends did this. We all trusted you. You’re old enough to know better!”

The teen’s cocky facade faltered. “We just needed some stuff, all right? We weren’t trying to get anyone in trouble. I’m sorry.”

“Well, you did. And Sam—she’s out there now. Alone. Do you have any idea what that means? Do you even care? She could be dead.”

The teen shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other and started at a point on the wall. “We didn’t think you’d all kick her out.”

“You should’ve thought harder.” She glared at him. “You’ve condemned her, and for what? Because you were bored?”

His face hardened again, though his eyes darted to the ground. “It’s not our fault she got the blame. She didn’t fit in, anyway.”

“You’re a coward,” she hissed, shaking her head.

The teen’s gaze finally met hers. “Do you want me to say I’m sorry again? It’s not like that’s going to fix anything, is it?”

“No. It won’t. But it’s a start.”

She stormed out of the hut, her breath coming in quick, sharp bursts. Her eyes scanned the settlement until she saw him. Riley. He was standing together near the center of the compound, laughing and joking with another couple of guys as if nothing had happened.

She moved toward them with purpose. Her vision narrowed until all she could see was Riley.

“Youknew,” Kara screamed, rushing over to the man who was at least two feet taller than her until she was just inches away from him.

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He turned, startled by the venom in her tone. One of the other men, short and broad-shouldered with a thick beard, met her head-on. He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her in his direction, his brow furrowing in confusion. “Kara? What’s the matter?”

“You knew, didn’t you? You all knew,” she repeated, stepping back and shaking her head. “It wasn’t Sam! You knew it was your kids. You must have! And you said nothing? You didn’t think to go talk to the captain about this?”

The shorter man’s face darkened, his expression hardening. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I found the stash,” she yelled. “In the old huts. Your kids have been stealing supplies—food, weapons—everything Sam was accused of. And you let her take the fall.”

The man’s eyes flickered with something—guilt, maybe—but he quickly masked it with anger. “Just watch your tone, Kara,” he growled. “My kids didn’t do this. You’re going to have to show me.”

“I’ve got all the proof I need,” Kara snapped. “I found the supplies. I found everything. Do you think you can cover for them? Sam is out there alone!”

The man’s face twisted into a sneer. “They’re just kids, Kara,” he spat. “They didn’t mean any harm. It was just a silly mistake.”

“Mistake?” Kara’s voice was rising now, filled with disbelief. “A mistake? Sam was

banished because of them. She's out there alone, facing God knows what, and you call it am mistake?"

The tension in the air was palpable, crackling between them like electricity. The other parents had gathered around, watching the confrontation with wide eyes, but none of them spoke. Kara knew she was losing the battle.

"I'm going after her," she said. "And when I bring her back, everyone is going to know the truth."

Kara stood there trembling, her heart hammering so loud it seemed to echo in the hollow silence around her. The parents were staring, faces red with anger and embarrassment, but she didn't care. Not anymore. Not about them, not about anything but Sam. She hadn't even realized what she was saying until it had come out, but now the truth of it burned in her gut.

I'm going after her.

A cold dread settled in Kara's chest, as heavy as a stone pressing down on her lungs, making it hard to breathe. She turned away from the parents, ignoring the shouting that rose behind her as they scrambled to justify themselves, to cover up what they'd allowed to happen. None of it mattered. She'd wasted enough time trying to convince people who didn't care about the truth. She needed to get her bag before she set off.

Sam was out there because of her and she had to at least try to find her.

The ground felt uneven beneath her feet as she began to walk. Her arms hung heavy by her sides, her fingers curling and uncurling in erratic spasms. Inside, it felt as if something foreign was crawling beneath her skin—muscles tensing and releasing in a rhythm she couldn't control. Her chest tightened, not with sharp pain, but a slow, relentless pressure, as if the air itself had turned solid, pressing inward from all sides.

Jesus! Am I having a panic attack?

As she reached the gate, the weight of what she was about to do hit her full force. She had never ventured beyond those walls alone. It was one thing to go out with a team, armed and prepared. It was something else entirely to face it solo.

