



# Hollow Stars

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**Category:** Fantasy, Young Adult

**Description:** Six months ago, Lazlo Durante entered a military quarantine to escape the zombie apocalypse, and he hoped he had somewhere safe to live with his found family.

But when the quarantine falls, Lazlo is alone and on the run through a harsh wilderness. He has nothing but the stars to guide him, and zombies howling at his heels.

As he searches for those he's lost, he learns disturbing truths about the world he lives in.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

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1

Lazlo

It would've been a beautiful evening in spring, if it weren't for all the zombies howling.

The rumbling of the truck engine always seemed to have a soothing effect on the other survivors, and they were sleeping while I stayed awake. I was leaning against the tailgate, with a thick canvas cover keeping most of the sky hidden, but when I tilted my head, I could see the bright crescent moon among the sea of dazzling stars.

At times like this, I was always tempted to think of Remy. From where she was locked up inside the medical ward back at the Blaine County Quarantine Zone, I doubted she could even see the moon. There were no windows in the room they kept her in, but maybe she had escaped by now.

It had been seven days since I had been evacuated from the quarantine with eleven other survivors, because the zombies were weakening the perimeter walls. A soldier friend, Pvt. Tatum, had stayed behind and promised to help Remy get free before it was too late.

Now, for the first time in six months, there was actually a chance that Remy and I were looking at the moon at the same time, and I found some comfort in that.

My main concern, though, was that Harlow was safe, and so was I. My focus had to stay on the here and now, on ensuring the two of us survived, and not on any

daydreams about maybe reuniting with Remy.

I didn't know for sure how many people lived back at the BCQZ, but we had been sent out in small groups. The people who were studying the virus had deduced that larger groups attracted zombies. The sweet spot was apparently fewer than a dozen.

Along with myself and Harlow, there were ten other people:

? Private Kerrigan, a soldier I had gotten to know back at the quarantine, and he was generally considered the one in charge since we'd left

? Riva and Calvin, a medic and her boyfriend who worked in the mess hall

? Drew, a man in his thirties, along with his two nephews and one niece, but I couldn't remember the children's names, and it would be rude to ask them what they were called now that we've been travelling together for so long

? Bào and Vân, sisters from Vietnam who kept to each other mostly, but I knew Bào a little because she had worked with Harlow back in the quarantine

? Kimber, a teenage girl about Harlow's age, and the two had been attached at the hip since we left

For the past week, we had all spent the majority of our time crammed into the back of the truck, putting as much distance between us and the zombies that were overrunning our former home in the BCQZ.

We stopped for breaks during the day, scavenging for supplies when the opportunity arose, and we camped out at night. We headed north into the Canadian wilderness, since the zombies were rumored to be cold avoidant. The hope was that, eventually, we would stop hearing them, and then we would start looking for somewhere to make

our new home.

We had yet to go a day without hearing zombie groans, although, they had been sounding more distant. At least, they were until tonight.

Usually, we'd have stopped to camp out by now, but Kerrigan kept driving onward. I was way in the back, so I couldn't ask him why, but I assumed that he heard the same howling I did.

It had begun after most everyone else had fallen asleep, and as the night went on, the howling grew closer and more aggrieved. I wished the military truck could go faster, but at least we were moving.

A loud sound – like a small explosion – came from underneath the truck, and all at once, the vehicle lurched forward before flipping and rolling.

2

Lazlo

The back of the truck was full of elbows and screams, as we tumbled head over feet over one another. Harlow cried out, but the sound was cut short as the truck skidded on its side.

“What the hell happened?” someone asked, and one of the children was crying.

I scrambled on my hands and knees out of the back of the truck onto the asphalt road. My eyes darted around, scanning the moonlit highway and surrounding forest for any sign of zombies.

When I couldn't see any, I turned back to the truck to check on Harlow. But Kimber

was already feeling around in the dark, saying her name.

“What’s wrong with Harlow?” I asked.

“I don’t think she’s in the truck,” Kimber replied. “She must’ve gotten thrown out when we flipped.”

I spun around and shouted, “Harlow!”

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Kimber had gotten out of the truck and started calling for her, too. The pair of us were walking up and down the stretch of highway, shouting her name.

And then her voice squeaked out from the long grass of the embankment. “I’m okay!” Harlow yelled weakly, and I immediately ran to the sound.

She was sitting up by the time I reached her, and I crouched down. I brushed back the hair from her face so I could see her eyes better, and I noticed a gash on her cheek.

“You’re bleeding. What else is hurt?” I asked.

She rubbed her temple and shrugged. “Everything. What happened?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. There was a loud noise, and then it all happened so fast.”

I stood up and surveyed the scene, but the only light came from the moon, the red taillights, and the headlights shining in the opposite direction from where we were on the embankment. Kimber had followed me here, and she knelt on the ground beside Harlow.

Kerrigan, Riva, and Calvin had already gotten out of the truck, and they were walking around it, investigating the crash. One of the kids was crying in the back, and Bão and Vân were talking to each other frantically in Vietnamese.

“There’s fucking spike strips!” Kerrigan shouted and kicked a chain, making it clatter against the road, and my stomach dropped. That was a man-made trap.

“Spike strips?” Harlow asked. “What are those?”

“It’s basically what it sounds like. It’s a strip of spikes laid across the road to puncture tires and disable vehicles.”

“Someone put that out there?” Kimber asked. “Why would they want to –”

Her words were cut off by a zombie howl. It was the same kind I’d been hearing for the past hour or so – the warbling and rasping howl, almost like a zombie wolf – but it was much closer than it had been before.

“Can you stand up?” I asked Harlow.

“Yeah,” she said, but the moment she tried, she started to fall, and I had to catch her.

“I’ve got you,” I promised her, and the two of us and Kimber hurried to the truck.

When we reached it, Riva and Kerrigan were arguing, with Riva contending, “We have weapons, we can hold off a few zombies for a night, and in the morning, we’ll patch the tires and get out of here.”

“A few zombies?” Kerrigan snorted. “You think a zombie laid that spike strip? No, we’re dealing with something else out here, and I don’t know what the hell it is. We’re better off running.”

“We can’t all run, Kerrigan,” Riva said sharply. “There’s little kids, and some of us are banged up from the crash.”

Harlow leaned against the back of the truck to rest her knee, and another of those long zombie howls rattled the night, sounding even closer than before.

“We can’t stay here,” I muttered, and I left Harlow to join Kerrigan and Riva’s discussion. “We’ll be sitting ducks if we stay here.”

Riva whirled on me instantly, her eyes wide with disbelief. “How can you suggest that? Harlow can’t even walk.”

“I’ll carry her on my back if I have to,” I said.

“Finally, someone with some –” Kerrigan was saying, but a whistling sound cut through the air, followed by a wet thwack. “What the hell just happened?”

“There’s an arrow in your arm,” Riva said, pointing to the thin pole jutting out of his right shoulder.

“Get down!” I shouted as I dropped to my knees. “Someone’s shooting at us!”

All around us, in the thick forest that surrounded either side of the highway, branches were breaking and crackling, as if a herd of deer were racing through. But by the sound of the zombies howling, it was something much worse.

“The zombies will get us if we stay on the ground,” Kerrigan grumbled, and then he got to his feet and shouted, “Women and children, get on top of the truck! Everyone else, grab a weapon and get ready to fight for your fucking lives.”

Harlow wouldn’t be able to get up on the truck on her own, so I ran over to help her. Kimber went up first, using the underside of the truck as a ladder. I grabbed Harlow by the waist and lifted her up until Kimber took her hand.

“You got her?” I asked as she helped pull Harlow up over the edge.



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Kimber held my gaze and promised me, “Yeah, I’ve got her.”

I raced into the truck to grab my machete from where it was sheathed in my backpack, and I emerged as the first zombie came rampaging out of the trees. I planted my feet on the asphalt, and just before it reached me, I sliced through it with the machete.

Fortunately, I had spent the majority of the past six months training with Kerrigan and other soldiers back at the quarantine. I hadn’t been much of a fighter before, but I had worked hard to be able to hold my own against the zombies when I needed to.

Within moments, four other zombies appeared, all of them fast and fleshy. I was on the ground, fighting alongside Riva and Kerrigan. There may have been others, but I was too focused on staying alive to worry about everyone.

As I was slicing through any zombie I could, I was distantly aware of the screaming going on behind me. Some of the zombies managed to slip between me and Kerrigan, and they were trying to climb up onto the truck.

When I finally had a chance to look back, I saw the survivors baling off the roof. Zombies had made it up there, and so Harlow, Kimber, and all the others had to escape back to the ground.

“Lazlo, run!” Harlow yelled, and Kimber took her hand, helping her race toward the woods as quickly as she could.

“Go!” I shouted back. “I’ll catch up to you!”

Harlow and Kimber disappeared into the forest, the way the other survivors had. A couple zombies gave chase, but Kerrigan ran into the trees after them, wielding his gun.

I stayed back, less by choice and more because the zombies kept blocking my path. Everything was a blur of adrenaline and zombie blood. I didn't think – I let my body move on the instincts I'd been honing and relied on the sharpness of my machete – and I dispatched the zombies as quickly as I could.

Riva let out a frustrated grunt as one pinned her against the side of the truck. The only reason she was still alive was because she had her baseball bat shoved in the zombie's mouth, but it still kept reaching its long arms toward her.

No more zombies were running at me, so I went over and helped Riva by slicing straight through the zombie's neck. The corpse fell to the ground, spilling thick greenish blood, while the head was still stuck on the end of the bat, dangling in the air.

"Is it over?" Drew asked, wiping his forehead as he came around from the opposite end of the truck. "Are all the zombies dead?"

Riva spun around, so she could appraise the area better. "I think so."

"Okay." Calvin let out a rough breath. "What was that? Did those zombies ambush us?"

"I don't know, but I have to find my family," Drew said, and he started calling the names of his nibblings as he headed toward the forest. "You can come back now!"

My arms and shoulders ached from slicing through so many zombies, not to mention all the bumps and bruises I sustained in the vehicle crash, but I agreed with Drew.

The only thing that mattered was making sure my family was safe.

3

Lazlo

The zombies were gone, and some of the other survivors that had scattered into the surrounding forest had already returned when they were called for. Drew's children were safe and sound, along with Bão and Vân.

I shouted Harlow's name, again and again. But there was no sign of her.

"Lazlo, you're being too loud," Riva chastised me.

We were all clustered around the truck on its side, where the headlights still illuminated the area around us. Riva was crouched down next to Bão, tending to a few minor scrapes and scratches she'd gotten while running through the thick pine trees.

"I won't find Harlow by being quiet," I said.

"You might not find her at all," Calvin countered. He was sitting on a tire, hunched over, and his dark skin looked ashy in the headlights.

"'Might' isn't reason enough for me to stop," I said before shouting Harlow's name again.

Riva glared over at me and tucked her dark hair back behind her ears. "We're already down to eight of us. We don't need to lose anymore by attracting zombies or wolves or any other dangers."

“Eight?” I echoed. “Who else did we lose?”

Her frown deepened and her voice softened when she said, “Mason was killed in the attack, and Kerrigan and Kimber are missing too.”

Mason. That was the name of one of Drew’s nephews. Now I felt like an even bigger asshole for not remembering his name while he was alive.

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“Three people are missing? You mean they’re lost in the woods?” I pressed.

“Or the zombies got them,” Calvin interjected.

I shook my head fiercely. “We don’t know that. We should be sending a search party, not abandoning them. I’m heading out to find them, and anybody else who isn’t injured is free to join me.”

I glanced over at the other survivors, hoping to add them to the search party numbers to increase our odds. But two of them were crying children, and as their uncle, Drew wouldn’t leave them behind. Calvin was still winded and recuperating from the fighting he’d done, and Bão was injured, so her sister Vân would likely stay with her.

“We can’t stay here all night,” Calvin said. “If the zombies come back again, we’re completely screwed. We need to move out of here, not spend time playing in the woods.”

I was about to argue with him, but Riva stood up and asked, “Does anybody have a watch?”

Vân raised her hand. “I do.”

“Good.” Riva had a watch around her own wrist, and she glanced down at it as she spoke. “I’ll go with Lazlo, and we’ll search for Harlow, Kimber, and Kerrigan. If we can’t find them within an hour, we’ll come back, and we can all head out. In the meantime, you can rest up and gather your things for the long walk ahead.”

“And if you don’t come back in an hour?” Calvin asked, while Riva and Vân quickly synchronized their watches.

“Then move on without us.” She gave him a helpless shrug, then turned back to me. “Come on, Lazlo.”

Together, Riva and I scoured the nearby forest, looking for any sign of Harlow, Kimber, or Kerrigan. I obviously wasn’t as close to Kimber or Kerrigan, but they had both seemed nice enough, and I hoped that they weren’t hurt or dead.

As we went deeper into the woods without hearing from Harlow, my panic began to grow. Why wasn’t she responding to us? How far could she possibly go on that injured leg? She had to be somewhere close, and yet, she was nowhere nearby.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Riva checking her watch again, and I grimaced inwardly. I didn’t know for sure how long we’d been searching because it felt like an agonizing eternity, but we hadn’t found anyone yet, so I wasn’t ready to give up.

“It’s getting late,” Riva said, giving voice to my fears. “We should start heading back.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Harlow,” I insisted.

“So you want me to leave you alone in the woods, wandering around with a limited supply of food and water?” Riva asked pointedly. “Do you think that’s what Harlow would want?”

To that I could only reply with the cold truth, “Harlow would want me to find her.”

I knew we couldn’t go on much longer, so I hurried onward.

The moonlight filtering through the tree branches glinted on something and caught my eye. When I got closer, I realized it was a small cross hanging on a golden chain, and it was caught on the end of the log. I took it off, careful not to break it.

“What’s that?” Riva asked.

I swallowed back the lump in my throat so I could manage to answer, “It’s Harlow’s necklace. Her mom gave it to her, and she never took it off.”

I started yelling her name, and I ran frantically in the area surrounding it, scanning the darkened woods for any other sign of her. I shouted and shouted until my voice was hoarse and cracking. When I tripped on a stick and fell to my knees, I just stayed on the ground, kneeling in the mud and struggling to catch my breath.

“She isn’t here, and I have to get back,” Riva said, and her tone was growing more insistent.

I shook my head. “I can’t just leave her. We haven’t even found any bodies. Did Kimber, Kerrigan, and Harlow all vanish?”

“They’re likely dead and hidden under brush,” Riva said bluntly. “Or they’re dead, and the zombies carried them off to eat them later.

“If Harlow were here and she were alive, she would’ve answered by now, Lazlo,” she went on, speaking more slowly and emphatically. “The question is no longer will you find her – it’s do you want to live, or are you going to stay here and die?”

“What would you do if it were Calvin instead of Harlow?” I asked her finally.

“I would live, and I hope he would make the same choice.”

Lazlo



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I went with Riva because I wasn't ready to die, even if I wouldn't really classify it as a desire to live. But I knew it wouldn't do any good if I stayed behind to die cold and alone in the forest.

Riva and I made it back to the truck before anyone had left, and I gathered up Harlow's things, consolidating it with my own in my red backpack. The others had already gone through Kimber's and Kerrigan's bags, scavenging them for anything useful. I grabbed Harlow's books – her personal sketchbook, a battered dictionary, and an old copy of Little Women – and tucked them in between my clothes to keep them safe. The cross necklace, I wore myself and slipped it under my shirt.

Nobody said much of anything to me, but there wasn't much of anything to say.

Harlow wasn't the first person I'd lost to zombies, and I doubted she would be the last, even though I hoped. But I always hoped, like the foolish idiot I was.

The real gut punch was that I had left Remy behind for Harlow. For the past six months, it had been the two of us – Harlow and I – living in a trailer together, like a little family. When I had first met her, I think that Harlow had a crush on me, but considering our age gap – she had just turned fourteen, and I was seven years her senior – it wasn't anything that I had ever reciprocated.

Fortunately, the crush seemed to fade quickly, and our relationship had turned into something different, something special. She'd become a little sister and my closest friend. With everyone else I cared about either locked up, dead, or just plain gone, Harlow was the only family I had.

We were each other's only family.

When Private Tatum had come in the middle of the night to evacuate us, I had initially resisted because I wanted to ensure that Remy got out (and I also still hoped to see her again). But Harlow had begged me to go with her, and she refused to leave if I didn't. Tatum thought it would be near certain death if we stayed, and I didn't want that for her.

So I had left the quarantine with Harlow because I cared about her and wanted to keep her safe, and because I believed it was what Remy would have wanted me to do. If the situation was reversed, she would've left me behind for her little brother Max or even for Harlow.

I had never felt like such an immense failure. I had essentially abandoned Remy for nothing, and I had not protected Harlow.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to block out the shame and guilt and despair, because if I didn't, I wouldn't be able to go on. Deep down, I knew I didn't even deserve to go on, but some primal survival instinct inside me refused to let me just give up and die.

By starlight, the eight of us remaining survivors followed the road north. I was at the rear, wielding my machete in my hand in case any zombies or wild animals came out of the darkness.

We walked until dawn when we found an abandoned barn. There, we slept and recuperated for a while, but then we moved on to find somewhere more secure.

It was on our second day walking that we stumbled upon a deserted militia base. The exterior concrete walls were cracked and weather-worn, bearing the scars of past battles, and the entrance was partially barricaded with rusted vehicles.

I went in first, carefully maneuvering over the blockade and opening the battered front door. Inside, the compound stood in various states of disrepair. Tattered flags adorned with militant insignia hung askew, and the floor was littered with rusted weapons, ragged uniforms, and scattered ration packs, all abandoned in a hasty retreat. Nature had started to reclaim the building, with overgrown vines and vegetation snaking their way through cracks in the concrete.

Despite the clear signs of abandonment, there was an eerie feeling that the base wasn't entirely devoid of life. As I scoped through the various empty rooms and hallways, the occasional creaks and rustling leaves gave me pause. When I heard footsteps behind me, I whirled around, brandishing my machete.

"It's only me!" Riva held her hands up in surprise. "You'd been in here awhile, so I wanted to make sure everything was fine."

"I haven't found anybody alive, and there's no signs of zombies," I told her as I lowered my weapon. "It seems like it's been ransacked for supplies."

She scowled. "Dammit."

"But the structure is still standing, and the roof is okay. I spotted some beds and cots, and I think I found some generators." I motioned toward where I had seen them when I did my sweep through the compound.

"Vân worked with the generators back at the BCQZ, so she could maybe get that working again," Riva said. "And with a compound like this, there has to be a water source or some sort of water filtration. This could be a good place to regroup for a while."

I looked around again, at the bullet holes in the concrete walls and the rust-colored stains that I suspected were blood. It was trashed and had a strange musty odor, but it

was much more secure than sleeping on the side of the road again.

“It’s not home, but it’ll do,” I agreed.

It had been getting close to dusk when we discovered the compound, so we had to hurry if we wanted to make it comfortable for the evening.