A wave of fear crashed over her, and for a split second, she was paralyzed.

What if I can't find Sam? What if Sam's already...?

Kara couldn't even finish the thought. The images that flashed in her mind were too much. Sam, alone, wandering through the wilderness, her skin pale and cold, her eyes glassy, a lifeless shell of the woman Kara loved.

God, why didn't I go after her sooner?

Kara's mind drifted back to a moment from her childhood, a memory she had buried deep, but one that clawed its way back to the surface now, raw and vivid.

She had been twelve, standing in the middle of a crowded room, heart pounding as she tried to explain to her father what had happened. She had seen something—something bad—out by the woods. A group of older kids, maybe sixteen or seventeen, doing something they shouldn't have been. They had taken a younger boy, a neighbor, and pushed him into the creek, laughing as he struggled to get out, the current pulling at him. Kara had been the only one who'd seen, the only one who'd tried to help. She had run to her father.

But he hadn't believed her.

"You're just imagining things, Kara," he had said, his voice firm but dismissive. "You've got a wild imagination. You didn't see what you think you saw."

Kara had protested and tried to make him understand, but he wouldn't listen. Later, when the boy's parents came to their house, it was her father who smoothed things over and told them there was no need to worry. He told them kids would be kids, and Kara had probably just misinterpreted what she thought she'd seen.

No one had believed her.

She had been powerless back then. Her voice was drowned out by the authority of a trusted adult who refused to listen. Years later, she'd found herself in the same position—powerless to stop the injustice that had been done to Sam.

But this time, it was different. This time, Kara wasn't a child. She could do something.

She took a deep breath, her chest expanding painfully as she inhaled, and then she reached out, her hand steady this time, and pulled open the gate. The guard tried to advise her not to, but she didn't care.

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The wind hit her like a wall, cold and biting, but she welcomed it. The air outside the walls tasted different—sharper, rawer, alive with the untamed world beyond.

As she walked, Kara's mind raced, her thoughts jumping from one worry to the next. Where would Sam have gone? Would she have tried to head toward the mountains? Or maybe she'd gone south?

Where did she say her tribe had gone? Think! Think!

But the truth was, Kara didn't know. She couldn't remember. And that scared her more than anything. Sam was resourceful, sure, but she was also vulnerable. Kara's heart clenched at the thought of Sam, cold and scared, with no one.

Her pace quickened. Every rustle of the wind and every snap of a twig made her jump. Her senses were on high alert.

Please let her be okay.

The world outside Fort Haven was wild and dangerous. Kara knew that better than anyone. She had been out scouting, leading expeditions beyond the walls, navigating the chaos of the post-apocalyptic landscape time and time again. But never like this. Never with this gnawing fear in her chest, this desperate need to find the person she loved before it was too late.

She hated herself for letting it get this far, for letting Sam walk away without a fight. She had let doubt and fear cloud her judgment, and now Sam was paying the price.

Kara's eyes stung, and she blinked furiously, refusing to let the tears fall. She didn't have time for weakness. Not now. Not when Sam needed her. Her focus was singular—to find Sam and make things right.

But... she also knew it may be too late.

12

SAM

The sky had darkened. As she looked up, Sam thought the colors were fading from the world itself. Sam crouched low behind an overturned truck and spent a couple of minutes trying to catch her breath. Blood caked her hands, and her thighs burned from running. She'd been in a fight — a desperate one — with more zombies than she could count, and the heavy sensation of dread weighed on her like a boulder in her gut.

She wasn't sure if the gnawing pain in her side was from the deep gash she'd gotten from falling on a jagged rock as she exited the woods and made her way onto the road or from something worse. From the fight. Her mind raced as she felt the muscles twitch beneath her skin, and her thoughts whirled in dizzying loops of paranoia.

Had I been bitten?

The fear of having been infected itched inside her like a poison spreading through her veins. She scanned the ground around her, looking for any sign of movement. She knew one of them was still following her, one of those pale, relatively fast-moving beasts that haunted her footsteps. She was terrified. But more than that, it felt as if something was changing in her body. Was it panic? Or something much, much worse?

I can't die. Not like this.

The growl came from just a short distance behind her. It was a weird, wet sound spilling through the air. The creature's footsteps seemed more sluggish now but still persistent. She could hear it sniffing the air. It was in hunting mode, and she was trapped.

Sam's hands tightened around the knife in her grip, but even as she held it, her body felt weak. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She gritted her teeth, sweat stinging her eyes. If she were infected, she couldn't wait to find out. She had to end things on her own terms.

She heard a noise from the undergrowth yards away. She imagined the creature getting closer, its gaunt body making its way over to finish her off. Was she imagining it, or could she smell rotting flesh?

"Fuck," she hissed, her throat tight.

She was in over her head. She'd only just made it out, but it looked like the battle wasn't over.

She was ready to fight like an animal— no holds barred. She's done it in the past—heck, she'd done it just a few minutes ago. Her knife had found its targets, slicing into rotting flesh and severing heads. But they'd just kept coming. She'd felt their hands on her, cold and decayed, dragging her down. She fought through them, slicing and thrashing until she could escape. But she'd obviously taken a hit — a deep one. And there was still one zombie left.

Sam glanced down at her side, pulling back the torn fabric. The cut was terrible. Deep enough to bleed through her fingers... but it wasn't the bite she'd been dreading. The skin was torn from a sharp edge, not teeth.

It's not a bite.

But this realization didn't stop the gnawing uncertainty. She still felt sick. Burning up. If she changed—if she turned into one of those things—she wouldn't have long.

Footsteps.

This time, they were closer and heavier. The groaning was louder and more distinct. The creature had found her.

Sam held her breath and crouched lower. She could see it in the shadows, its silhouette emerging through the gloom. It staggered toward her, its hands still outstretched, the hollow remnants of what used to be a face twisted in a permanent, agonized scream.

She stood up slowly, her knife gleaming in the faint light as she prepared herself. This was the last one, the last thing standing between her and...well, she didn't know. Between her and whatever came next.

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It lunged at her faster than she expected, and Sam barely managed to sidestep the attack, slashing her knife across its arm. The creature jerked.

She spun and drove the blade deep into its skull, feeling the sickening crunch of bone as it collapsed in front of her. The thing twitched once, then went still.

Sam stood there panting, blood running down her arm. She felt the world tilt beneath her feet.

As she wiped the blood from her hands, a new sound startled her. This time, the noise was human. Deliberate. But this didn't make her feel any less anxious. Humans were as dangerous as the infected these days.

A figure approached across the tarmac. It was slow and cautious. Sam's heart leaped into her throat, instinctively raising her knife. But the shape didn't move erratically. There didn't seem to be an immediate threat. Or was that just wishful thinking?

"Kara?" she whispered, blinking against the blur of exhaustion. "No, it can't be you. I'm dying, aren't I? You're not real."

Kara emerged from the trees, her eyes locking onto Sam. Her face was streaked with dirt, her clothes soaked, but her eyes were just as clear, determined, and beautiful as ever.

"You..." Sam's voice faltered with emotion. "You came to find me? Is that you, Kara?"

But before Kara could answer, Sam's knees buckled beneath her, and she collapsed onto the rough, hard ground.

"Sam!" Kara ran over to her. "Hold on, baby. I'm here. I followed a trail of blood. I knew it was you."

Sam flinched, her mind reeling. "Get away! Don't...don't touch me," she gasped, shoving Kara back with what little strength she had left.

"Listen to me," Kara said, grabbing Sam by the shoulders and shaking her slightly. "I'm not leaving you. Not ever again."

Sam wasn't sure if she could trust what was happening. Was Kara even real, or was this some hallucination? She grabbed her knife. "I'm dangerous, Kara," Sam warned in a frantic voice. "Keep your distance."