The rusted vehicle stayed in front of the door, for additional protection if any zombies found us, although not everyone was thrilled about that. Bão had cut her arm climbing over it, and it was enough that Riva had to give her a couple stitches.

Once she was all bandaged up, I showed Vân and Bão where the generators were. They were in a small room with some other electronics. There was a bank of six TVs set up on a table, and based on the broken security cameras I’d noticed throughout the base, I guessed that they were part of a now defunct surveillance system.

“Do you think you can get the generator working?” I asked Vân.

She nodded. “I think so, but I’ll need a few instruments and it’ll take time.” Vân turned to her sister and gave her a list of specific tools to search for.

“Riva found a supply closet, so I’ll check there,” Bão said, and then she darted out into the dim hallway to fulfill Vân’s requests.

I stayed back with Vân, holding a kerosene lamp so she could see what she was working on. She knelt beside the square metal box, wiping off the dust to inspect it better. As she did that, I looked around the room again to see if there was anything else useful.

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Other than the old TVs – two of them with their screens broken in – there was a radio smashed on the floor, and on the wall, a corded phone hung beside a CB radio.

“Once the power is on, will the CB radio work?” I asked.

“Um, I don’t know, maybe” Vân replied absently.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, and I leaned over to shine the light on her bed.

Bão returned with a few tools, and Vân immediately got to work. I stayed beside them, holding the lamp as the night wore on.

Riva, Calvin, and Drew had spent their time making the rest of the place more livable. Even the kids got involved, sweeping and dusting while the adults righted the beds and moved heavier junk out of the way.

Drew shared a room with the kids, Riva and Calvin got one, Bão and Vân had another, and I took a small one in the corner. It was empty, other than a few candles, a thin blanket that Riva had found, and a worn-out cot. Still, it was much better than sleeping in the cold dirt or in the back of the truck.

As exhausted as I was, I didn’t feel like sleeping. I lit the candles, and I gingerly pulled Harlow’s sketchbook out from my backpack.

When I ran my hand over the cover, tears stung my eyes. A frozen agony overwhelmed me, as if my chest had literally been ripped open and filled with ice.

Slowly, I opened the sketchbook and saw her message written on the front page: “If found, please return to Harlow Smith, trailer 1185 in the Blaine County Quarantine Zone, Idaho. All ideas and designs are the property of Harlow and none of your business.”

Everything I had done since the moment we’d left the BCQZ had been in the hopes of keeping her alive, and yet I had failed. I looked through her sketchbook, so I could think of her and feel close to her, even though it hurt so much.

Because it hurt so much. Because I deserved every ounce of pain I felt.

Most of the pages contained sketches of fashion, since Harlow designed and made her own clothes back at the government quarantine. She refused to let a zombie apocalypse stifle her creativity or ability to be stylish. I had known a few things about fashion back in my days as a musician, and she had real talent. In a different time, she would’ve been utterly brilliant.

A few pages contained charcoal sketches of people – mostly of her friend Kimber, but then there was one of me. Beside it, she had written lyrics from “Earthly Symphony,” a song by my old band. All at once, the tears were streaming down my face.

I closed the sketchbook and set it aside, so I wouldn’t dampen the paper.

5

Lazlo

All of our recent travels and tragedies had left us exhausted, and the compound seemed to be a safe space to catch our breath for a few days. There was fresh water, warm beds, and flickering electricity. Riva had even found a giant plastic tub of dried

beans, and Drew managed to catch a couple catfish in a nearby river.

Vân had also gotten the CB radio working again, and we had our first chance of contacting other people, including any others that escaped the BCQZ.

We all took turns manning the radio, hoping to connect with any other survivors. But so far, we heard nothing in reply, just static. On the second day, when it was my turn at the CB, Riva came in.

“Any luck?” she asked, but by the grim expression on her face, I knew that she hadn’t come in for small talk.

“Not yet. What’s wrong?”

“I was outside with Drew trying to catch some fish.” Her frown deepened. “We could hear the zombies howling. They’re distant right now, but I don’t know for how much longer.”

“We could stay and fight,” I suggested. “The walls here are thick, and the electricity and water are hard to beat.”

“It’s clear that the zombies got in here once before, presumably when they were better armed and it was more secure.” She motioned vaguely around to the broken TV sets and blood stains on the floor. “We need to move on to find somewhere that the zombies aren’t.”

“What if no such place exists?” I asked.

She waited a beat before replying thoughtfully, “I have to believe that one does. I’m not ready to give up on my dream of peace.”

Something about the way she said it reminded me of Harlow, and it was like a knife twisting inside my chest again. I looked away from Riva.

“Maybe with the radio, we could meet up with more people from the BCQZ,” I said.

“We’re not supposed to meet with more people,” she reminded me sharply. Zombies were more attracted to larger groups, so it was in our best interest to keep our numbers small.



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“It wouldn’t hurt to talk to others, to share information,” I argued.

“If anyone even answers at all,” she amended for me. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning. I’d like it if you joined us, but if you want to stay back here, I won’t fight you on it.”

“Everyone is going?” I asked.

Riva nodded. “It’s like you said when we arrived. This place isn’t home.”

I didn’t have anything to counter that, because it really didn’t feel like any place that I wanted to live forever. But would any place ever feel like home again? Without all the people that I cared about?

Riva left me alone to think about what she’d said, and I went back to trying to reach someone on the radio because I didn’t want to think about anything right now.

“Can anyone hear this? Over,” I repeated into the mic, the way I had all day, and I released the push-to-talk button when I finished and waited for a response.

I was about to say it again when there was a crackle, and then a man’s voice, “This is Sergeant Boden. Over.”

For a moment, I could only stare down at the microphone, and then I scrambled to reply, “This is Lazlo Durante. Are you from the Blaine County Quarantine Zone?”

There was a long bout of static, so loud I wondered if I lost him or if I had imagined

it in the first place.

“Lazlo?” A woman’s voice gasped into the mic, and my heart soared because I recognized it immediately. “Lazlo?”

That was Remy’s voice. Remy King, who I hadn’t even seen in six months. Since she was locked up in the medical ward, since we were separated by armed guards, locked doors, and threats of exile.

This was the woman I loved, who I feared I would never see again.

“Remy?” I asked, but there was only silence that followed – no static.

“Lazlo?” she repeated, sounding distressed, and in the background, I heard someone telling her to let the button go.

As soon as the static began, I started talking, “Remy? Is that you?”

“Yes!” she shouted. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” I answered hurriedly. “How did you get out? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. It’s a long story, but I’m fine,” she said. “Where are you?”

“I don’t know exactly,” I said. “Somewhere in Canada, or near to it.”

“Who all is with you?” she asked. “Is everyone in your party okay?”

I winced at the question, but I swallowed it back to reply evenly, “There’s eight of us. We found an abandoned militia base to rest up, and it had this CB radio, so that’s good.”

“How’s Harlow?” Remy asked, and I grimaced. How could I answer that over a damn CB radio? “Laz? How’s Harlow? Over.”

I took a fortifying breath and gave her the simplest explanation, “She didn’t make it.”

In response, there was a long stretch of static, and I worried that my words had cut out or gotten scrambled.

“Remy? Did you hear me?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said flatly. “Where can we meet you?”

For the most glorious of moments, I let myself fantasize about a future reunion between the two of us. But then I realized that in order to get to me, Remy would have to pass through the same area where we’d gotten caught on road spikes and hunted by zombies. I still didn’t understand what had happened there, but it was a dangerous mess.

And how would I even tell her how to find me? I didn’t even know where I was – there was no address, no map, and all I knew was that we’d followed roads through forests for miles and miles. I couldn’t even tell her where the spike trap had been left. Somewhere northeast of Idaho on an empty stretch of highway?

Besides, what good would it do for Remy to join up with me again? I hadn’t been able to protect her or Harlow or anybody. Hell, when we were together, Remy had spent far more time protecting me than the other way around.

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She would be better off away from me.

“I’m sorry, Remy,” I said finally, my voice thick. “We can’t wait for you. I want to, but it’s too dangerous. But maybe we can meet in Canada.”

“Lazlo, what are you doing?” Riva asked, and I glanced back over my shoulder to her standing in the doorway. “Are you making dates with somebody?”

“Something like that,” I muttered and I turned my attention back to the mic.

“That sounds good, Lazlo,” Remy replied. “On my way to Canada, is there anything I should watch out for?”

“Don’t stop moving. If you get a flat tire or get slowed down for anything, you have to keep moving. And ... avoid zombies, I guess. Be careful.”

There was another staticky lull in our conversation, and when Remy came back, she said, “Listen, Lazlo, I should get going.”

“Will you have the CB with you?” I asked.

“No, I won’t. I won’t be able to radio anymore. Take care of yourself, okay, Lazlo?”

“I will. And you do the same. You have a date you have to go to in Canada, remember?”

“I won’t forget it,” she promised. “Bye, Lazlo.”

“Bye, Remy.” I took a deep breath. “Over and out.”

I dropped the mic and ran a hand over my face.

“Lazlo, are you okay?” Riva asked from behind me.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, then quickly amended, “I’ll be fine.”

“Did you learn anything useful?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“I’ll leave you alone then. Let me know if you want to talk later on,” Riva offered.

“Thanks,” I said, but as she started to go, I looked back at her, “Riva. I’m going with you tomorrow morning.”

6

Lazlo

Remy and Harlow were being torn to shreds by zombies, and I could only watch on a staticky TV screen until raised voices roused me from my nightmare. I stumbled out to the kitchen of the compound to find the others arguing.

Bão and Vân were on the far side of the sparse kitchen, with Bão more incensed and standing slightly in front of her sister. On the other side was Riva, her arms folded across her chest and her nostrils flared. Between them, Drew and Calvin were leaning back against the counters, looking uncomfortable.

“We are already so far north, and there are still zombies,” Bão was saying when I

came in. “Not to mention that whole situation with the spike strip. Either the zombies are much smarter than any other we’ve encountered, or the humans nearby are especially vicious. We don’t even know what happened in this compound!” She pointed to the bullet holes in the countertops and broken cabinet doors. “How did such a secure base fall? I haven’t seen a trace of green blood. Did zombies even have anything to do with it?”

Riva shook her head. “We can’t ever know what happened here, and that doesn’t even matter because we aren’t staying.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, cautiously entering the conversation. “Does somebody want to stay here?”

“No, we are definitely leaving,” Bão stated unequivocally. “We just can’t agree on where we’re going.”

“They sent us north from the quarantine zone because they believed that we would be safer,” Riva reasoned. “They have military officials and scientists studying the virus, and they must have a better understanding of it than we do. Why shouldn’t we follow their recommendations?”

Bão scoffed. “Because they don’t actually know shit. They promised us that the quarantine was safe, where there were hundreds of us, and when they sent us off, they’d only recently discovered that humans will never be safe in groups larger than a dozen.”

“Correlation doesn’t always equal causation,” Vân chimed in, speaking more timidly than her sister. “Maybe there are fewer zombies up north because it’s less densely populated, and it has nothing to do with the temperature at all. If that’s the case, we would be much better off living somewhere warmer, with longer growing seasons and less harsh winters, and we should be fine, as long as we avoid large groups.”

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“But you saw the horde of zombies surrounding the BCQZ!” Riva countered.

“I heard them,” Bão corrected her. “But I didn’t see much of anything since it was pitch black and I was huddled in the back of the truck when we left in the middle of the night.”

“Well, I did see them, and there were hundreds,” Riva retorted. “It is not safe there.”

“It isn’t safe anywhere!” Bão yelled in exasperation.

“Hey, let’s all calm down and talk this through.” I held up my hands and stepped further in the middle of the room, trying to put myself in between Bão and Riva.

“I am calm,” Riva insisted and lowered her voice slightly. “Okay. Let’s discuss Vân’s theory. The zombies aren’t actually affected by the cold at all but are merely a product of the populations around them. What does that change? The northern parts of Canada are the least populated areas in North America. How many people lived in the United States before the virus?” She glanced over at the men leaning against the counter. “Drew, you were a teacher, do you know?”

For a moment, Drew looked like a deer in headlights, but he finally answered with an uncertain, “Just over three-hundred million, I think.”

“Does anybody have any wild guesses about how many of those people are zombies now?” Riva asked, and now she looked between us all. “A hundred million? Two-hundred-fifty million?”

Bão shook her head. “Not that many. A lot of people died before they even became infected, and so many zombies have been killed, too.”

“Fine. We’ll go with the lower number,” Riva contended. “There are at least a hundred million zombies hunting an increasingly shrinking food supply.”

“And you don’t think they’ll move north, looking for food?” Bão countered dubiously. “I’m not saying that the zombies won’t be a threat if we go south – I am saying that they will be a threat anywhere we go. So we might as well live somewhere where we aren’t fighting the climate in addition to the undead.”

Riva scoffed and shook her head in disbelief. “That’s absurd. You wouldn’t go live in a lion’s den because it’s raining out.”

“I can fight or outrun a lion. I can’t do that against hypothermia or starvation,” Bão reasoned.

“I don’t know about that. Lions are a lot faster than you think,” I said.

“We don’t all have to go the same direction, you know,” Calvin interjected quietly. “In fact, it might even be better for us all if we travel in smaller groups.”

Bão glanced back at her sister, then stood up straighter and announced, “We’re going south, and anyone who wants to join us can.”

“I’m going north, and anyone who wants to join me can,” Riva said, then she looked around to see where the rest of us would land.

Calvin was the first to raise his hand. “I’m with Riva.” Which was basically a given since he was her boyfriend.



“I’ll go north,” I said.

Honestly, I was going north even if nobody else was. I didn’t know if it was safer or not. Bão was likely right about nowhere being safe, but I had made a date with Remy in the future. Even though I knew that she was safer without me, I needed to be where I said I’d be if she ever came looking for me.

Drew seemed to hesitate a moment before finally deciding, “I’d like to take the kids and go south with Bão and Vân, if we won’t be too much trouble.”

“No, we’ll be happy to have you,” Bão reassured him with a smile.

“Well, it’s decided then, so we should get out of here before the zombies get any closer,” Riva said.

By mid-morning, we had all packed our things, loading up our bags with the scant few supplies we’d managed to find here, and we’d filled our water canteens. Before we left, we all took turns drinking as much water as we could, except for Bão, who insisted that there was no reason for it.

The eight of us decided to leave together, even though we were going separate ways, and we walked down the long gravel driveway to the main highway that ran by.

Once we reached the asphalt was when we split up. Bão, Vân, Drew, and the two kids heading one way while Riva, Calvin, and I went the other.

I paused once, looking back over my shoulder at their retreating figures. I hadn’t been particularly close to any of them, despite their proximity as of late, and I couldn’t say that I’d exactly miss them.

But I hoped that they had a kind journey ahead of them, with someplace soft for them

to rest their head. That was the most I could hope for anyone anymore.

I turned away and didn't look back after that. No matter what I left behind, I had to keep moving forward. There was no other way to survive in this world.

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Lazlo

When the sun began to sink below the forest, we set up camp after our first full day of walking. The trek had started with a few distant zombie howls, but by the time we were bunking down amongst towering pine trees, it had been hours since we'd heard anything.

Ideally, we would've found somewhere more sheltered, like a house or abandoned vehicle or even an underpass. Zombies weren't the only threats out there, and it was always nicer to sleep someplace warm with a roof overhead.

A few hours before dusk, we'd passed a rusted out old van without any tires, and that was about the only thing we'd seen all day that constituted shelter. By the time we realized that had been the best we could do, it was too late to go back.

So we set up camp under the thick canopy of pine branches. We made a fire and spread our flimsy blankets on the ground.

Calvin and Riva sat beside each other, his arm around her with her leaning into him. I didn't have anyone to share any warmth with, so I hugged my arms across my chest and clenched my teeth to keep them from chattering.

"How far do you think we walked today?" I asked over the crackling of flames.

"It's hard to say," Riva said. "Maybe ten miles, probably less."

"How many miles do you think a zombie can travel in a day?" Calvin asked.

She exhaled loudly. “I have no idea. Do they need to rest? The fast ones can probably cover a lot of ground.”

“They can still catch up to us then,” Calvin said, and he stared off into the ominous darkness of the forest around us.

“Well, if we keep our pace, we should still put a lot of distance between us over the next few days,” Riva said. “I bet we can start looking for something more permanent in as little as a week.”

“You really think that?” I asked, because in my mind, it sounded much too optimistic.

We drove in a military truck for a week, and we still hadn’t made it out of the zombies’ range. How could a week of hiking across uneven land be enough?

“There’s only three of us. I’m hoping they lose our scent faster,” Riva said with a yawn.

“You and Calvin should get some rest. I’ll stay up for the first watch,” I offered.

Without walls around us, there was no way that we could all sleep at once, and my struggles with insomnia meant that I was the best one to begin with.

It was sometime late in the night, after I’d lost sight of the moon behind the branches and the clouds, that my eyes grew heavy, and I traded shifts with Calvin. The fire was still alive as I curled up under my blanket, and sleep overtook me.

It was deep and dreamless until the ground trembled beneath me, and I heard Riva screaming.

I sat up with a start, and our campsite had gone dark, with the fire little more than

embers. But there was a commotion about, with debris of dirt and pine needles flying everywhere.

In the darkness, I made out the shape of a massive creature standing over where Riva slept, and it was stomping down on her with long legs.

I couldn't do any good if I couldn't see, so I scrambled over and grabbed a stick from the firepit. It wasn't burning, but I hurriedly lit it with my matches, and soon I had a working torch.

Across from me, Calvin was bloodied and unconscious, and nearby was Riva, futilely attempting to ward off an enraged moose. I had never seen one up close before, and it appeared much more like a furry dinosaur with cloven hooves. It had no antlers, but it was definitely doing enough damage with feet alone.

"Hey!" I shouted and waved the flaming torch in the moose's face before it pulverized Riva into hamburger meat.

The moose looked at me and gave an unnerving guttural bellow, and then it began to charge at me.

I grabbed my backpack in case I might need my machete, and then I turned and raced onward into the trees. Behind me, I could hear the branches cracking and breaking as the giant beast gave chase, and I didn't know how much longer I would be able to outrun it.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw the moose barreling toward me. That split second of not looking forward was enough, and I tripped on a pinecone before I went flying headfirst into a tree. Then everything went black.

Lazlo

Scattered bird calls woke me up, but it was the splintering pain in my skull that had me alert. I opened my eyes and stared up at the morning sun filtering through the branches.

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When I tried to sit up, I learned that the headache wasn't the worst of my injuries. My entire left side throbbed, with my knee engulfed in a searing pain.

I was somewhere in the woods, but it looked the same as anywhere else I'd been lately. My backpack was on the ground beside me, next to some hefty moose tracks left in the mud. Thankfully, the ground had been too damp for a fire to spread, and my torch had gone out long ago.