Kara leaned back slightly and raised both hands in a nonthreatening gesture. "I'm not afraid of you. You're delirious. You're going to be okay now."

Sam's grip on the knife loosened as she met Kara's gaze. But she couldn't let go of the fear that she could turn any minute and kill Kara. She would have no control of herself once the infection reached her brain. "You don't understand. I don't know if I'm...if I'm still me."

Kara shook her head and smiled. Sam could see the kindness in her eyes. Instead of comforting her, it only increased the sensation of panic in her chest. "You're Sam. You're here. And I'm not losing you."

There was a brief pause, a tense silence hanging between them. To Sam, it felt as if it was the calm before the storm—the eye of the storm. But before Sam could react, Kara grabbed Sam's arm and pulled her up into a tight embrace. The knife slipped out

of her hand.

“I’m sorry,” Kara whispered against Sam’s hair. “I should never have doubted you. I should never have left. What the hell was I even thinking? I won’t blame you if you don’t, but please forgive me. I should’ve fought harder for you. I was scared.”

Sam’s heart pounded in her chest, and for a moment, she couldn’t breathe. The weight of everything she’d been carrying was too much—the fear, the loneliness, the heartbreak.

“You let me leave,” she choked out.

Kara pulled back just enough to look into Sam’s eyes. “You’ll never lose me again,” she said, her voice firm. “I’m here. I’m so sorry.”

For a moment, they stood there holding each other, the danger, the fear, the uncertainty—all of it forgotten.

Eventually, Kara pulled back, wiping the dirt and sweat from Sam’s face. “You’re not infected,” she said quietly. “Do you understand? You’re going to be just fine. Well, you may need stitching up, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. We need to get you to safety.”

Sam’s eyes flickered with relief, though she still felt the weight of everything that had happened. “I think you’re right. But can we be sure? I fought so many of them. I want to say fifty, but I’m prone to exaggeration, right? I reckon probably between five and ten,” she whispered.

“Listen, I know you,” Kara replied softly. “And I trust you. Do you hear me, Sam? I trust you.”

Sam's chest tightened with emotion. She didn't feel like she really had Kara's trust, not after everything that had happened, but here she was, standing in front of her, offering it freely. "So, what comes next?" Sam asked. "I'm on my way to find my people. I don't know where they are, exactly, but they were headed south on this road. I'll catch up with them. But I don't want to do it alone. Are you going to come with me?"

Kara smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from Sam's face. "I have to go back, Sam. You know that. But we can go back together. We'll be safer there. And they're taking on board what you've been saying."

"They think I stole from them."

"Well, they know you didn't do it now. It was a couple of kids. I found the stash, and I exposed the little fuckers! They're all sorry."

"But will that even make any difference? I mean, so what? They accused me with zero evidence. What's to stop it happening again? They don't want me there."

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“We’ll go and see the captain together. I can explain everything.”

“I don’t think too much of your captain, Kara. I really don’t. And I don’t care anymore. About her. About them. I tried my hardest. Fuck them.”

“Please don’t say that. You care about me, Sam. Maybe we can go and join your people at some point, but I can’t manage it right now. I can’t. I’m not ready to stay out here in the wild. Not full time. Maybe later, down the line. What do you think?”

“I think I can’t go back. That place isn’t for me.”

But I’m for you, aren’t I?” Kara said with a faint smile on her face.

“You are. Yes. Or at least I thought you were.”

“Please,” Kara pleaded. “Please come back with me. I’ll take care of you, just like you took care of me. I can’t lose what we have. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, I’ve ever loved. You’re everything to me, Sam.”

As the two stood there, there was tension between them, but Sam couldn’t deny her feelings towards Kara.

“Yes, what we have is sacred, Kara. You’re right. But the first sign of trouble, and I’m out of there. I want to make it perfectly clear. We’ll try it your way, and if they fuck up again, we’ll do it my way. That’s my condition. I want to love you unconditionally, but that’s my condition.”