Wincing through the discomfort, I pushed myself up until I was sitting, and I leaned back against the pine tree trunk that had knocked me unconscious. With a great deal of pain, I was able to lean forward in an attempt to get a look at my knee, but it was too swollen to get my jeans over it. Even still, the dark purplish bruises had spread half-way down my calf. The moose must've stomped right on it after I'd gone down.

Other than the birds, the forest was quiet, and I couldn't see any signs of the moose or my travelling companions.

"Riva!" I shouted. "Calvin!"

I called their names a few more times, my voice echoing through the trees, but I never got a reply.

"Dammit," I cursed and tried to get to my feet, but my knee instantly gave out underneath me.

My left leg was apparently no longer weight bearing, so I had to find another way to get around. Fortunately for me, when the moose was lumbering through the trees, it

had broken several branches.

There was a sturdy looking one just beyond my grasp, and I had to crawl over to it, using only one leg as I did. It would've been nicer if the stick was longer, but it was strong enough for me to lean on and use as a crutch.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, and using the branch, I carefully hobbled along, following the moose tracks back the way he'd chased me.

The campsite turned out not to have been very far from where I'd woken up, despite the long time it took me to return to it. My knee really hampered me, as did the body aches in general, and I was feeling especially dizzy and weak as I moved.

I saw our campsite as I approached – remnants of the fire pit, trampled dirt stained with blood – but there was no other sign of Riva or Calvin.

They had left me behind. That wasn't too surprising, since Riva had wanted to leave without even looking for Harlow. Obviously she valued her survival over me, and that was the sensible thing in a world like this.

I limped over to the firepit, then dropped on the ground beside it. There was still some firewood piled up under the tree, but it would hardly be enough for the evening. I'd need to get more soon, and I wasn't sure how to manage that.

I opened up my backpack to see what I had in the way of provisions. A couple tins of meat and a few MREs I snagged from the militia base. Plus half-a-canteen of water, a book of matches, and a machete.

Beneath that, I could see Harlow's sketchbook, and I ran my fingers across the cover.

"Is this how it ends?" I asked into the ether. "Alone in the woods, after I've lost



everyone else?”

Three years ago, I was singing onstage to sold-out crowds. Two years ago, I went down into a bunker with some friends to ride out the zombie apocalypse. Nine months ago, I left the bunker because things had gone to hell. Six months ago, I met Remy, fell in love with her, and lost her all in rapid succession. Six days ago, I had lost Harlow.

Was that enough? Had I lived enough of a life? Had I lost enough and endured enough that I could find some rest?

I looked down at Harlow’s sketchbook again, and I shook my head. If I died out here, the paper would be ruined by the elements and lost forever. Everything that Harlow had done and been would be gone. She had no headstone, and almost everyone that knew her was dead.

I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let her be completely erased from the world, so I had to find a way to make it through this. I had survived so much for so long, I wouldn’t let a few cold nights with a banged up knee be the end of me.

I mustered up all my strength, still using the broken branch as a crutch, and I started searching around the campsite for firewood.

Once I finally got it going, I ate a tin of meat and only drink a quarter of the canteen.

Night came, and I wanted to stay alert, especially with what had happened the night before. But my insomnia evaded me as exhaustion took over. As much as I fought it, there wasn’t anything I could do, and I fell asleep beside a fading fire.

I didn’t stir again until the sun was high in the sky above me, warming the spring air, and I woke up with my forehead and chest drenched in sweat, even though the fire

was long out.

My mouth was dry, but I only took a few conservative sips from my canteen. I hadn't found a new water source yet, and I didn't know how long I needed this to last me.

I knew I should eat, but without more water, I didn't want to consume anything as salty as the canned meats and MREs.

Today I needed to push myself, though. I had to go farther than I had yesterday to find water, and I'd hoped that I would feel better after a night's rest. I didn't have a watch, but I guessed I'd slept at least twelve hours, and I still felt weak and tired.

With my branch as a crutch, I barely managed to get to my feet, and I was hit with an overwhelming dizziness. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and when I opened them again, the world wasn't swaying as much.

I slung my backpack over my shoulders, and I headed deeper into the forest, determined to give everything I had to stay alive.

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Faintly, I could hear the distant babbling of flowing water, and I thought I could smell it, too. I hurried towards it (as much as my knee and crutch would allow), unmindful of the loud sounds of my footsteps crunching on sticks and pine needles.

In retrospect, I was far too focused on tracking down the water instead of paying attention to my surroundings. But I didn't realize that until I heard the wolves howling behind me.

9

Lazlo

One of the worst things about being in densely wooded land was that all the tree trunks caused sounds to echo and reverberate through them, making it very difficult to discern where they were coming from.

I looked around, my eyes scanning through the trees, and I could hear the sounds of panting and animals closing in.

All at once they were right in front of me. Two gigantic wolves stood only a few yards away. The larger of the two was white with silvery-gray running along on the back, and its two brilliant blue eyes were locked on me. The other was only slightly smaller, with a thicker coat of dark brown, and its head was down as it moved closer to me.

“Get back!” I shouted, and I put my weight on my good leg so I could wave the branch around as a weapon.

The darker of the animals put its ears back and paused for a moment, but neither of them appeared afraid or like they had any intent of going anywhere.

“Get the fuck out of here!” I yelled again, more fiercely this time, but my voice cracked. My throat was dry, and I hardly even had the energy to hobble around, let alone wave a stick and fight a pack of wolves.

But that wouldn’t stop me from fighting. As long as I had breath, I had to keep going, and so I swung the branch again as the wolves moved in closer to me.

This time, though, I lost my balance, and I tumbled back onto the ground.

“Sable, Frost, stand down!” a woman’s voice commanded.

The smaller, darker wolf made a whimpering that sounded eerily like disappointment to me. Both of them took a few steps back from me, and the white one even laid down.

I couldn’t see the woman who had given the orders, but I could hear her footsteps approaching, and I strained my neck to get a glimpse of her.

“Have you been bitten?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No. The wolves didn’t get me.”

She groaned in frustration. “No, have you been bitten by a zombie?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” the woman’s voice asked, echoing between the trees.

“Yeah. I’m sure. Where are you?” I asked. “Who are you?”

“I’m someone who has survived long enough to know not to trust anyone who says they haven’t been bitten by a zombie, especially when they’re clearly not doing well,” she said.

A figure finally appeared – a shadow of a woman who emerged between the two wolves. Her hair was black and straight, and her expression was severe, especially her dark eyes. Her skin was a deep tawny color, and she was thick under her flannel jacket and jeans. Across her back, she had a bow and quiver full of arrows, and behind her, I caught a glimpse of a small wagon full of chopped wood.

“My name is Lazlo, and I don’t know how to prove it to you, but I’m not infected,” I told her. “I was attacked by a moose the other night, as bizarre as that sounds.”

“It’s not that bizarre. The moose have been more aggressive since the zombies moved in,” she said, and her expression never changed as she stared down at me. “They’ll go after anything even remotely humanoid anymore.”

“Well, the moose certainly went after me,” I said. “My knee’s messed up, and I am alone out here. I need help, and I would be happy to help you in return.”

“I’m not really looking for an extra mouth to feed,” she replied flatly.

“Are those your wolves?” I asked, changing tactics. “They’re beautiful animals, but I imagine they’re a lot of work. I can help you take care of them. Animals usually like me.”

“They’re not that much work,” she corrected me. “They help me hunt, actually.”

A cold pit grew in my stomach. I hadn’t survived this long without coming across

rumors of cannibals. When there was no food left to eat, people would do whatever they had to, and eat whatever they could find.

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“I’m no good to eat,” I started to argue, and for the first time, her expression changed when she gave a crooked smile. “Honestly, I’m wiry and tough, and I think I could be of better use to you once my knee heals. I’m a hard worker.”

“If you’re such a hard worker, then why are you alone?” she asked. “Diligence is usually prized in any community that has it.”

“Because zombies keep destroying my communities, and because life isn’t fair and survival is hard.”

“The good news for you is that I don’t eat humans.” She hooked her thumb at the wolves behind her. “They’ll eat anything, though.”

My forehead was drenched in sweat, and my vision had a blurred edge to it. I didn’t have the strength for this argument anymore.

“You don’t have to help me. Just leave me be.”

She shook her head once. “Nah, that wouldn’t do me any good. I can’t have you becoming a zombie so close to my homestead.”

“I was not bitten by a damn zombie,” I insisted through clenched teeth. “It was a moose that did this.”

“I already told you that I’m not much for putting trust into the honesty of strangers,” she remarked. “So we’ll have to come up with something else.”

“Please. Leave me alone.” My voice was hoarse and weary, and I was practically begging her as tears formed in my eyes, further blurring my vision. “I’m not infected, and I can take care of myself.”

She cocked her head, looking down at me rather sadly. “I really don’t think you can.”

As she moved toward me, I tried to scramble backwards, but my hands kept slipping in the mud and pine needles. The young woman was telling me to be calm, but I ignored her. My heart was racing frantically in my chest, my head was spinning, and in my desperate attempt to survive, I overexerted myself.

The world slowly faded to black, and the last thing I saw was her face hovering above mine with her eyes as dark as night.

10

Lazlo

In the dimly lit room backstage, I could hear the crowd out front chanting our name. “Emeriso! Emeriso!” But I was alone. Every other time I had been waiting to go onstage before our concert, my bandmates had been with me.

“Guys?” I asked, searching the empty room for them. “Guys? We have to go on. Where are you?”

“They’re not here,” Harlow said, and I whirled around to see her sitting on a bass drum, her legs crossed at the knees. Her blond hair was colored with neon streaks of red and green, and her makeup was heavy glam-punk.

“Harlow? How’d you get here? Where’d you come from?”



“It doesn’t matter.” She shrugged her shoulders indifferently. “All that matters is that you’re alone now.”

“But I’m not alone. You’re with me,” I pointed out, even though that should be obvious.

“No, I’m not,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I came to get my necklace.”

She held her hand out toward me, and I looked down to see her gold cross hanging on a chain around my neck. But the usually gleaming metal was tarnished and stained with greenish blood.

“I can’t give it back.” I wrapped my hand around the cross, clenching my fist to protect it.

“But it’s mine.” Harlow sneered at me. “You promised that you’d never hurt me or abandon me. You were supposed to take care of me, Lazlo.”

The crowd outside was chanting louder, but then I realized they weren’t saying the name Emeriso. They weren’t even forming words – it was the garbled howling and groans of a horde of zombies.

“Harlow, we have to get out of here.” I tried to take her hand, but she pulled it back from me. “It isn’t safe.”

“No, it’s not. But I’m not really here, Lazlo. You’re the one that has to find a way out.”

The zombies were getting closer, and I knew we’d have to leave the room if we wanted to live. I ran to the door to open it, but it wouldn’t budge.

“We’re trapped!” I shouted.

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When I turned around, the room had completely changed and Harlow was gone. No longer was I backstage, but instead I was in the underground stockades back at the quarantine zone.

“No. No, this isn’t right.” I started running my hands along the blank walls, looking for a way out even when I knew there wasn’t one. “No! I’m not supposed to be here!”

The air in the room was disappearing, so I was gasping and hyperventilating. Outside, the zombies were growling and howling, and I clawed at the walls until my fingers bled.

“Lazlo. You have to get up.” That was Remy’s voice, strong and certain right in my ear.

I coughed violently and pushed myself up. I wasn’t in the stockades anymore or backstage, but somewhere I’d never been. My fingers weren’t bleeding, but my body ached all over, particularly my left knee that was still swollen.

I was awake in a strange place.

The floor was cold and concrete, and the walls were windowless and made of cinderblock. There was a solitary bulb hanging on a string above me, and it flickered. In the middle of the floor was a metal drain, and in the far corner of the room were stacks of boxes and other junk.

Based on all that and the musty, damp smell, I gathered that I was in a basement.

When I moved, chains rattled around me. Each of my wrists had a heavy iron manacle on them, with a thick logging chain that was bolted into the wall.

I still had the clothes on my back, but my backpack was missing. My knee throbbed, and my lips were cracked and dry. And now I was being held captive in a dark, mildewy basement.

My time in the underground bunker when the outbreak first began had been claustrophobic, but a luxurious kind of claustrophobia. It was a 3,500 sq. ft. well-stocked bunker underneath a mansion in Beverly Hills, so I hadn't been denied much of anything except a change of scenery.

The stockades back in the BCQZ, though, those could be comparable to this. I had been caught in the locked medical ward, along with Pvt. Tatum who had aided at getting me inside with Remy. She stayed in the ward, and Tatum and I were put into the military stockades.

Armed soldiers brought us to the basement below the Center Building, and they had thrown me into a small windowless cell, alone. For the first two days, nobody spoke to me or told me anything about what was happening. They didn't serve me food, and they didn't even give me any water until sundown on the second day. Then they opened a slot in the door and shoved a metal cup of water inside.

Or at least, I think that's how long it was. A bright fluorescent light had been permanently on, and there were no windows, no human interactions, nothing to gauge the passage of time.

When I was finally released, I feared it had been months, but it had only been fifteen days. Fifteen days that had dragged on endlessly, a blank overwhelming monotony where nothing mattered.

After I was released and went back to the trailer with Harlow, I tried to pretend that everything was okay for her. She was scared and alone, and I knew she needed me. But I struggled with nightmares and panic attacks. That's when my insomnia had started, and I'd wake up in the middle of the night to throw up.

This – being chained up in a basement – was better than the stockades. That's what I told myself, but my palms were sweaty and my heart was racing. I closed my eyes and reminded myself that I wasn't there anymore, that I had survived that, and I could survive this – whatever this was.

Above me, the ceiling creaked and groaned. That was to be expected in an old house, and the open beams and floorboards of the upper story definitely looked to belong to a very old house. But the scraping and the plodding, the groaning and the scurrying, that was much more alarming and harder to explain.

Sometimes it sounded like a person walking about, other times it was much closer to a horde of zombies. My only comfort was that a zombie would've eaten me, not chained me up in their basement.

Then again, there had been the spike strips, so maybe the zombies around here were capable of far more than the others.

When the sounds upstairs had finally fallen silent, the door at the top of the stairs creaked open. The wooden steps were on the far wall, and I sat up straighter, steeling myself for whatever came down.

Heavy boots slowly descended, and the woman from the woods came into view.

“You're still alive, and you're not a zombie yet,” she said as she approached me, and she seemed neither happy nor disappointed about that news.

“I told you that I wasn’t bitten,” I reminded her.

“And I told you that I don’t care what you say.”

I lifted up my shackled wrist. “Is that what all this is about?”

“If you’re still human after three days, I’ll set you free.”

“Without food and water, I don’t know that I’ll be alive in three days,” I admitted, and my voice was dry and crackling.

She held up a glass bottle with a flip top lid, and it was filled to the neck with water. Just the sight of it awakened my parched mouth, and I couldn’t mask how badly I wanted it. I would’ve been drooling if I had any saliva to spare.

“Water I can do, but I’m not wasting food or medicine until I’m certain you are uninfected.” She leaned forward and set the bottle down, presumably at the edge of my range, and then she stepped back from me.

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I didn't want to seem desperate and vulnerable in front of her, since I couldn't get a read on her blank expressions, but honestly, I was desperate and vulnerable, and we both knew it. So I crawled over on my hands and uninjured knee, half-dragging my other leg behind me, until I reached the bottle. I opened the lid and gulped it down greedily, and nothing had ever tasted better or felt more refreshing as it coursed down my throat.

"You don't seem to have hydrophobia, so that's a good thing," the woman commented.

"Hydrophobia?" I asked breathlessly between drinks of the water.

"Water aversion. Everyone who contracts rabies experiences it, and it happens roughly 30% of the time in those with zabies."

"Zabies?" I looked up at her in confusion. "Did you mean rabies?"

She frowned at me. "No, I meant zabies. Rabies causes madness and death in mammals, and its bastard sibling zabies causes zombification in humans."

"I don't think I've heard anyone call it that before. But it makes sense, I guess." I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and I offered her a weak smile. "Thank you for helping me."

"I haven't really helped you yet," she replied flatly, and she pointed to the bucket to the side. "That's for your waste. I'll be back tomorrow to give you more water, if you're not dead or a zombie."

“I truly appreciate what you’ve done so far, bringing me out of the elements and sharing your water with me,” I said. “So I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but do you have any bandages you can spare? I’d like to wrap my knee to help with the pain.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, but her dark eyes were unreadable. “I can’t spare any resources, not if you don’t make it.”

“What about bringing me my backpack?” I suggested. “It’s my own stuff. I can tear up my old shirts, and I have some things I can read, to help me pass the time.”

She was quiet for a moment, thinking, then she said, “Tomorrow. If you’re doing well tomorrow, I’ll bring you your bag. But I’m keeping all the weapons, including the machete and the matches.”

I bristled. “You went through my stuff?”

“I wanted to make sure it was safe to leave you alive,” she replied, unashamed.

The woman turned to go, but when I called after her with a plaintive, “Hey,” she stopped and looked back.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“If I let you out, I’ll let you know.”

“What should I call you until then?”

“You shouldn’t call for me, because I won’t answer.”



Lazlo

It wouldn't be so bad if there were windows.

That had been my constant refrain when I was locked up in the stockades, and it was back again, now that I was chained up in a basement. If I could only see the stars or feel the sun on my face, it would make everything infinitely more tolerable.

In the stockades, it made sense. That was meant to be a punishment, with extreme isolation leading to disorientation and fear. They had even made the cells soundproof, so I had been entirely cut off from the world. There was no way to know how much time had passed or if anything still existed beyond those four walls.

Here, at least, in the strange woman's basement, there was a sense of time. I couldn't see outside, but light moved through a shelf of dusty boxes. There was likely a small window hidden behind all the clutter. Watching the light shift from red in the evening to the darkness of night was comforting. It kept me grounded here.

Like almost every basement I had ever been in, it had that musty underground smell. Even the clutter felt familiar. Cardboard boxes stacked on top of one another, labelled with things like "Holiday Decorations" and "Old Sports Equipment."

The sounds in the basement, however, were not nearly as comforting as the sights and smells. It was an old house, and from what I could see, there appeared to be an ancient, rusted furnace in the corner, rigged up to newer electrical boxes and presumably renewable energy sources. Despite the upgrades, it still roared like a demonic engine every time it kicked on the heat, and after spending so much time around zombies, that kind of sound was particularly unnerving.

The house itself groaned and creaked often, so there was never complete silence. On top of that were the bouts of activity upstairs. Lots of heavy footsteps, belonging to

many people or maybe zombies or horses, it was hard to tell, honestly.

I was sitting on the basement floor, with my back against the cold cinderblock wall, when it began again. With the rumbling noises upstairs, the ceiling trembled so much that the lightbulb on a string began to sway.

A cold sweat broke out on my neck, and my heart raced. If the zombies were breaking into this house, I couldn't just stay down here, chained to the wall, and expect to survive.

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The only thing I could do was pull at what held me, fighting against the shackles, the chain itself, the anchor in the wall, everything I could in hopes that something would give.