Kara's hand lingered on Sam's cheek, and Sam allowed herself to lean into it. The rough calluses on Kara's fingers felt strangely comforting.

"I was so scared," Sam admitted, her voice trembling with the weight of emotions she had kept buried. "Not just of turning into one of them, but of losing you, too."

"You're not going to lose me. I'm here, Sam. I'll always be here."

Sam closed her eyes. She felt as if she'd been pulled back from the edge she had been teetering on since she'd left Fort Haven.

For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing. The world had quieted.

Sam opened her eyes, her gaze meeting Kara's. "I'm glad we're not fighting," she mumbled. "Look at the state of me. I'm covered in blood and guts. In your shoes, I'd have turned around and run back to the settlement as soon as I laid eyes on me."

"I know," Kara giggled. "I thought about it."

Sam realized just how close she had come to losing the one person who mattered.

"If we get back to the settlement, at least I can keep away from the infected for a while," Sam said, her voice cracking. "I didn't know what to do. I panicked. Jesus, it's awful out here. I need to rest up. This wound is fucking stinging like crazy."

"Things are going to be different. I promise you that," Kara reached out to Sam's hand, leading the way back.

"You know, the whole time I've been away from you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Meeting you changed everything, and I was truly heartbroken when I thought I'd

lost you.” Sam wiped her eyes.

“I understand, because I love you so much, Sam. I always will, and I promise from now on, I won’t let anything, or anyone, tear us apart.”

Sam smiled, squeezing her hand before pulling her closer to kiss Kara.

“I love you, too. Please don’t ever break that promise.”

And with that, they made their way back to Fort Haven, ready to fight their way back to happiness one step at a time.

The End.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Kara stepped into the shower, feeling the rush of hot water cascade over her skin.

The heat hit her body, loosening the knots of tension in her muscles. Steam swirled in the air around her, thick and heavy. She sighed in relief. She stood still for a moment, letting the water drench her hair and run down her body in rivulets, washing away that day’s grime. Her fingers massaged her scalp as her thoughts drifted inevitably to Sam.

Her heart fluttered, almost skipping a beat, as she pictured Sam's strong, protective hands and the way they held her close at night, her fingers tracing the lines of her body. It always felt as though Sam was mapping out the curves and planes of her skin, learning her all over again every time they touched. Kara held her breath as she felt her own hands slide down her stomach, the slickness of her wet skin guiding her

motions. Her fingers dipped lower, teasing herself, imagining that it was Sam there with her instead. It started the same way it always did between the two of them—the deep pull of desire and the undeniable attraction they felt for each other even after a year of shared life in Fort Haven.

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The sensations heightened with every stroke, her body responding to the vivid image in her mind of Sam's lips on hers, the soft moan of pleasure that Sam always let slip when their mouths met. Kara bit her lip, her hand moving with more urgency now, the pressure building as she remembered the feel of Sam's mouth traveling down her neck, biting, teasing. It wasn't just desire; it was love, deep and all-encompassing. Kara exhaled a trembling breath, her fingers moving faster, imagining Sam's touch—rougher now, insistent, the way Sam always was when she was desperate to feel every inch of her.

Her body arched, her free hand pressing against the cool wall for support as her legs weakened under the pressure of her own touch. She gasped, the sound soft but desperate, muffled by falling water, her fingers circling her clit and driving her wild. Her mind was consumed by Sam—by the way, Sam would whisper her name, in that low voice that sent shivers down her spine, by the way, she would push her body against hers, hard.

With a final, sharp intake of breath, Kara's body tensed, her climax crashing over her like a wave. Her knees shook as the pleasure traveled upwards through her belly, leaving her breathless and dizzy. The water now felt soothing against her flushed skin. Slowly, her hand fell away, and she leaned her forehead against the shower wall, letting the water continue to pour over her as her breathing steadied.

Sam. It'll always be you, Sam.