I groaned and cried and fought and thrashed. The flesh around my wrists went from red and swollen to scraped and bloodied in very short order, but nothing gave. They were too strong to be broken by a man's bare hands, at least not by mine.

In a final desperate attempt, I crawled to the edge of the chain, and I strained out for the nearby boxes. I needed a weapon or a tool, or anything other than my bloodied hands. The box closest to me was labelled "Old School Stuff" in big block letters on the side, and I wasn't sure if that would be helpful, but I had to use what I could.

I laid on my back with my hands above my head, reaching out beyond the range of the chain. With my uninjured leg, I stretched out and clipped the edge of the box, and I very, very slowly tilted it toward me.

Straining with all I could, I managed to get my foot around the corner, and pulled it toward me. When it was finally close enough, I sat up and grabbed the box with my hands and tore it open.

It was stacks of heavy textbooks and maybe a dozen spiral notebooks. I tipped it over, so I could dig through it more hurriedly, but that was it. Just notebooks and old biology textbooks.

One of the sharp ends of the spiral notebook scraped the palm of my hand as I went through the box, leaving a small scratch. That little metal wire could actually be

useful.

I hurriedly unwound it out of the notebook, and I jammed it in the lock on the shackles, twisting it this way and that. The only thing I knew about lockpicking I had seen in movies and I literally had no idea if they worked that way, but that didn't stop me from trying.

Eventually, it fell silent upstairs, and my fingertips were raw from my failed attempts at setting myself free.

"Dammit," I muttered and ran my hands over my face.

I glanced over at the mess beside me, the books and notebooks spilled out on the floor. There was one notebook unlike the others, a composition book with fabric binding. The cover was tattered and on the front it read, "My Journal." The date listed beneath was only a few months after the zombie outbreak.

I picked it up and started flipping through the pages. If I was going to be locked up here, I might as well find out more about my captors.

12

Sage

13 October

My name is Dr. Sage Boone, MD. It is the thirteenth of October, and the viral outbreak attributed to the lyssavirus genotype-8 (henceforth known as "zabies" for clarity's sake) began almost three months ago. Right now, the first case was believed to happen on the eighteenth of July, but that is not definitive.

If someone is reading this in the future, you will presumably know far more than I do about the virus and how it all went down. In the increasingly likely event that the world falls apart, I trust that my information here will be of some help to you. I hope that the world we've left isn't completely uninhabitable.

The past three months haven't made me optimistic about humanity's chances at large, but I have always believed that as individuals, humans are resourceful, resilient, and capable of great things. Perhaps even surviving this.

Initially, after the outbreak began, I stayed in Vancouver, working in the clinic, but it was only a matter of weeks until the violent and erratic behavior of both the infected and the uninfected made it untenable.

I learned very little during those first weeks. Too much was happening all at once, and as frontline workers, my colleagues were many of the first to fall victim to the zabies virus. My recollection of those days is sparse, with only hazy memories of working long hours, and the death and gore on a magnitude unlike anything I had ever seen before.

The day I walked off my job was when my supervisor attempted to bite me.

By then, people had started referring to the infected as "zombies," and their behavior certainly made that difficult to argue against: seemingly uncontrollable rage and hunger, aggressive and erratic violence fueled by an apparent craving for flesh and blood. As far as anyone could tell, the zombies were completely impervious to any forms of communication, reason, or emotional sentiment. Parents would tear apart their own children without any hesitation or acknowledgment.

On the minor end of the symptoms, the earliest signs of infection in humans were fevers, nausea, lethargy, and hydrophobia. In these ways, the zabies virus did appear very similar to the other genotypes of the lyssavirus, commonly known as rabies.

There was one catastrophic difference between the two: those infected with rabies all die within two weeks of showing symptoms, while those infected with zabies seem virtually unable to die.

Severe injuries that would normally be incapacitating or even life-threatening cause very little impediment to the infected. Legs could be cut off, and they would sprint surprisingly fast on the bloody stumps. As long as the brain is connected to a body part, it is able to move and “live” onward.

From there, those with zabies experience similar dysfunction as those who are afflicted with leprosy. As the host lives on, the damaged body parts begin to decay and rot while still attached. This leads to horrific complications among the infected, further leading to comparisons to zombies.

I have been hesitant to refer to the infected as zombies, even if I can see the resemblance is unmistakable. Especially as a medical professional who has taken the Hippocratic oath, I feel it is my duty to remember that these are people suffering from a horrific illness, and they deserve the most compassionate treatment possible.

However, I must confess openly and unequivocally that I have killed infected humans in self-defense, and I will likely have to kill more if I mean to survive. I will always advocate for any measures necessary in self-preservation, and that is the unfortunate case with many interactions with the infected.

It is in fact because of this – and not despite it – that I must insist on referring to humans infected with zabies as just that, and not zombies. I cannot forget the people they once were, the people that perhaps they still are underneath the infection.

I do not know if the virus can be reversed or if the infected humans can be reached again, but I do believe it is still worth it to find out. That is why I came to the countryside, to live with my sister Nova away from the worst of the outbreak.

After I left my job at the hospital, I tried to get work for the government. They were setting up quarantine centers across the nation, but I didn't like the way they were treating the infected. They bombed our own cities to prevent the virus from spreading, but still it spread, and thousands of innocent lives were lost.

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No one wanted to research on how to help the infected. Some cared about looking for a vaccine, but most people in power were simply focused on eradicating all of the infected humans as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The infected have been written off as a lost cause, and yet they remain. In fact, since the infected seem to be almost supernaturally resilient, they will likely remain after thousands (millions or even billions??) – more of us have died.

Nova lives in an old farmhouse, set up to be off the grid and far out in an unpopulated forest. That was one of my motivations for moving in with her since it's so far from civilization where the infected congregate.

The other reason is because Nova is a wildlife animal rehabilitator, and she has a few opossums in her care. This is especially relevant because opossums are completely immune to every form of lyssavirus.

So far, only the great apes – including humans, gorillas, and chimps – appear to be susceptible to the genotype-8, unlike the other forms of lyssavirus that can infect most mammals. Yet, the opossum is immune across the board.

I am not a virologist, unfortunately, but I gathered as many books, research, and equipment as I could before I fled my brief stint at the government quarantine. Nova's expertise is in animal medicine, but considering our main hope involves studying a North American marsupial, she will be of a great help.

Today I have arrived at her farmhouse, and today we begin our research.



Lazlo

At some point, I must've passed out, because I awoke with my face pressed against the concrete floor and a spider walking across my arm.

It looked like a wolf spider, with brown fur and black stripes across its back, but it was massive, with a fat abdomen and legs stretching out several inches.

When I was a kid, I'd had a pet tarantula named Damien. We'd lived in an apartment, and my mother had horrible allergies, so the spider had been one of the few pets I was allowed. But I probably would've chosen him anyway. Damien wasn't cuddly, but he was sweet and seemed to like me.

"Do you want to hang out and be Damien, Jr?" I asked as the spider walked languidly across the tattoos on my forearm.

He didn't reply, but he didn't run away, so I took that as a good sign. I didn't know how long I would be down here, and having something – anything – that resembled a friend would help to pass the time.

Abruptly, there was a loud thumping upstairs, hard enough that dust fell from the open rafters, and that startled my new spider friend into making a mad dash for the shadows. Not that I blamed him. I would do the same if I could.

The loud noises upstairs only exacerbated my already pounding head, and I sat up slowly.

A door swung open above the slatted stairs on the far side of the room, and warm morning sunlight slipped in through the cracks. The woman's heavy boots clomped

down the steps, and I sat up straighter, trying to look stronger than I felt.

Her long black hair hung around her face like a curtain, and she glowered down at me as she carried the bottle of water over.

“How are you feeling today?” she asked, still holding the water out of my reach.

“Just peachy,” I lied, because I would say and do anything to get that water from her.

“Thirsty?”

“Yes,” I said desperately and started crawling towards her, when she held up her hand.

“Wait until I put it down before coming over,” she commanded, so I stopped. She carefully set it down, then stepped backward out of my possible grasp, and then I hurriedly crawled over to it.

“You’re not walking yet,” she commented as I gulped it down. “So you’re not entirely peachy.”

“I’m starving and sleeping on a concrete floor, of course I feel like shit,” I told her when I stopped drinking long enough to take a breath.

“Don’t lie to me. It’s not helpful,” she said flatly. “When I ask you how you feel, you have to be honest.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to betray the captor-captive bond,” I replied glibly. “I’ll try to remember that for next time, Sage.”

Her dark eyes instantly narrowed at me, and her blank expression hardened. “What

did you call me?"

"Sage," I repeated. "Isn't that you? Sage Boone, MD."

"How in the hell do you know that name?" she demanded, and her gaze darted around the room, to where the box was tipped over at the edge of my range. "Have you been going through my things?"

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“I’m only trying to figure out who is holding me hostage,” I defended myself.

“You’re not a hostage,” she snapped and rushed over to gather up her things and move them out of my reach. “You’re quarantined to keep everyone safe.”

“And you’re starving me to keep everyone safe too?” I shot back.

“I don’t have the food to waste if you don’t make it.”

“Please. I’m hungry and exhausted and alone and in pain. Can’t you spare some moldy bread or a damn potato? Please, Sage.”

“That’s not my name!” she shouted in frustration. She’d packed everything back into the box, and she straightened up and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Sage was my sister. I’m Nova.”

“Sorry. I was taking a guess since you both call the virus ‘zabies.’” I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Nova. I’m sure you’re doing what you think is best to protect yourself, but um... I’m really struggling. Can I at least be moved to a room with a window?”

She shook her head once. “I wish I could, but it isn’t safe. Not yet.”

“I’m still a person, you know,” I was practically pleading with her. “I can’t survive in this purgatory forever.”

“I know that. But it won’t be much longer,” she said, but the way she spoke made it

very hard to tell if she was being genuine.

She picked up the box of “Old School Stuff” and started heading upstairs, and I tried to keep my cool. I didn’t think that yelling or screaming or threatening Nova would do any good, especially when I definitely could not back any threats up.

But as she ascended the stairs, I couldn’t take it anymore. The manacles around my wrists were tight and heavy, and I felt as if she closed the door, all the air would be locked out, and I would suffocate.

“Nova, please!” I shouted after her. “Please don’t leave me chained up down here! Please! I can’t live like this!”

It didn’t matter what I said or how I yelled, because the door slammed shut, blocking out the sunlight again, and I heard the locks click. Part of me understood that she was only being prudent, but that part of me was not in control.

A steel panic had taken hold of me, and I felt like a feral animal, fighting and pulling at the chains, destroying my already ragged wrists.

I fought until my body gave out underneath me, and I collapsed against the floor sobbing. It wasn’t even so much a fear of dying or being held captive – it was simply fear. My heart pounded so hard in my chest that it hurt, and my mouth tasted like metal and acid.

Was this it? Had I been infected somehow? Is this how it felt when the illness took hold? Too hot and too cold all at once, with adrenaline surging through me so intensely that I was trembling. My breath came out in ragged gasps, and I rested my head against the floor.

Then I heard Remy’s voice in my head, “You’re stronger than you think.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and slowed my breath. I counted to a hundred, and I felt the cold concrete beneath me. Eventually, slowly, the fear subsided, and I was back in control.

I'd had a panic attack, but I wasn't a zombie. Not yet.

14

Lazlo

It was a very long time until I saw Nova again. I slept often, since starvation and exhaustion were taking their toll, and the sky seemed to be overcast, because it was dark for so long.

Maybe I was delirious, but I swore I could hear the keys jingling at her side as she descended the stairs. I sat up straighter, and an uncontrollable wave of elation rolled over me when I saw the key ring in her hand. I had no idea what existed beyond this basement, but I was thrilled to see sunlight and stars again.

"You're setting me free?"

"You were never not free," she said without a hint of irony, despite the fact that I was sitting before her chained to her wall. "You were quarantined."

"Well, I am happy to leave semantics aside as soon as you unlock these cuffs." I held my hands hopefully out toward her.

But she made no move towards me. "I have a few questions first."

"You can see clearly that I'm not sick," I insisted.

“You don’t seem to have zabies,” she conceded, then added bleakly, “But you aren’t well, either.”

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“So? Why do you care?”

“What do you plan on doing when I unhook the chains?” she asked.

I shook my head in dismay, not understanding how it mattered what I did with my life once I was away from her. “I don’t know. I’ll get the hell out of here the moment you let me.”

“Can you even walk on that knee?” Nova pointed to my injured knee that was visibly swollen, even through my jeans.

“If I say no, are you gonna put me down like a sick dog?” I asked.

Her nose wrinkled in disgust. “I would never do that to a sick dog. I thought you read my sister’s journals. Didn’t she explain that I did wildlife rehab?”

“I didn’t get to read much of it before you took them away, but yeah, I do remember her mentioning something like that,” I confessed uncertainly.

“If you leave now, on that knee, you won’t survive long, and we both know it. What you don’t know is that while you’ve been quarantined down here, a big winter storm dropped nearly a foot of snow. How are you going to handle that? Best case scenario for you is that you starve or freeze to death, worst case involves wolves ripping you apart or succumbing to zabies.” Nova explained this all so matter-of-factly, discussing my imminent demise like it was nothing.

I arched my eyebrow at her. “Is this your way of offering me help?”



“I can treat your knee, tend to your wounds, and I even have a few pain relief treatments,” she continued impassively. “While you convalesce, I can make sure that you have food and water, although I will expect you to do the chores that you’re able to do while recovering.”

“That sounds... very generous of you,” I said, and I did my best to not sound as suspicious as I felt.

“Well, I am not generous, so you have misunderstood,” Nova corrected me. “Planting season is around the corner, and I already have dozens of animals under my care that I’m struggling to keep up with. I can only risk adding another mouth to feed if I am getting something in return.”

“And what do you want in return? You already have my backpack, with everything I own,” I reminded her.

“I need a pair of hands, and you look like you’d be strong when you’re healthy. Help with chores as much as you can until you recover, and then work the homestead with me for another six weeks after you’re better,” she proposed. “That will set me and my animals up for a much better position over the summer, and then you can move on anywhere you want.”

I tried to study her unreadable expression, and I finally asked, “So if I accept your help, I’m signing up to be an indentured servant?”

“For six weeks. Plus recovery time.”

“And the other option is that I hobble off your property and die?” I asked.

Nova nodded. “Basically, those are the two options, yes.”

“I suppose I would have to work longer than six weeks to pay my medical bills, you know, back when we still had bills,” I realized with a heavy sigh. “Fuck it. I’ll take the deal.”

“This probably goes without saying, but if you hurt me or any of my animals, the deal is off,” Nova said.

“Understood.” I held my hands out toward her again, and she finally came over and unlocked the cuffs.

She took my hand and helped me up onto my good leg. I still couldn’t put any weight on my injured knee, and Nova had her arm around my waist. Together, we slowly made it upstairs, and she brought me into a small country kitchen.

“Frost and Sable are outside right now, but they usually have the run of the house, and they’re not super keen on new people,” Nova said as she helped lower me down into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Are you talking about the wolves?” I asked.

“Wolfdogs, actually,” she clarified.

“What is a wolfdog?”

“They’re wolves that are bred with domestic dogs, usually to make a more pet-friendly wolf, but even with the breeding, they don’t often do well in the human’s world. Which is how they ended up here,” Nova explained. “Frost is a Samoyed mixed with a grey wolf, and Sable is a mixture of a German Shepard, Malamute, and grey wolf. I’ll introduce you when the time is right, but for now, it’s probably best if you avoid them both.”

“When I was downstairs, I’d often hear all this commotion up here.” I glanced around what I could see of the farmhouse from the kitchen table, and there were no obvious signs of a zombie horde, but the wood floors were awfully scraped up. “Was that the wolfdogs?”

She gave me a thin smile. “Probably. They love to run around. But you’re hungry and in pain. Why don’t you eat, and then I’ll get you settled in and tell you about what’s expected of you?”

“What is expected of me?” I pressed, but already my attention was turning to the scent of something savory in the air.

“Eat first. We’ll talk later.”

Nova went over to the stovetop, where a cast iron pot and frying pan were sitting. She dished out potato porridge into the bowl and topped it with two runny eggs. The moment she set it in front of me, I murmured a thanks before wolfing it down, and it was easily one of the best meals I’d ever had.

Alongside it, she served me a glass of bittersweet apple cider and a tangy glass of goat milk. She gave me a few pills for pain, and I took them without too much hesitation, because I really doubted that she would waste food on me if she meant to poison me.

Nova went into another room and came back with a homemade first aid kit. Gingerly, she propped my injured leg up on another kitchen chair. The good news was that the swelling had gone down enough that she could roll my jeans up to my thigh. The bad news was that it still hurt like hell.

“So... is it just you living here?” I asked, making conversation to distract from the pain as she began cleaning my knee with a rag and alcohol.

“Me and the animals. My grandma died four years ago, and she left me and my sister a small inheritance. Sage’s was in cash, and mine was this old farmhouse. I always wanted to be a hermit who lived off the land and helped animals, and when the virus spread, I got my wish in the worst possible way.” She frowned at that. “But at least I was already set up for the end of the world.”

“How many animals do you have here?”

Nova began rattling off a whole list: “A mule named Vince, that I also inherited from my grandmother. The two wolfdogs you met, and a few goats and a small flock of chickens and ducks, which you can probably hear. Then there’s the opossums, a skunk, and half-a-dozen rabbits in the smaller barn. So however many that is. I used to have more, but the whole zombie apocalypse made things much harder.”

“That does seem like a lot to care for by one person,” I said.

“It’s not too bad except when it comes to planting season.” Her dark eyes were filled with something that might have been hope. “But with you, it could be a good year.”

After she cleaned it up, she wrapped my knee with a bandage. I grimaced at the pain, but she assured me that it needed to be tight to stabilize and support the knee.

“Your leg might never be right again, but this is the best I can do to help,” she said. “If you want to rest now, I can show you to your room.”

Once again, Nova helped me to my feet, and I had to lean on her to walk. Fortunately, it was only a short distance from the living room to the room at the back of the house.

The bedroom was rather small, with peeling chartreuse and pink floral wallpaper and newer windows that suggested a 1970s addition to the old farmhouse. That also explained the tiny half bath attached to it, with a toilet, pedestal sink, and chipped tiles.

A narrow twin bed was pressed against the wall (with my red backpack sitting on top), a rocking chair was in the corner, and that was it for furniture. The only other décor was semi-sheer drapery, and a large painting on the wall of a wolf.

The most peculiar thing was that the windows had bars over them. That wasn’t unusual given the zombie epidemic, except that I hadn’t seen any bars on any of the

other windows. Outside, though, I could see everything was covered in a thick layer of snow, just as Nova had told me.

She helped me over to the bed, and I sat down. I wanted to go through my backpack to make sure all my contents were still intact, but that seemed rude with Nova standing there, watching me.

“It’s not much, but you can rest and clean yourself up.” She motioned to towels and clean clothes that she’d left folded on top of the rocking chair.

“No, it’s more than enough. Thank you.” I forced a smile at her, but she didn’t return it.

After an uncomfortably long silence, she finally said, “I’ll leave you to it then.” When she left, she closed the door behind her.

As soon as she was gone, I tore through my clothes and supplies, and I let out a deep breath of relief when I saw Harlow’s sketchbook. I pulled it out and flipped through it slowly, ensuring that it was still intact, and a lump formed in my throat.

I wiped my eyes roughly with the palm of my hand, and then I set the book aside because I didn’t have time to cry right now. This was my first time with my stuff in days, and I had to find out if Nova had taken anything.

All of my clothes appeared to be there, along with the two other books that had belonged to Harlow, but my machete was missing (unsurprising) and so were all my food and water (slightly surprising).

“What the hell is she up to?” I muttered to myself, because I still couldn’t figure out Nova’s game.

On one hand, she'd kept me chained up in her basement for days, ransacked my stuff and took my valuables, and now she basically forced me into indentured servitude.

On the other hand, my belly was full for the first time in weeks, the bed was so comfortable I was already feeling drowsy, and without her help, I would certainly die on my own with my current injuries.

Nova's hospitality was a mixed bag really, but I didn't have any other options but to accept it.

Before I could nap, I forced myself up and limped over to the bathroom. The mirror above the sink was cracked, but I still had the chance to see my reflection for the first time in ages.

My face was sallow under my dusty beard, and I had a fading bruise on my cheek the color of pea soup. I pulled off my shirt and got my first real look at my body since the moose had kicked my ass, and the bruises across my ribs were still purplish in places.

In the absence of a shower or tub, I used a washcloth and the sink to give myself something of a sponge bath. Back when I was a touring musician, I had cleaned myself up the same way in truck stop bathrooms on occasion. This was much more refreshing, and I actually felt clean when I finished.

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I dropped my dirty clothing on the rocking chair, and I would have to talk to Nova about laundry tomorrow. But right then, all I wanted to do was sleep.

The room was chilly from a draft, and the floorboards creaked under my feet as I made my way back to bed. I crawled underneath the covers, and I had just laid my head on the pillow when Nova knocked on the door.

“I don’t want you having an altercation with the wolfdogs, so I’m locking this door to make sure it stays shut,” Nova said through the closed door. “But you can call for me if you need anything.”

There was a click of a lock, and she locked me in from the outside. I really looked at the door for the first time.

It was an old heavy wooden door that had been painted white, but there were thick gouges along the edge and doorframe. Like deep claw marks.

Something had been locked in this room before.

15

Lazlo

The first few days I spent in the guest room, Nova asked nothing of me, and I did little more than rest. She brought me meals twice a day – eggs and porridge in the mornings, venison or bear meat with vegetables in the evening along with apple cider or goat milk – and she checked on my knee once. That was the extent of our



interactions.

I tried to make small talk with her, but she was entirely uninterested. So I laid in bed for the most part, sleeping often. Nova kept the door locked during the day. I heard it clicking after she brought me food and clean linens in the morning.

It was unnerving, obviously. The way Nova came in without saying much more than salutations, leaving me with a tray of food, and then departing again with the audible click of the lock.

It was a strange thing being held captive, when my injured knee meant I couldn't really escape anyway. On top of that, I'd been starving, so I had no choice but to eat the food she offered me, and it tasted better than anything else I'd eaten recently.

In the afternoons, from my first-floor bedroom window, I watched Nova take care of her farm.

All of the non-wolfy animals were kept on the other side of the heavy-duty fences lined with barbed wire. The level of security was presumably due to keeping the wolfdogs out – along with other predators, like wild wolves, human marauders, or even confused and aggressive zombies – as opposed to what the goats and chickens required to be kept in.

On the morning of the fourth day, I woke up before dawn feeling restless, but physically, I was better than I had been in some time. I still had to limp to the bathroom, but if I tried to put weight on my bad knee, I could hold it with some pain instead of collapsing to the floor.

By the time Nova came in with my morning meal, I made sure that I was sitting up and nonchalantly reading Harlow's copy of *Little Women*, so I appeared as alert and healthy as possible.

“Oh.” She sounded surprised when she saw me, and she stopped short. “You’re looking better.”

“Yeah. I’m feeling better,” I told her with as grateful a smile as I could muster. “It’s probably about time I start helping out around here.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, but she seemed hesitant, and her dark eyes were unreadable, as usual.

“Where should I start?” I asked.

Nova set the tray down on my bed, and she pushed up the sleeves of her flannel shirt. “I have to do my morning chores, but when I’m done, I’ll direct you what to do.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Yeah.” She nodded and backed out of the room. “It’s time to put you to work.”

“I’m looking forward to being useful again,” I told her.

Then she left, and I heard the door lock behind her.

Excited about the prospect of leaving the room, I set up about getting ready, washing up and dressing myself for the day. As the sun rose in the sky, the room grew warmer, and all of the snow from the recent storm had already melted. Summer wasn’t that far away. I didn’t know when Nova would return, so I left my shirt off since it was more comfortable that way.

The lock clicked, and Nova opened the door without waiting to see if I was decent.

She looked at me sitting shirtless on my bed and her eyes widened in surprise. “You

have a lot of tattoos.”

“Yeah. It was something I used to be into.”

She tilted her head, trying to get a better look at one I had winding down my arm. “I just wasn’t expecting you to have so many.”

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“Well, I wasn’t expecting to be caught shirtless today, so...”

“Sorry.” Nova turned away quickly, her gaze on the other room, but she remained in the doorway. “Do you know how to cook?”

“I used to, but I honestly haven’t really used any culinary skills over the past few years beyond roasting it over the fire or opening a can,” I said.

“That’ll do. Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen.”

After I pulled on my shirt, I hobbled out to join her. Several large potatoes and two mason jars of mixed carrots, onions, and green beans were on the table, along with a sharp knife. A large pot was boiling on the stove top, and Nova was adding a bit of dried herbs to it.

“We’re making a forever stew to last us a few days,” she said as I approached. “It’ll free up our time for other things.”

“Forever stew?” I asked.

“It’s a stew that’s always going, with vegetables and water added as it runs out.” She was at the counter with a thick slab of red meat, and using a knife, she pointed toward the kitchen chair. “You can sit at the table and dice up the vegetables. I’ll handle the meat.”

I sat down at the kitchen table, taking my own knife and the cutting board, while Nova worked at the counter with her back to me.

“What about you?” I asked. “Did you cook a lot before?”

“Yeah, I did,” she said at length. “My grandma raised me and my older sister, and Sage was always the smart one and busy with school. Me and Nana were always in the kitchen.”

“So it wasn’t as much of an adjustment for you when things changed,” I said.

“No,” she agreed. “The hardest thing has been cutting down Nana’s family recipes designed to feed a dozen people when it hasn’t been that many in a very, very long time.”

“Did you grow up on a farm?”

“I grew up on the Canim Lake Reserve. My mom and Nana were of the Tsq’escenemc tribe,” Nova revealed. “My father and his mother were not, and it was his mother that left me this house. That was after Nana had passed, long after both my parents had died, and after Sage had left for school. There wasn’t much left for me on the reserve, so I came out here.”

“That sounds like a very interesting childhood,” I said. “I grew up a city boy, very basic middleclass apartment life. So I was ill-prepared for all of this.”

“What did you do before? Were you an artist?” she asked.

“Something like that,” I replied, because I didn’t like talking about music or fame or any of that anymore.

Nova glanced back over her shoulder at me. “Who did the sketchbook belong to?”

“How do you know it isn’t mine?” I asked.

“The way the pictures were drawn, and the fact that they were all signed Harlow Smith, and you told me your name is Lazlo.”

“Harlow was...” Her name stuck in my throat, and I swallowed it down. “She was like a little sister to me. We found each other in the mess of all this, and we took care of one another. Until I couldn’t... and I ended up here, and she didn’t.”

Nova’s voice was uncharacteristically soft when she said, “The apocalypse isn’t kind to anyone.”

“What about your sister?” I asked, because it still hurt too much talking about Harlow.

“She was smarter than me, but she wasn’t smart enough,” Nova said, sounding both proud and disappointed at the same time. “If you’re done with chopping that, we should probably move onto the hardest part of your life here.”

I held the knife a bit tighter in my hand. “And what’s that?”

“Meeting the wolfdogs.”

16

Lazlo

Nova always called them wolfdogs, and I believed that was true, but when I watched them walk in tandem across the yard, they were wolves.

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Frost – the white and silver male – was larger than any canine I had ever seen, maybe even larger than the lioness, Ripley. If he stood on his back legs, he would easily tower over Nova, and she wasn't exactly short, either.

The smaller of the two was the darker female, Sable, but she was still quite large. Her markings and thick fur gave her a more wolfy appearance, and her eyes were quick and calculating.

Nova suggested we meet on more “neutral” grounds, which was apparently me sitting on a log bench underneath an oak tree in the front yard.

When they weren't in the house or with Nova, the wolfdogs had a large fenced in area on the other side of the farm from the other animals. Nova released them from their enclosure, and she led them over to me.

Frost came over first, sniffing me, but Nova instructed me not to pet him yet. Despite her smaller stature, it was much more obvious that Sable wasn't an ordinary dog. Her eyes had a bright skepticism with a wicked intelligence flickering underneath, and she was always watching.

Frost gave me a berth the first day, but by the second morning, when I greeted him, he acted like we were old friends, and I was able to give him a good scratch on his head.

I thought we were making good progress, but it still took almost a week for Nova to feel safe having the wolfdogs and me hanging out inside together. Since they had always taken precedence over me, this was the first time that I was actually permitted

to spend time in the living room.

We had books, and Nova played old Fleetwood Mac records on the record player. I read *Little Women*, she read *Wild Sargasso Sea*, and she sat on the sofa with Sable curled up at her feet. Frost lay spread on the rug, his long legs taking up most of the floor, and he slept soundly as we all spent the evening relaxing together.

In the corner of the room, between the record player and bookshelf, the box labelled “Old School Stuff” was tucked away. That was where Nova had put it after I’d read her sister’s journal.

For the first night since Nova had brought me to her house, I went to bed with my door unlocked and my hands uncuffed. But still, I didn’t feel free, because I couldn’t really leave. Not if I wanted to live, and I hadn’t quite given up on that yet.

I laid awake for a long time, even though I was tired, and I tried to imagine what Remy would do if she were in this situation. First and foremost, she was a survivor, and she always managed to get out of even the worst situations.

If Remy had woken up in handcuffs, part of me truly believed she would gnaw through her own wrist if that’s what she needed to do to escape. If that didn’t work, she would play it safe and placate Nova, the way that I was.

I hoped I was making the right choices, but hope didn’t mean much of anything anymore. So I stayed awake and ran through the scenario again and again. How long should I stay here? What was my best chance for surviving as a free man?

Eventually, I must’ve fallen asleep, because I awoke in the dark to the sound of zombies howling. Close enough that they had to be on Nova’s homestead, and close enough that the goats and chickens were causing an angry commotion.



I sat up and pulled back the curtains. I peered out the windows, past the bars outside the glass, but there wasn't much to see in the darkness of night.

There were footsteps rushing about the house – Nova and the wolfdogs by the sounds of it, and then I heard the lock on my bedroom door slide shut.

“Nova?” I asked in dismay. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll take care of it,” was all she said, and then I heard the front door slam shut.

Nova had raced out into the night with her pair of wolves to protect her from zombies, and if she didn’t return, I was locked inside a bedroom with bars across the window.

The zombie calls were becoming more incensed, reminding me of the unusual howls I had heard after the military truck had been hijacked. First there was a long deep growl, and right after a shorter one would reply, almost like a call and response.

One of the wolfdogs growled – Sable, I think – and I heard the loud bang of a shotgun and a quick flash of light from the barrel momentarily illuminated the conflict. In the next quick blast, I counted three zombies descending on Nova, but Frost was diving for one of their throats.

For a few moments, there was only the sound of the canines’ growls and the zombies’ howls and flesh tearing, and I could only catch glimpses of movement at the edge of the gardens.

And then it fell silent.

I held my breath and pressed my forehead against the window, and I stared into the darkness.

After a long time, the front door finally opened, followed by the sound of Nova's boots on the wood floor and the wolfdogs paws scratching behind them.

I got out of bed and limped over to my bedroom door, and I pressed my ear against the wood, straining to hear as much as I could.

"Nova, what happened?" I called through the door. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Everything's fine," she said, sounding exasperated. "I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. We should be safe for the rest of the night."

"Do you need any help?" I offered. "Do you want to unlock my door and I can help you?"

"No, I don't need help bathing, Lazlo," she muttered, and her footsteps had moved onto the stairs leading up to her second-story bedroom.

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“I didn’t mean it like that!” I hastily amended, but it was too late. Nova had gone upstairs, out of earshot, and I was once again locked in my room for the night.

It was so unnerving to lose my freedom – as limited as it was – so soon after regaining it. Was she really locking me up to keep me safe, like some kind of injured raccoon? Did she literally view me as an animal in need of rescue, and she was treating me as such?

After the middle-of-the-night zombie attack, I struggled to fall back to sleep, but I eventually did just before dawn. It must’ve been a very deep sleep, because I woke up to my bedroom door open.

I got up and hobbled out to begin preparing breakfast, but the bonfire caught my eye. I made my way over to the big picture window in the living room to get a better look at it. Right out on the side lawn, away from all the trees and buildings and animal habitats, Nova had made a bonfire out of the zombie bodies, and she was watching it burn with Frost and Sable sitting beside her.

With the firelight dancing across her face, I noticed the tears streaming down her cheeks.

I realized once again that I did not know enough about this person, and my life was essentially in her hands. I needed more insight into who she really was, and I only knew of one way to get it.

I hurried over to the cardboard box in the corner. When I opened it, Sage’s journal was sitting right on top. I grabbed it, closed the box, and hid the journal under my bed

to read when I had the chance.

When I returned to the kitchen, the fire was still raging outside, and Nova still watched with her wolves.

17

Sage

How can one determine the sentience of a “zombie?”

I know I previously stated that I would avoid using that pejorative, but I think it is the only way to properly express the situation I am dealing with. Ordinarily, if a human were to fall ill with any kind of infection, there would be no question of their sentience. Even in those that cause dramatic cognitive or behavior changes, such as dementia or schizophrenia, the patient is always considered human, regardless of their abilities to care for themselves or function in society.

My belief that infected humans are in fact still human is not unique to myself, although it is unfortunately not as popular as one would hope in a compassionate society. There were groups that championed “Dignity in Death,” but even their campaigns were often more about ethical euthanasia versus militaristic attacks as opposed to finding out if there was any capacity for the infected to live a life without harm.

In my time here at the farm, I am seeking to discover more about the virus and the infected, and I mean to investigate it beyond biology. My lack of virology experience and proper equipment makes it unlikely that I will be able to find a cure for the virus, but I do hope to understand it better.

To fully study it, I have required an infected human subject. I am unable to obtain

consent, but I see no other way to help the infected or those of us who wish to remain uninfected. My sister and I set up a large animal trap in the yard, baiting it with fresh meat from a deer Nova hunted.

The infected seem to be attracted to the scent of humans, but blood in general also has a powerful draw for them. It only took two days for one to stumble into the trap.

Because of my sister's work with wildlife, she had a catch all pole, Kevlar gloves, and unusually large muzzle on hand. It took careful planning and hard work, but we were able to safely catch and muzzle the infected human without any injury to anyone.

He is a young white male, approximately nineteen years old. He is 5 ft 11 inches tall, and he weighed 122 pounds on arrival. He is emaciated with deep cuts on his hands. His pupils do not react to light, and he does not respond appropriately to most stimuli.

I have decided to call him Adam, because I can't know his real name, and giving him a number seems too impersonal. I cannot ask for his consent or permission in any of this, so it is imperative that I treat him with respect.

We have set him up in an enclosure at the edge of the farm. We have provided him with water, which he always refuses, and uncooked red meat, which he devours even though it is not human flesh. When he is served vegetables, eggs, or poultry, he is completely disinterested, but both bear meat and deer meat have been eaten.

He has not shown any interest in the various comforts we have provided for him: blankets, linens, and straw bedding. He has not laid down or sat once that we have seen, but he does have certain times of the day where he stands motionless for several hours that could be something akin to sleep.

Temperature does have an effect on him, but he does nothing to change his situation.

He moves around more when it is warm outside, but if it is freezing cold or raining, he will stand virtually motionless. However, he makes no effort to return to the indoor portion of his enclosure.

It is hard to know exactly if Adam has “wants” or what they might be, so it would not be fair to say that he wants to leave the enclosure he is kept in. That said, he does seem to make simple attempts at breaking out. These primarily include walking into the fencing multiple times per day, but without enough effort or strength to actually do it. He appears more like a sleepwalker stumbling unknowingly into a wall.

Over the past several weeks, Adam’s overall demeanor has changed. Initially, he was very aggressive during any interaction we had with him. He would try to bite us through the muzzle and gloves, and he would thrash at us when he couldn’t.

For the first few weeks, my sister and I kept a strict schedule. In the morning, we’d muzzle him so we could clean his enclosure. Adam releases an oily black excrement every day that is potent and offensive, and it needs to be removed every morning.

While he is muzzled, I draw blood if needed for the laboratory work, and I also tend to any wounds he may have gotten. He frequently suffers from cuts and bruises from running into walls, trees, fences, anything around him. Once that is done, he is fed, and then he is left alone for a while.

In the afternoon, he is let out in the fenced outdoor area. During this time, my sister and I attempt various enrichments with him. We play music, give him toys (tennis balls, stuffed animals, the bones Nova gives her dogs), and talk to him through the fence.

He always responds to noises of any kind, and he will also follow our scent if we are quiet, sniffing the air as he tracks us. Beyond that, he shows no interest in any of the things we have given him. If we tossed a ball at him, he would make no motion to

catch it or move out of the way.

In the early days of Adam's time on the farm, he would run at the fence when we were around for enrichment. He would chase our scent, frothing at the mouth and growling.

In the forty-seven short days he's been with us, all of that has almost entirely stopped. He no longer thrashes or fights us when muzzled, although we still do not dare handle him without our gear. During enrichment, he will trail after us, but more like a dog following an owner and less like a rabid animal hunting us.

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Still, I cannot answer the question of whether or not he has sentience. Does he feel pain? Does he have thoughts? Does he want for anything? Or is he working on some instinct driven by the virus? If so, is he even there, or is he a fleshy vessel for the zombies? Should the question really be, how can one tell if a virus is sentient?

18

Lazlo

Despite the strangeness of the situation and our lives, Nova and I managed to fall into a kind of domesticity. In the mornings, I made breakfast while she tended to the animals. When she worked in the garden, preparing the land for future planting, I did the laundry.

Her trust in me seemed to be growing because she put me in charge of feeding the wolfdogs. I diced up raw deer meat and liver and tossed it with pumpkin from a mason jar Nova had canned in the fall and eggs I'd hardboiled in the morning.