As the sensations faded, Kara let her thoughts drift beyond her relationship. Fort Haven had changed so much since Sam had arrived. What had started as a rigid, distrustful community led by the captain who ruled with an iron fist had now

transformed into something so different, it was beyond belief. Kara felt that she and Sam had definitely had something to do with that change. Sam had really pushed for new ideas, and Kara had followed her lead. They were living in a world that seemed determined to destroy them, and so survival strategies, new plans, and shared experiences made life more bearable.

Fort Haven was more than surviving these days. It had come to life. They had devised innovative ways to grow food—vertical farming that utilized every square inch of space and hydroponic systems that meant they could cultivate vegetables and herbs year-round. The once-barren soil within the walls was now full of plants, tended by the community in shifts. They had tomatoes, beans, and leafy greens.

Over the last few months, new families and solo survivors have been welcomed, each bringing with them new knowledge and skills.

Sam had led the efforts to build a new and improved solar power system that now provided Fort Haven with electricity. The panels were scavenged from abandoned towns and cities, carefully transported on foot in teams, and installed piece by piece until the entire community could rely on the sun for warmth and light. No more dim, flickering candles or sputtering fires, the energy they generated powered their cabins, their communal kitchen, and even their water filtration system, which had once seemed like an impossible dream.

Kara turned the shower handle, the cascade of water slowing to a final, reluctant drip. The sensation of steam clung to her skin, still warm and flushed from the heat, and the scent of Sam's homemade lavender soap lingered in the air. She stepped out onto the cool, unforgiving concrete floor. Reaching for a towel hanging nearby, she pressed the soft fabric to her damp skin, starting at her arms, then across her breasts, her nipples hard as she savored the simple ritual of drying off. Each movement was slow and deliberate as if trying to hold onto the fleeting warmth a little longer.

As she left the room and closed the door behind her, her eyes landed on Sam, who was

standing by the window, her back to Kara, her broad shoulders framed by the light filtering in through the glass. Sam turned at the sound of Kara's footsteps, her face breaking into a broad smile, her eyes dark with the same longing that Kara had only a few minutes earlier felt in the shower.

"You think of me? That's your post-orgasm face right there," Sam teased affectionately. She stepped forward, her arms slipping around Kara's waist, pulling her close.

Kara smiled, pressing her body against Sam's, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin fabric of her robe. "Always," Kara whispered, her lips brushing against Sam's ear.

Sam's hands moved to the small of Kara's back, fingers tracing the curve of her spine. "Good," Sam murmured, her voice deep and rough with desire. "Because I've been thinking about you... and your post shower look really does something to me."

Kara laughed softly, her heart swelling with love for this woman who had become everything to her—her partner, her lover, her protector. "Really? Well, come over here. Let's rectify that."

They stood there for a moment, holding each other, the quiet beat of their hearts in sync. Kara tilted her head up, her lips finding Sam's in a slow, tender kiss. The kiss deepened as Sam's hand slid under her robe, and her fingers splayed across the bare skin of Kara's hips.

Kara moaned softly into Sam's mouth, her body already responding to the familiarity of Sam's touch. It didn't take much—just a look, a word, a brush of skin—and the fire between them would ignite all over again, as strong as it had been the first time.

But there was something different about their sex these days. Lust was still a significant factor, but it was so much more than that. It was about everything they'd

been through—the battles, the fear, the loss—and how they'd come out the other side almost unscathed.

“I love you,” Kara whispered against Sam's lips, her hand sliding up to cup Sam's face.

Sam's eyes softened, her expression full of the same unspoken emotion that Kara felt every time she looked at her. “I love you too,” Sam replied, her voice barely more than a breath. “Always.”

They kissed again, slower this time, savoring the moment and the taste of each other. Kara's hands roamed across Sam's body as she continued to commit to memory every line, every muscle, every scar—a map of their shared journey etched into her skin.

Kara murmured between kisses, her voice laced with playful mischief, “I'm pretty sure I could spend the rest of my life exploring you... and still find new places to get lost in.”

Sam chuckled. “Good thing we're in this for life, then,” she teased, pulling Kara even closer. “Because I'm not going anywhere.”