Leaving me in charge of anything to do with Frost and Sable had to be the highest compliment she could give, because it had become very apparent that the dogs meant the world to her.

While Nova still remained cold and rather aloof with me, I had seen a much warmer side emerge in her interactions with the animals. In the evenings, when we sat in the living room, reading and listening to music, Sable would always cuddle up beside her on the couch, and Nova's face would light up every time, as if it were some rare or amazing experience.



We still didn't speak much. Over breakfast, we exchanged basic pleasantries, but Nova never tolerated much more than that.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked when we sat around the kitchen table.

"As well as I ever do."

"What about breakfast?" I pressed as she stabbed at her food with a fork. "I added some dill to the eggs and potatoes."

"Interesting choice. They were fine."

"Interesting good or interesting bad?"

She lifted her eyes enough to cast me a glare. "Interesting fine."

"What would you like me to do today?" I asked.

"The usual. Mop the floor if you can stand that long. Sable tracked in some mud last night." She motioned to the big muddy prints that darkened the floor.

"Sure, I'll do what I can."

"That's all I ask."

After we lapsed back into another silence, I asked, "What do you want for supper tonight?"

"We can finish off the venison with the canned pumpkin."

"Sounds good. We'll have dinner at dusk then?"

“The same as every night,” she said, growing annoyed.

“Do you want to do anything different?” I asked.

Nova leaned back in her chair and eyed me across the table. “Like what? Take a drive into the city and have dinner and see a show?”

“No, but something more basic. Maybe we play cards. Or talk,” I suggested.

She shook her head like it was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard. “What is there to talk about?”

“Did you watch a lot of movies?”

“You want to talk to me about my movie preferences?” she asked with a dubious laugh.

“I want to talk to you about anything,” I said, letting my frustration sharpen my words. “We’ve been roommates for a few weeks, and we’ve got even longer to go. I figured it wouldn’t hurt for the two of us to get to know each other.”

“It might,” she countered evenly.

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I let out a sigh and lowered my gaze. There was no point in forcing a friendship if she didn't want one. "Sorry. I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, and I'm definitely not asking for us to be besties or anything. I've been a little... lonely, I guess." I peered up at her from under the long bangs that fell into my eyes. "Do you ever get lonely?"

"No, I don't," she answered without hesitation. "That's why I moved out here."

"Right. Of course." I got to my feet and started clearing the table of the breakfast dishes. "I'll see you for dinner, but I'll let you eat in peace."

"Thank you."

She didn't say anything more as I cleaned up the kitchen. She finished her juice, pulled on her work boots, and headed toward the door.

The floor creaked, but the door didn't open, like she was lingering there behind me. I looked back over my shoulder, and sure enough, she was standing there with her hand on the doorknob and a conflicted expression on her face.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Your hair is shaggy and long. Is that how you like it?"

"I... I don't know," I replied uncertainly, thrown by her question. "I've been liking it longer, but it is messier than I'd want, I suppose."

“I can help you clean that up. I might not look like it, but I’m actually pretty good with hair. If you want, I can trim it up tonight after supper.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. That would be great.” I smiled crookedly at her, because I had no idea what to make of her offer, but I didn’t think that I should turn it down.

The rest of the day went as normal, although time seemed to move much more slowly. A haircut was hardly something to look forward to in anticipation. The last time I had gotten one hadn’t been something I gave much thought about.

It had been in the winter, and I had come home one day to Harlow. She’d complained that my hair kept covering my eyes, and then she had offered to cut it in a way that was clearly a command, so I had let her.

I ran my fingers through my thick wavy hair, and I swallowed down the lump in my throat at the realization that Harlow would never cut it again. In that way, it made the thought of someone else – a virtual stranger – cutting my hair feel vaguely sacrilegious.

But in the back of my mind, I could hear Harlow chastising me, “Lazlo, you need to get your damn hair out of your eyes.”

I came back from hanging the laundry on the line to find Nova in the kitchen, already waiting for me.

“You can take off your shirt.” Nova had her back to me as she laid out her various tools on the counter – scissors, a comb, bobby pins, and a very sharp straight razor.

“What?”

“It makes clean up easier so you don’t get those little hairs all over.” She grabbed a

big brown towel from a cabinet. “I’ll use this to cover you.”

I pulled off my shirt and set it aside on the table, and I was surprised by how exposed I felt standing shirtless in Nova’s kitchen. At the height of my career as a musician, I had posed half-naked on a magazine cover, and I had never even given that a second thought.

Now the memory of it made me cringe inwardly. It all seemed so ... indulgent and unnecessary.

When Nova finally turned back to face me, she barely gave my uncovered torso a second glance. Maybe she sensed my unease, with my arms folded uncomfortably across my chest, or maybe she didn’t find anything interesting about it.

“You can sit down.” She motioned to a chair beside the kitchen table.

After I sat, she draped the towel across my chest, and she smirked down at me.

“You don’t have to be so nervous. It’s a haircut – not an execution.”

“It’s just been a while.”

When she grabbed the scissors, I inwardly flinched, but then she ran her fingers through my hair in a way that instantly calmed me.

“This isn’t going to hurt a bit. I promise,” she said, and her voice was low and comforting.

As she trimmed my hair and shaped my beard, our gaze met for a moment, and I noticed the flecks of gold in her dark eyes. She smiled at me softly, and there was a flutter of something warm and unexpected in my chest. Her very touch felt deliberate,

gentle, and even affectionate.

Was I actually safe with her? And how had I never noticed how beautiful she was before?

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“All done.” Nova set the scissors and comb aside.

She gave me a handheld mirror, and I turned it this way and that to get a good look at my new haircut. I still looked like myself, with my thick hair longish and a little wild, but she’d cleaned me up so I looked more like a member of society instead of a mountain man.

“It’s excellent. Thank you.”

She shrugged. “It needed to be done.”

“Well, I still appreciate it.”

“How’s your knee? Could you go on a short hike?” Nova asked.

“Right now?” I asked, caught off guard by her question. “I still have my limp, but I can get around okay. Why? What did you need me to do?”

“I’m going out foraging tomorrow. Why don’t you come with me?” she asked.

“If you think I’d be of help, then I’d be happy to.”

19

Lazlo

After breakfast, we set out with a wagon and the wolfdogs. Nova had a quiver full of

arrows on her back, and the bow rested in the wagon that she pulled as we walked.

“Is the bow and arrow to fight off zombies?” I asked as we started down a dirt trail that led into the woods.

She shook her head. “I prefer the shotgun on them. They don’t go down as well with a bow and arrow, but I don’t have much ammo, so I save it for them. The arrows take down deer and rabbits just fine.”

“So what happens if we come across a zombie?” I asked.

“We’ve got the wolfdogs and the machete.” Nova motioned back to my broad knife sitting next to her bow.

“I didn’t realize we’d be hunting today.”

“Foraging for me is looking for plants and animals ready for harvest. Frost and Sable require a lot of protein, and as you’re still healing, so do you.”

“I haven’t done that much hunting,” I admitted. “I’ve killed plenty of zombies, but not any animals.”

“You can stick to foraging for plants for now,” she said.

As we walked through the trees, Nova told me what I should be on the lookout for, like nettles and dandelion greens. The thing she was most excited for were morel mushrooms, which she usually found on top of a nearby hill this time of year.

“How far do we have to go?” I asked after we’d been walking for a while.

My knee was already throbbing, and I was pushing through it as much as I could, but



I honestly wasn't sure how much it had left considering we'd have to make the same journey back to the house.

"The hill with the morels should be right up ahead. I usually only go a few hours away from the farm so I can be back by dark," she said. "Sometimes I have to go beyond that, but only when I'm heading to another settlement to trade for the goods I can't get on my own."

"How close is the nearest settlement?" I asked, since I hadn't seen any neighbors or even any other houses nearby.

"The closest is two days away by mule, but the place I prefer takes five days of travelling, so I don't go there often. We are very isolated out here, which keeps the zombie populations low, and fortunately, we can get most of what we need on the farm or nearby."

When we got closer to the hill, a wild rabbit ran across our paths, and both of the wolfdogs immediately gave chase.

"You can't run, so go on and look for the mushrooms," Nova commanded hastily as she grabbed her bow. "I'll meet you up there when I'm done."

With that, she raced after Frost and Sable, and hopefully she would return with rabbit.

I left the wagon behind, and I carefully scaled the hill, using the pine trees to lean on and take breaks when my knee required it.

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When I reached the top, I could hear the wolfdogs howling through the trees, and presumably, Nova was chasing right behind them. I was looking toward the sounds, paying more attention to their hunt than where I was going, and I stumbled over something, and fell into a pile of leaves.

Thankfully, I caught myself with my hands and didn't hurt my leg any worse. I sat up and brushed back some of the leaves to see what I'd tripped on, and I barely held back a disgusted scream when I saw the rotting arm.

I scrambled up to my feet, and I used a stick to clear the leaves away. My stomach dropped in horror as I realized that I recognized the dead bodies I'd fallen over.

Riva and Calvin were lying hand-in-hand, and they'd already begun decomposing. Animals had eaten the tips of their noses and cheeks, but they were unmistakably them.

They looked like they had been dead for weeks, probably not that long after I had last seen them. It was hard to tell exactly how they'd died – hypothermia? internal injuries I couldn't see? poison from eating the wrong berries?

There had been so many casualties from the zombie apocalypse that weren't even directly related to the virus. Surviving on your own in the wilderness was an incredibly difficult task, even when someone was as determined and resourceful as Riva.

I didn't have much time to mourn them, though, because I heard a familiar noise. As the distance between the wolfdogs and I grew, and the sounds of the hunt faded, I was

able to hear something much closer – the rattling breath of a death groan. I turned around to see a zombie standing a few feet behind me.

She was tall, with ashen skin and tangled hair, but it was her mouth that truly gave away that she was infected. Her lips were torn and bloody, as if she'd gnawed them off, and her teeth were stained rust red.

She seemed young and healthy, so I wasn't sure that I could outrun her, and her bloodshot eyes were locked right on me, so I knew that she had me in her sights. My only courses of action were fighting her and calling for help.

"Okay, let's get this over with." I snapped a branch off the tree beside me, and I pointed the sharp broken end at the zombie. Then, to hedge my bets, I called for Nova and the dogs: "Nova! Frost! Sable! There's a zombie up here!"

The zombie ran right at me, and I swung the stick like a baseball bat. It cracked hard against her skull, and she went flying back on the dirt.

I ran over to her – pushing through the searing pain in my knee – and I raised the stick up high, preparing to drive it down right through her eye and finish her as she stared up at me.

But before I had the chance, Nova came running over, and she tackled me to the ground.

"What are you doing?" I shouted in dismay and anger.

"You can't hurt her!" Nova yelled, and she had already turned her attention to the zombie lying in the dirt nearby. She took the zombie's hand, tenderly holding it in her own.

“Nova! What are you doing?” I repeated, as my frustration and confusion turned to fear. “You can’t touch a zombie! You’ll get bitten!”

“She’s not a zombie!” Nova insisted desperately with tears in her dark eyes. “She’s my sister. This is Sage.”

20

Lazlo

There was some family resemblance that I didn’t immediately catch – their dark eyes, the sharpness of the cheekbone, even their long black hair. But it wasn’t obvious with the zombie’s sickly appearance, and the way that her lips were torn off made her facial features harder to recognize.

The zombie – Sage, Nova’s sister – was making guttural sounds, almost as if she was talking to her.

“It’s okay,” Nova murmured words of comfort to her. “It’s going to be okay.”

Sage snapped her teeth together to make a clacking sound, and I flinched, but Nova didn’t even react. Sage kept turning her head from side to side, her neck swiveling and jerking, but it didn’t seem like she was looking around so much as she couldn’t control her movements completely.

“Is it going to be okay?” I asked Nova breathlessly.

“Yes, it will,” Nova insisted. “She got out of her enclosure, and I have to put her back. It doesn’t happen very often, but when it does, she doesn’t hurt anyone. She just wanders around.”

“You know she’s a zombie, right?” I asked her slowly and seriously, because I didn’t know exactly how deep Nova’s delusions ran on this. Because keeping your zombie sibling in an outdoor enclosure was definitely a delusional thing to do.

“I know that she is not who she once was,” Nova answered carefully. “But she is my sister, and she’s infected with a really fucked up illness. That’s all.”

Nova helped Sage to her feet and added, “She usually doesn’t wander this far.”

“If she likes to eat humans, she might’ve been drawn to those corpses.” I pointed to the bodies of Riva and Calvin that I had exposed.

I didn’t mention that I knew them, because it didn’t seem like the time. Not when I was still processing the fact that Nova was able to hold hands with a zombie.

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“Tomorrow, I will come back out here and take care of them, so they don’t attract more zombies.” Nova looked at them somberly and sighed. “Poor fools probably froze to death, and they were so close to the house.”

Nova steered Sage away from them, leading her back down the hill, back to the farm. Frost and Sable didn’t seem overly concerned about Sage, but they still gave them a wide berth.

When we finally reached the farm, we parted ways. Nova took Sage to her “home” at the edge of the property, and I went to the house, with the wolfdogs following me. The fact that they chose to accompany me over Nova meant they clearly had some aversion to Sage, even if they seemed tolerant.

Nova joined us in the house several minutes later. I was sitting at the kitchen table, with my leg propped up on an empty chair to ease the pain in my knee. She didn’t say anything or look my way, and instead went straight over to the kitchen sink and washed her hands thoroughly.

With her back still to me, she pulled two large glasses out of the cupboard, and then, from on top of the fridge, she grabbed a half-gallon jug filled with a deep purple liquid.

“I made this blackberry moonshine.” She set it down on the kitchen table beside the two glasses. “You want some?”

“Yes, I will take a drink.”

She poured my glass full, and when I took a sip, it burned going down. I couldn't even remember the last time I had any alcohol, so my tolerance was probably low, but I didn't care. I gulped it down and felt it warming me through almost instantly.

"So..." I said at length. "Are we going to talk about your sister?"

Nova took another drink, then began, "Even before the virus, it was only the two of us left. Our mom, dad, both our grandmothers, they'd all died in a string of completely unrelated bad luck. Or that's what I thought at the time. Once the zabies hit, I realize that they were the lucky ones after all.

"Sage lived in the city, because she was a doctor, and she wanted to help people, and I lived out here because I wanted to help animals and be left alone,' Nova went on. "It worked out great for both of us until the virus, but so it goes. My sister came out here because she wanted to survive and she wanted to find a cure. But, well, you can see how that story ends. Sage is infected, and she never even came anywhere close to a cure or a vaccine."

"I'm sorry," I said, and I meant it. "It's awful seeing someone you care about eaten away by the virus."

Nova stared off at nothing, her eyes dark and misty. "Before she lost herself, she told me she was getting sick, and she asked me to chain her up so she couldn't hurt me or anyone else."

"That was the little arrangement downstairs?" I asked, and my wrists throbbed at the memory of my time handcuffed.

"I had to keep us both safe," she replied, her tone turning defensive. "And in the early days, that was very difficult. She was so angry and violent. I fed her every single day, but she clawed at her own skin and chewed off her own lips."

“I don’t mean to sound cruel, because I know you love her, but... why didn’t you...” I stumbled, unable to find an inoffensive way to ask why she hadn’t killed her sister.

“Why didn’t I put her down?” Nova finished for me, and she shook her head. “Sage didn’t want me to.”

“But she’s dangerous and suffering,” I contended.

“There’s still something in there,” Nova insisted. “She’s not the sister I knew, but there’s something alive and vital inside her. Something feels pain and anger and hunger and sadness and I think – I think happiness.”

“Nothing you’ve described so far sounds like happiness,” I pointed out gently.

“The first weeks were the worst, but eventually, she calmed down,” Nova explained. “She stopped hurting herself, stopped trying to attack me. She’d stand and wait when I brought her food and water. I gave her bones and toys to play with, enrichment stuff I had around for the wolfdogs and other animals. She tore it up and destroyed a lot of it, but not all of it.

“Now she responds to her name, and she lets me hold her hand, she enjoys eating and hugging this ratty old stuffed bear,” Nova argued emphatically. “She’s got a nice place to live, and she’s contained, so she can’t hurt anybody.”

“But you killed the zombies that came on your property?” I asked, growing perplexed by Nova’s stance.

She nodded. “I did, and I will again. The same way I would kill marauders that came on my land to hurt me or a wolf that came to eat my animals. I resort to it as a final option, but whenever it ends up in me versus them, I’ll always choose me.”



What she was describing sounded similar to what Sage had written in her journal about Adam. But Nova hadn't made any mention of him, so I wondered what became of him. Was he still here, and Nova was hiding him from me?

I wanted to ask questions directly about him, but Nova had specifically told me not to touch Sage's things. I couldn't very well ask her about what I'd read in them without seriously upsetting her.

"Sage did seem more compliant and calm than any zombie I've seen. Do you think there are others like that?" I asked her carefully.

"Maybe they could be, after a time," she answered. "In the beginning, Sage was incredibly violent, and I seriously thought about putting her out of her misery. But I knew she'd want me to see it through, and I wouldn't give up on her if she was a scared opossum. But if I hadn't had her chained up before she completely succumbed to the virus, I likely would've had to kill her to save myself.

"Now, with me feeding her and caring for her every day, so she's not hungry or anything, she's become... domesticated, for lack of a better word," she finished with an uneasy shrug.

"So the others might not be monstrous so much as they are feral?" I asked.

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Nova shook her head, like she wasn't certain one way or another. "That was what Sage believed. I don't know. I don't even know if it matters. I only kill them if I need to, to protect myself and my animals and my home. And that won't change either way."

21

Lazlo

Nova poured us each another glass of blackberry moonshine, with the setting sun leaving the dark clouds a deep purple color out the kitchen window. She'd pulled apple preserves out of the cabinet and the rest of the bread I'd made two days ago from the breadbox, along with some goat cheese. It was probably the most decadent meal I'd had in ages, and despite Nova's rather alarming confessions about her sister, I felt more at ease than I had ... maybe since the outbreak began.

"So... you can be honest with me," Nova said through a mouthful of food, her words hazy from the drinks. "How crazy do you think I am now that you know about my sister?"

"I don't know if crazy is the right word, but yeah... I definitely think you have made an unusual and dangerous choice." I leaned forward and rested my arms on the table. "You've really never been bitten?"

She shook her head. "No, I used my gear at first. I have a catch pole and Kevlar gloves I'd use to muzzle her. I have tried to be careful, or at least as careful as I can be while also being incredibly reckless."

“Well, I never would’ve thought it was possible to have a domesticated zombie,” I admitted. “I had heard rumors, but I really never believed them.”

Nova sat up a bit straighter, her interest clearly piqued. “What rumors have you heard?”

“This soldier at the military quarantine claimed he knew of people who kept zombies as pets and even romantic partners. Like they had a farm and humans and zombies live together or something.” I waved off the ridiculousness of the urban legends that Pvt. Kerrigan used to tell me back at the BCQZ. “I don’t remember exactly. It all sounded far-fetched. Their name was like Sloth or something.”

“The Loths?” Nova asked. “Yeah, that’s all true.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Loth family live about two day’s ride south of here.” She pointed vaguely in the direction. “They’ve had this ranch in their family for generations. Before the zabies took over, it was one of the biggest cattle ranches in Canada, and they have thousands of acres of land.

“But when the virus hit, the demand for cattle immediately dropped,” Nova continued. “They were already kind of doomsday prepper types, so the family sat out the worst of it, and then, I guess, they turned to new livestock since cattle were no longer so profitable.”

“Are you implying that zombies are more profitable than cattle?” I asked dubiously.

“They made them profitable by making them useful,” she amended. “The Loths have this trading post on their ranch, and they sell trained zombies. They are used for protection and hunting.

“In addition to selling zombies, the Loths still have some regular livestock and a general store where they sell more mundane goods, like milk, eggs, and moonshine. I visited it once since the outbreak.” She frowned at the memory. “It was a disturbing place, with zombies groaning and humans crying, and it smelled far worse than any other farm I’ve been.”

Nova shuddered in revulsion, and then went on, “The Loths were walking around the general store with rifles, and they have zombies tied out front on chains.”

“How do zombies help with hunting?” I asked. “They’re not like wolfdogs. I’ve never seen them interacting with any animal that wasn’t attacking them. They don’t give a shit about deer.”

“No, but they do care about humans. The Loths use the zombies to catch uninfected people.”

“They hunt us? How do they do that?” I asked, and even in my moonshine foggy brain, a kernel of fear was growing.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen them hunting. I’ve only heard stories from other travelers I’ve bumped into here and there. They are training zombies to use their natural instincts, so they can likely chase down humans about the same way that Frost and Sable chase down rabbits. Plus, the Loths use tricks and traps. I’ve heard they have spike strips to stop vehicles, because they are most likely to have uninfected travelers.”

The world suddenly stopped moving, and my blood pounded in my ears. “Wait. What did you say? They have spike strips?”

“Yeah.” She looked at me curiously. “Why?”

“That’s what got us,” I said, and it felt like the ground was opening beneath me, like I was freefalling into some terrible nightmare. “There was a dozen of us in a truck after we’d left the quarantine, but a spike strip flipped us. Zombies chased us down, and I lost Harlow in the chaos. But I never found her.”

My mouth felt dry, and a sick oily fear coiled itself around my insides.

“If that was the Loths chasing her down, would they have taken her back to their ranch?” I asked. “What do they do with the healthy humans they catch?”

“Maybe,” Nova replied cautiously. “I don’t fully know what they do with the people they’ve trapped. Slave labor, human trafficking, feeding their zombies, presumably other terrible stuff like that.”

“That was... that was over a month ago.” My breath came out ragged, and I wanted to throw up. “She could still be alive, right? They might still have her on the ranch.”

“They might, but that’s really hard to say,” Nova said, trying futilely to temper my growing dread and hope. “It’s not an easy life on the ranch, and they trade and sell humans, too. Even if she’s alive, she might not be there anymore.”

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“Holy shit. Harlow could still be alive.” I breathed in deeply, and I stumbled to my feet. The world was spinning from the alcohol and my shock, and I had to grab onto the chair to keep from falling. “I’ve got to go.”

“Lazlo, you can’t just go,” Nova protested.

“If they have her, she’s been alive, waiting for me to rescue her for weeks. I can’t leave her there!” I shouted, and my voice cracked. “What would you do if it was your sister?”

“I would wait until I’d come up with a better plan than running off drunk, in the night, on a bum knee, for a two day trek,” Nova said, looking up at me reasonably. “I’m not trying to stop you from rescuing Harlow at all. I’m only stating it can’t be right this instant.”

“So when, and how?” I asked.

She motioned to my chair across from her. “Sit down, and we’ll figure this out together.”

22

Lazlo

Sometimes, Nova had to venture further than a day or two to get supplies, and so she had come up with a system of automatic feeders for the animals. It was a bit more complicated with Sage, but Nova made sure that she was very secure and safe inside

her enclosure.

Even with all that, I was surprised when Nova insisted that she and the wolfdogs go along with me to the Loth ranch.

“You don’t have to join me, you know,” I reminded her as we packed up before we left.

“I know,” she contended. “But I also know that you don’t know where you’re going, and you won’t make it on your own with your knee, and I’m not about to let you take my mule by yourself. So either I go with you, or you don’t go, and that seems cruel and unfair, even by end of the world standards.

“Besides, I wouldn’t have let anyone stand in my way if the Loths had Sage, and I doubt you would, either,” she said finally.

With the aid of Vince the mule, we traveled for two days and one night. As we approached our second night, we still hadn’t reached the Loth ranch.

The clouds were dark until just before the horizon, letting the sunset through to bathe the world in red. For the past half mile, the dogs had moved closer to us, flanking the mule on either side, and we’d begun hearing the distant mooing of cattle.

“Smell that?” Nova asked in disgust, and I inhaled deeply through my nose and instantly regretted it.

The crisp spring air was nearly obliterated by an overwhelming stench unlike any other I had ever smelled before. It was shit and piss and sour milk and metallic blood and sweet rotting meat. It was death and despair compounded into a single scent.

The mule stopped short, letting out a disgruntled bray.

“Vince knows better than to go any further.” Nova patted him on the neck, then she carefully swung her leg over and hopped down off the mule. “We’re travelling on foot from here, but we’re almost there.”

The sights and sounds had greeted us first, but the ranch itself was impossible to miss as soon as Nova and I reached the top of the hill. It was located in a valley, with vast rolling fields fenced all around the property.

From our vantage, it actually looked like a small town. Roads were winding all across fields, and in the center were a mass of buildings. Homes for the family, buildings for equipment, barns for livestock. It looked mostly intact, likely appearing roughly the same as it had when the ranch had been fully operational before the virus.

The new fortifying survival barriers were immediately obvious. All along the outer edge of the homestead and buildings were two tall fences made of high tensile steel mesh woven with barbed wire. The interior of the two fences ran around the perimeter of all the buildings and equipment, while the outer one was maybe half-a-mile away from the other.

Between the two fences was a vast enclosure that created something of a moat, except instead of water and alligators, this one was made of grass and zombies.

There had to be hundreds of them there, if not thousands. The ranch was completely surrounded with a horde of zombies, most of them groaning and milling about.

Beyond that were the overgrown patchwork of pastures that filled the valley. At one time, they’d likely been used for the cattle, but apparently, the zombies didn’t need as much room to roam.

The only way into the ranch was a wooden bridge that ran over the “moat” of zombies. Locked steel gates blocked the entrance and exit of the bridge, and zombies



were chained up on either side, like some kind of guard dogs.

“When the general store is open, they unlock the gates, and one of the boys restrains the guard zombies so we can get by,” Nova said. “They’re not going to do that for us though.”

“So how are we gonna get by?” I asked. “You and I can climb over the gate maybe, but the dogs won’t be able to do that.”

“My plan sounds more dangerous but it’s actually much easier,” Nova insisted. “We need to find a gap in the zombies.”

Most of them were congregating on the east end of the property, around the bridge and closer to the house and the general store.

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“Over there to the southwest.” Nova pointed to an area where only a handful of zombies were standing. “We cut through the fence, and we sneak into the property.”

“But right now the zombies are contained. You’re suggesting we set them free?” I asked.

“Not if we’re discreet,” she said, unconcerned. “If the zombies don’t notice us, they won’t notice a small gap in the fence. At least not right away, and then it’s the Loths’ problem to deal with.”

Nova and I crept through the fields with the dogs, and without all the cattle grazing, they had become overgrown and wild, giving us plenty of cover as we made our way closer to the buildings.

Already, the cacophony of sounds was overwhelming. Somehow the cows mooing had travelled the farthest, but they were definitely outnumbered by zombies. Their death groans and grumbles were coming from everywhere, piled on top of each other.

As we got closer, I realized I hadn’t been exactly correct about the ranch looking the same as it once had. It was all still standing, sure, but all the buildings had been redecorated in a very post-apocalyptic style. Rusted sheet metal covered broken windows. Barbwire ran around the roofs. Green and red blood was splattered across walls, and old bones were displayed ornamentally.

The sun had fallen quickly, and it was dark by the time we finally reached the outer fence where the zombies weren’t gathered. Two of them were standing motionless and silent, as if asleep on their feet.

Nova had brought heavy-duty wire cutters, along with her gloves, bow, and arrows. She cut through the wire fencing, and carefully pulled it back enough that Frost, Sable, and I could slip through. Once we did, she followed suit, and then bent the fence back to hide the gap as best she could.

We crept slowly near the ground as soundlessly as possible. One of the zombies twitched, but neither of them moved for us. From what I read in Sage's journal, it seemed like zombies mostly hunted by scent and by sound. With the sheer intensity of the stench, I doubt they could even get a whiff of Nova or me, even if we were standing right in front of them.

When we reached the interior fence, Nova once again cut through it, and we slipped inside. We were officially on the ranch, but there were dozens of buildings spread out across many acres.

"Do you know where they keep the people?" I asked Nova quietly.

She shook her head. "I never went beyond the general store near the entrance. We'll have to make our way through."

"Should we split up so we can cover more ground?" I asked, since I wanted to get Harlow and get the hell off this creepy, wretched ranch as soon as possible.

"That sounds good, but how will I know if I've found her?" Nova asked.

"Um, she's fourteen, and she's barely over five feet tall, I think. Maybe she's grown, though. Last time I saw her, her blonde hair was long and kinda wavy, and she's got blue eyes and pale skin," I explained as best I could. "But she might look different now. Maybe just set free any person you find captive, and then ask them if they're Harlow or if they know where she is."

“Yeah, that’ll work. If you find her first, come back here, and if I find her, I’ll come here. This –” She motioned to a wreath made out of human skulls nailed up to a fence post “– is our meeting spot.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “Good luck.”

She went north, with Frost and Sable following her, and I went west alone. As I walked past buildings, I always peered inside, searching for any sign of Harlow.

The first two contained only cattle and other traditional livestock, while the next was filled to capacity with zombies. They had zombies surrounding the property, and they had a horde inside a barn. What exactly was their plan with all these zombies?

As I walked, staying close to the buildings and hiding in shadows, I started to smell smoke. It was subtle at first, but then overwhelming. In the darkness, I could see the plumes of smoke filling the sky, and then I heard someone screaming.

23

Harlow

Thirty Five Days Ago

My cheek was resting against the cold ground, and the crescent moon above was lighting the road in front of me. The taillights of the truck glowed red, casting everything in an ominous light.

Something had caused the military truck to flip over and crash, and I had been thrown from the back and landed in a grassy embankment. I was alive, but I’d twisted my ankle, so I couldn’t move very fast.

“Harlow!” Kimber and Lazlo were yelling my name, and I slowly sat up.

They found me quickly, but zombies weren’t far behind. They never were anymore.

A week ago, twelve of us had been evacuated from the Blaine County Quarantine Zone, and we’d been on the move ever since in the military truck. Lazlo and I were already family before we left, and I had grown closer with Kimber as we travelled.

Truthfully, I had been crushing on her for months. She was this beautiful, bold sixteen-year-old girl who dyed her short hair red with a beet juice concoction, did her own tattoos in intricate designs down her arm, and had her septum pierced. Even when we were on the run, she put on her handcrafted eyeliner every day, and she never, ever stopped making me happy.

Now was not the time to act on any of those feelings, and I tried to stuff them down as soon as we’d evacuated. But that didn’t mean that I wasn’t grateful that she was here with me.

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When we reached the truck, some of the survivors were arguing. The two who seemed to be clashing the most were Riva – an outspoken medic who always tried to help everyone – and Pvt. Kerrigan – the young soldier who had been put in charge of the rest of us civilians.

The others were still hiding in the back of the truck. I leaned against the tailgate, avoiding putting my full weight on my injured ankle, and I peered inside. Bâo was tending to her sister's split eyebrow, and Drew was consoling his distressed nibblings as best as he could.

Another of those long zombie howls rattled the night, and it sounded louder and closer than the last.

“We can't stay here,” Lazlo said quietly, and then he turned and went over to where Kerrigan and Riva were still arguing. “If we stay, we'll be sitting ducks.”

“How can you suggest that?” Riva asked, aghast. “Can Harlow even walk?”

“I'll carry her on my back, and everyone will have to move as fast as they can,” he said.

“Finally, someone with some –” Kerrigan was saying, but a whistling sound cut through the air, followed by a wet thwack, and he cursed loudly. “What the hell was that?”

Kerrigan looked down at his shoulder in dismay, and there was an arrow sticking straight out of it. He'd been shot.

“Get down!” Lazlo shouted, and he immediately dropped to his knees. “Someone’s got a bow and arrow!”

Kimber took my hand and helped me crouch down. The two of us huddled together just out of the glow from the taillights.

In the woods that surrounded the road, the sound of breaking branches and crackling leaves grew louder. The zombies were close enough that I could hear their ragged breathing and their quieter death groans, as well as a couple more of those earsplitting howls.

“Women and children, get on top of the truck!” Kerrigan commanded. “Everyone else, grab a weapon and get ready to fight for your fucking lives.”

Kimber climbed up on top of the truck first. Lazlo gave me a boost up, and then she took my hand to help me the rest of the way.

“You got her?” Lazlo asked her.

“Yeah, I’ve got her,” she replied.

Once I was up, I knelt beside her and hung my arms over the edge, so I could help hoist up the children, Alex, Chloe, and Mason.

Within moments, the zombies appeared, all of them fast. Lazlo, Riva, Calvin, Drew, and Kerrigan were on the ground, doing their best to fight off the rabid monsters that surrounded us.

Barely audible over the fighting, I heard the whistle of the arrows. I opened my mouth to tell everyone to get down, but it was a moment too late. An arrow pierced the chest of Mason, the eldest of Drew’s nephews, and he fell backward off the truck,

onto the ground with his little brother and sister screaming his name.

I grabbed Chloe before she dove off the truck after him, and I held her close to me because it seemed like the only thing to do.

A zombie suddenly leapt up onto the canvased cover of the truck, and this one was a fast-moving female in a bloody sundress, who struggled to keep her balance on the uneven footing. Kimber roared – a righteous, angry sound – and she charged at the zombie, kicking her right in the chest. The zombie tumbled off and fell to the ground.

“This isn’t safe,” Kimber said as she crawled back to us. “We have to run. We have to find somewhere safer to hide.”

I didn’t argue with her, even though I wasn’t sure if I could run or even walk, but it didn’t matter. Staying here was certain death, and I didn’t want that for anyone.

Kimber took my hand, and we used the canvased roof to slide down to the ground. Everyone else jumped off the side and started running, and they quickly disappeared into the tree line. One zombie ran after them, but the others stayed back, dodging Kerrigan’s bullets and Lazlo’s machete.

Into the trees we went, but I couldn’t move very fast, especially not in a dark forest full of broken branches and unstable ground. Kimber kept an arm around my waist, dragging me and carrying me along.

“You should leave me behind,” I told her. “You’ll go faster without me.”

“I won’t leave you,” she declared.

I didn’t argue with her, because I didn’t want to be left behind to die, but I wasn’t wrong. We weren’t moving fast enough, and the zombie howls echoing through the



trees sounded like they were surrounding us.

“There’s a fallen log,” Kimber said, motioning to a thick hollowed out tree lying flat on the forest floor. “We can hide in there.”

It was barely wide enough for the two of us, thanks in part to it being half-full of mud and leaves, and it hurt to crawl on my hands and knees, but I grimaced through it. The two of us managed to squeeze in, and we clamped our hands together.

“If we die tonight, I’m glad I got to know you,” I whispered.

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In the darkness, I could hardly even see her face, but I knew she was smiling when she said, “We won’t die tonight, but I’m glad I got to know you, too.”

The ragged breath of a zombie grew louder, and I could hear the footsteps crunching in the leaves. Kimber and I held our breath, waiting in total silence, and in the dim moonlight, I could see the zombie’s heavy lumbering steps passing in front of us.

My heart was pounding so hard I could hardly hear anything else, and I stared straight ahead, willing the zombie to move on.

Suddenly, someone grabbed me by my ankles, and all at once, I was sliding backwards through the dirt as I was yanked out of the log. I screamed, and the last thing I remembered before everything went black was Kimber’s hand, clinging tightly onto mine until something ripped us horribly apart.

24

Harlow

It was the pained sound of a man crying out that pulled me from the darkness, and as I slowly awoke, I realized dismally that it was Kerrigan.

The floor beneath me was cold concrete, covered in a thin layer of dirty sawdust, and the ceiling above me was open wood rafters and cobwebs stretched between.

Kerrigan was slumped against the back wall, trying to remove the broken arrow that was jutting from his shoulder. One of his ankles was horribly mangled and bloodied,

with his foot twisted the wrong way, and he had a makeshift tourniquet tied around his ankle.

Beside me, Kimber lay unconscious on the floor, breathing normally. A dark bruise was blossoming on the sharp line of her jaw, but she otherwise didn't appear to be too roughed up.

On first glance, I surmised we were in some kind of barn. The exterior wall went from floor to ceiling, and the three interior ones, while too short to reach the ceiling, still extended to at least ten feet tall. The bottom halves were made of wood, and the top were iron bars with barbed wire weaved through.

A few cracks in the walls let in some light, but there were no windows, no other way to discern where we might be.

Besides Kerrigan's groans, a cacophony of sounds filled the space. A strange ambient rumble, similar to being in the forest, except this wasn't peaceful birds and wind in the trees. This was crying, screaming, zombies, and distant mooing.

But the first thing I had really noticed was the unrelenting stench. Since the zombie apocalypse, I had grown accustomed to the strong scent of death and decay, but this was something beyond that. Putrid and acrid and intense.

"Ugh." I groaned involuntarily and put my hand to my nose.

"Good. You are alive," Kerrigan said with a cynical smirk.

"Where are we?" I asked. "What's going on? Where is everybody else?"

His dark hair was only slightly longer than a buzzcut, and he ran his hand through it before looking over at me. "What's the last thing you remember?"

I thought for a minute before answering, “Zombies were chasing us, so Kimber and I ran into the woods to get away.”

“So you only remember the zombies then?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t zombies that shot the arrow into my shoulder, and it wasn’t zombies that set that bear trap that ruined my ankle.” He glared down at the gory mess where his foot was barely even attached anymore. “And it wasn’t zombies that dragged us back here and locked us up in an old horse stable.”

“Who took us? And why?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Kerrigan admitted bitterly. “Humans were barking orders at the zombies when they loaded us up onto the back of a truck, and when I tried to escape, they held me down and knocked me out with ether or something. Then I came to in this stall, not much sooner before you did.”

“But we are still alive, right?” Kimber asked, startling me. She was sitting up and rubbing her chin as she squinted up at our new residence. “This isn’t like hell or purgatory or something?”

“I don’t think so. Are you okay?” I asked.

“My head hurts, but I’ll survive.” She gave me a weak smile. “You? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine,” I lied, because my body ached all over. I turned back to Kerrigan and asked again, “Where are the others? Lazlo? Chloe and Alex? Bão? Riva?”

Kerrigan held up a hand to silence me. “Stop listing names. My answer’s all the

same, anyway. I have no fucking clue where anybody is except for the two of you that I can see right here.”

“Maybe they got away,” I said quietly, more to myself than anyone else.

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“I’m sure they did.” Kimber put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Lazlo is a survivor.”

“We all are, and yet here we are, barely surviving,” Kerrigan muttered.

I hoped that Lazlo had escaped. I hoped that they all had, and that Mason had been the only casualty. I didn’t know where we were, but I had to believe that anywhere that Lazlo and the others would end up had to be better than this.

Kerrigan was cursing to himself as he struggled to remove the arrow from his shoulder, so I asked him. “Do you want help with that?”

“It’s better if you don’t.” He rolled up the sleeve of his fatigues, revealing a jagged semi-circle of teeth marks on his arm.

A zombie had gotten him.

“How long ago were you bitten?” I asked.

He rolled his sleeve back down and shook his head. “Just before I went unconscious. Any ideas on how long ago that was? Your guess is as good as mine.”

By the sunlight shining through the cracks in the wall, it had to be at least five or six hours later. But then again, I wasn’t even certain about when the truck had flipped over last night.

Suddenly, there was a loud sound of metal scraping against metal echoing all through

the barn, and that was soon followed by the heavy footfalls of boots stalking down the middle corridor between the stalls.

Kimber scooted back against the exterior wall, close to Kerrigan but not quite next to him, and she grabbed my hand and pulled me back with her. The two of us sat huddled together. I had already scanned the stall for any weapons, but other than sawdust and cobwebs, I didn't see much of anything.

Outside our stall, there was the sound of a lock clicking, and when the sliding stall door opened, we were greeted by a woman smiling at us.

It was hard to say exactly how old she was, but in her sixties was my best estimation. Her dishwater hair was graying, and her eyes and skin were pale. Her nose was broad and slightly too large for her face, and while her smile was warm and lovely, her skin had the weathered look of someone who spent long hours in the sun and snow. She wore a flannel jacket over a prairie-style dress with a pair of well-worn work boots.

"You're all awake," she said as she grinned down at us. "You're likely confused and afraid, but don't worry. All will be explained. I am Elmyra Loth, and this is my son, Bly."

I hadn't even noticed the young man standing beside her, even though he was actually taller and wider than her. There was something about Elmyra's presence in our doorway that seemed to take up so much space, despite her diminutive size.

Bly didn't really look at us, so much as leer with his pale eyes. His big hands were hanging out of the pockets of his dirty overalls, and he said nothing as his mother introduced them.

"This is our family ranch, our home, our business, our life." She moved her arm in a sweeping, expansive gesture, as if we could see anything outside of the stall we were

locked in. “For generations, the Loth family raised cattle and horses on these very grounds. Thousands and thousands of animals have passed through these doors.

“But when the world changed, we changed with it,” she continued amiably. “Cattle were no longer worthwhile to raise, so we switched livestock. Even with these adaptations, the ranch requires so much work, more than our family can handle on our own.

“And that’s where you come in,” she said, and her smile deepened. “You will help us on the ranch, and we will keep you safe and keep you fed.”

“What if we don’t want to work for you?” Kimber asked, and I squeezed her hand.

Elmyra’s expression faltered slightly. “It wasn’t a question. You will work for us, and if you don’t, then we will find another use for you. We can always find a use for healthy young bodies.”

I shuddered involuntarily at that, but I did my best to keep still. I didn’t want this imperious matriarch to know how much she unnerved me.

“Given the state of the world, it seems like more than a fair trade,” Elmyra insisted.

“What would you have us do?” I asked.

“We’ll get to all that soon enough. For now, you three will stay in here until we determine that you’re safe to mix with the uninfected,” Elmyra said. “And if you’re not, we’ll move you in with the rest of the zombies.”

“You’re quarantining us?” Kerrigan asked apprehensively. “Shouldn’t the three of us be kept separate for that?”



“We have use for both the infected and uninfected, so it’s no matter to us which way the three of you go,” Elmyra said. “You all look in desperate need of some respite. Bly, make sure our new friends have food and water.”

Bly disappeared behind the stall wall, leaving Elmyra waiting in the doorway and humming happily to herself. Her son returned rather quickly, carrying two small metal bowls in each hand. He set them on the floor near the entrance, then he stepped back.

“Eat up,” Elmyra told us with her bright smile. “I will see you all soon.”

We waited until the door was closed and we’d heard their footsteps retreating.

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“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” I said, breaking the silence first. “They’re keeping us here to quarantine, so maybe things will be nicer after that.”

Kerrigan let out a misanthropic laugh. “Harlow, I know that you’re young, but you can’t be that naïve. Not after all this time. That bitch Elmyra is going to be a nightmare.”

I bristled a little. “She left us food, and that’s something.”

“She left you in here with me, too,” he pointed out harshly. “I’m going to turn into a zombie sometime in the next seventy-two-hours, and I don’t know how the hell you two are gonna be able to protect yourselves from me.”

“I always think better on a full stomach,” Kimber said, and she got up to retrieve the food they’d left for us by the door. As soon as she picked up one of the bowls, she swore and dropped it, the metal clattering on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” I asked and instantly got to my feet, even though my sprained ankle still hurt.

“It’s rotten!” Her face twisted up in revulsion. “The food is full of maggots!”

“Told you that Elmyra wasn’t your friend,” Kerrigan interjected.

“If you don’t have anything helpful to say, can you keep your mouth shut?” Kimber asked. “This is all hard enough without dealing with your attitude.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is the way I’m processing my impending horrific violent illness not setting well with you?” he shot back.

“Maybe you’re immune,” I suggested.

He snorted disparagingly. “Nobody’s immune. That’s just some bullshit people like to believe, like Santa Claus or religion.”

That wasn’t true, though. Remy was immune, and so was her brother. I had seen her zombie bite with my own eyes, and she never fell ill.

But I didn’t argue with Kerrigan. He was angry, but not with me, not really. Besides that, he wouldn’t believe me, and even if he did, what did it matter? Why did he need to know that immunity was actually possible, but he was one of the unlucky ones?

My hand had instinctively gone to my neck, where I always had the cross necklace my mother had given me, but now, I came up empty.

Somewhere in the woods, I had lost it, the same way I had lost virtually everything that mattered to me. My clothes, my sketchbook, my books, my family.

All I had now was Kimber. And Kerrigan for however long he wasn’t a zombie.

“I’m sorry,” I said thickly, and he lifted his eyes to meet mine. “You’ve been shot, bear trapped, bitten, and held captive, and you might be a zombie in a few days’ time. That really sucks.”

“Yeah, it does,” he agreed, and with his anger dissipating, he was left deflated and melancholy. “But... I’ll do what I can for you girls while I’m still a soldier. And when I get sick... I’ll try to handle it, so you don’t have to.”

Harlow

Neither Elmyra nor her son returned the next day or the day after that. It was hard to know exactly how much time had passed, but we could see the sky through a hole in the roof and cracks in the walls.

By then, Kimber and I had drank all the water, even though it smelled suspiciously like sewage, and we had managed to get down a few bits of rancid meat. Even when starving, the maggots were nearly impossible for me to contend with.

But it had only been a few days since I'd eaten, so maybe I would feel differently in a week.

Kimber paced the short perimeter of the stall, which was how she spent most of the time we'd been here. Her long legs completed her walk in several quick strides, as she stalked around like a caged lioness.

Kerrigan was dozing in the corner, and that was also how he spent the majority of the days and nights. It was hard to tell if his exhaustion was from his injuries, starvation, and blood loss, or if it was only a symptom of the virus.

I alternated between standing and sitting, with me spending more time on my feet as my sprained ankle healed. I always stared through the cracks in the walls and gaps in the bars, looking for a way to escape, for any sign of hope.

"What if they never come back to feed us?" Kimber asked as she paced.

"They'll come back," I said as I chewed my nails, and I was growing less and less convinced the longer we went without seeing any of the Loths. "What would be the

point of dragging us back here and throwing us in a stall to let us starve to death?”

“Maybe that was always their plan,” she countered. “Maybe they mean to eat us. They wouldn’t be the first cannibals I’ve met.”

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“Maybe, but why wouldn’t they just kill us then?” I asked. “When you go deer hunting, you bring home a carcass, not a living animal you store in your stable.”

“Who says they won’t butcher us once they know we’re not infected? This whole quarantine is to ensure that they don’t eat tainted meat,” Kimber figured.

“Good news for me is that I won’t be anybody’s dinner then,” Kerrigan chimed in tiredly.

Kimber stopped walking and looked over at him. He still appeared to be sleeping, and he’d been intermittently talking to us without opening his eyes. His skin was pale, and his forehead was shiny with sweat despite the chill in the air.

“We can’t stay here,” Kimber said definitively, her eyes still locked on him. “We’re going to die one way or another if we don’t get the fuck out of this stall.”

“You say that like we haven’t been trying,” I reminded her in a hushed whisper.

All three of us had searched every inch of this stall, looking for a weakness we could exploit. Despite the shabby appearance, everything was astonishingly reinforced. Any gaps were only millimeters wide, and holes were closed with sheet metal, other than the one in the roof, but that was much too far to reach. Even the iron bars were wrapped in barbed wire, and the top of the wooden part was lined with rusted nails pounded outward to impale anyone who tried to climb it.

Kimber chewed her lip, and her gaze went back to the stall walls. “The only way out is over.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked as I stood beside her. “Neither of us are tall enough, and we’d get all torn up by the wire and nails.”

“Sure, individually we’re not tall enough,” she conceded. “But together, we could probably do it.” She reached out and tentatively touched at the rusted spikes and frowned. “Getting torn up is better than dying. Give me a boost.”

“What?” I shook my head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Harlow, we can’t stay here if we want to survive.”

“No, I know that. But you should be the one to boost me. You’re taller and stronger, you could lift me higher. I should go over into the hall, and then I’ll find a key and let you out.”

Kimber scowled at my proposal, as if just realizing that the plan she was suggesting was dangerous. But I was right. Kimber was two years older than me with slightly broader shoulders and more defined biceps.

“Fine,” she relented with a frown. “But you have to be careful, and if it gets to be too much, we switch jobs.”

“I’ll be fine. I can do it,” I insisted with more confidence than I actually felt.

Kimber boosting me was the easy part, because there was no way I could do it without tearing up my hands. I grabbed onto the bars to steady myself, the sharp barbs immediately cutting into the soft flesh of my palm. I gritted my teeth to keep from crying out, because I didn’t want Kimber to know how badly it actually hurt.

I thought of Remy, because I knew she could do this. She survived everything, even zombie bites, but she was only human, same as me. Which meant that I could endure

this, and so I had to, despite the pain.

I gripped tightly on the bars, and with the help of Kimber's shoulders, I was able to climb up onto the stall wall without spearing myself on a rusty nail.

When I put my full weight on the bars, pulling myself up, the barbs tore through my skin. The blood was making my grip slippery, but I was able to stable myself with my boots.

The worst part, though, was pulling myself up over the top. I had to rest there, and when I swung my legs over, the spikes tore through my pants and into my inner thighs.

I winced, and then all at once, before I could get my footing, my hands slipped, and I fell over the wall onto the concrete floor on the other side. I landed roughly on my back, knocking the wind painfully out of me, but nothing felt broken or sprained.

"Harlow!" Kimber gasped, and I could see her eyes above the top wooden slats, staring down at me between the gaps in the bars.

"I'm okay," I hurried to reassure her before I even had a chance to assess anything. "I'll be okay."

My hands had definitely taken the worst of it, and I wiped some of the blood on my shirt. The rest of my injuries were scrapes and bruises, nothing that should slow me down too much.

"Hurry and find a key!" Kerrigan shouted drowsily, as if I didn't already know the plan.

"I'll go look around so I can get you out of here as soon as possible," I told Kimber as



I stood up.

“Be careful,” she said.

The stalls on either side of the one Kimber, Kerrigan, and I were in were vacant, at least from what I could see standing on my tiptoes and peering inside.

“Is someone out there?” a small voice asked from the last stall.

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I climbed up on a bale of hay so I could see over the wall, and inside, I saw a girl standing in the center of the stall, and another person was curled up in the corner.

Her clothing was little more than rags – an old tee shirt patched with flannel and tattered pants. She was tiny and frail, with eyes much too big for her face, and her stringy hair hung down in two braids. All of that made it really difficult to guess her age. She could've been a tall eight-year-old or a malnourished sixteen-year-old.

Her left arm was missing from below the elbow. It was her eyes that were the most alarming thing about her appearance, though. Not how big they looked in her emaciated face, but the drawn blankness of them. They held no sense of fear or curiosity or hunger or urgency. They were as lifeless as a dolls, and if I didn't see her breathing, I would've thought she somehow managed to die standing up.

"Doors are locked," she said flatly.

"I know," I said. "Do you know where the key is? Or any tools?"

"Waylon has the keys. He won't be happy you're out." Her every word came out monotone and blank, much like her eyes.

"Are there any spare keys? If I found them, I could let you out, too," I said, hoping that dangling escape in front of her might elicit some reaction.

Instead, she just repeated, "Doors are locked."

"What about your friend? That person over there?" I asked.

“Buddy doesn’t know anything.”

“Are you sure?” I pressed. “Maybe you can ask him?”

The person in the corner finally stirred, uncurling himself so that I could see that he was a teenage boy, maybe a bit older than me. He didn’t look anything like the girl, but his eyes were hauntingly similar. Blank and lifeless.

But that was not what I noticed first. His mouth had been sewn shut. Thick dark string was woven through the swollen flesh, with red puffy wounds healed around it. A hole had been cut into his sallow cheek, all healed and puckered, and it gave a window to broken teeth and scabbed gums. The hole was a horrific solution to how he ate and drank without use of his mouth.

“Buddy doesn’t know anything,” the girl repeated, and he shook his head.

Since they clearly wouldn’t or couldn’t help me, I gave up and said, “I’ll come back for you and set you free,” and I hoped that would end up being true.

“The zombies are the only ones who are truly free,” the girl intoned hauntingly.

There was no response to that, so I jumped off the hay bail and hurried around the stable, looking for tools or weapons or anything that would help me get Kimber out of the stall.

I hadn’t been rummaging for long, when I heard the sound of voices coming from the western entrance of the stable. I couldn’t get back in the stall on my own without a key, and it wouldn’t be good for me to get caught out in the corridor, so I sprinted the other direction.

I ran out of the eastern door of the stable, but as soon as I felt the chilly afternoon sun

on my face, I stopped short and froze.

I'd known we were on some kind of farm or ranch, and I had expected to encounter overgrown fields and farm animals.

But I had nearly run face first into a wire mesh fence, and on the other side of it were zombies. More zombies than I had ever seen all together. Hundreds and hundreds of them, in various states of decay, hobbling around behind the fence.

But the fences weren't just keeping them out. They were directing the infected into the closed-up nearby barns. The zombies were being kept in captivity, the same as me and Kimber.

"What is this godforsaken place?" I asked breathlessly.

"It's our home, so why don't you show some fucking respect," a man growled behind me.

I whirled around to see Elmyra's son Bly standing with another man. The other man was older, with gray salting his moustache and thinning hair, and he glared down at me.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

I tried to run away and dart around him, but Bly grabbed my long hair and yanked me backward. I fell onto the ground, and he still had my hair in his hand when he kicked me twice in the ribs with steel toe boots. The third time, he kicked me so hard I threw up, and the time after that, even the other man tried stopping Bly.

"Bly, don't kill her!" he shouted through my haze.

“She’s lucky I don’t take her to meet the King,” Bly snarled, and then everything blacked out for a while.

The next thing I remembered after that was Kimber screaming.

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“What did you do to her?” Kimber shouted at Bly and the other man. “What’s wrong with you people? Why are you doing this to us?”

But I never heard the answer.

When I finally came around again, it was late in the night, and Kimber was curled up beside me, with an arm carefully wrapped around my waist.

“How are you doing?” she asked softly when she noticed me stirring.

“Sore, but I’ll survive.” I winced and craned my head, trying to get a look at her in the bit of starlight that spilled in through the cracks. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” she lied, because she didn’t know I could see the fresh bruise forming on her cheek, where Bly had likely hit her. “What happened? What did you see when you got out?”

“We are an island among a sea of zombies, and I have no idea how we could possibly sail away.”

26

Harlow

In the night, Kimber squeezed me hard enough that it hurt, but even the pain was weirdly comforting. It let me know that she was there, that I was not alone, and that

made all of this almost bearable. Almost.

It was never silent in the stables, but since the zombie apocalypse, I had learned to fall asleep wherever I could whenever I needed to. Survival often relied on resting in uncomfortable places when the opportunity presented itself.

Kimber's arm had tightened around me again. She reflexively squeezed from time to time, maybe in conjunction with bad dreams or twitching in her sleep. The sharp pain in my abdomen woke me, but her grip quickly loosened. I relaxed back into her arms when I heard a garbled noise.

The sound itself wasn't uncommon here at all, but it was the proximity that was disturbing. It was coming from right inside our stall.

Kerrigan slept on the other side from us, and in the dark, I could make out his silhouette on the ground, like he was lying down.

"Kerrigan?" I asked the darkness, and I carefully untangled myself from Kimber as I sat up.

"Harlow," he replied in a weary voice, but it soothed my fear because I've never heard a zombie say a name.

"What's going on?" Kimber asked, already alert and on edge. "Is he still alive?"

"I think so. Kerrigan, are you okay?"

"No, no, no," he mumbled. His words were distorted and his voice raspy, but the pain came through clearly. "Harlow, it's happening."

"Shit, he's turning," Kimber said, and she moved, blocking my body with hers.

“I’m sorry!” Kerrigan shouted, and then more plaintively, “I never – I never – nuh-nun-nnn...” He made a guttural gagging sound, followed by a despairing cry for his mother.

His voice was lost to an enraged scream that echoed through the barn, and then he fell silent.

“What do we do?” I whispered into the night.

Kerrigan’s body jerked, his arm jutting out to one side, and he pulled himself up to his hands and knees. He crawled toward us with quick jerky movements, thrusting himself into a pool of light from a hole in the roof, and I finally got a good look at the zombiefied Kerrigan.

His fingernails were cracked and covered in fresh blood. His lips were bloodied and torn open, as if he’d been chewing on them, and I had the grotesque realization that Kerrigan must have been devouring himself before he fully became a zombie.

“Stay back, Harlow,” Kimber commanded.

“I know how to fight a zombie,” I told her in protest.

“Your hands are all torn up, and his are all covered in blood. You can’t go near him or you’ll be infected.”

Kimber stood up, and he lurched toward her, surprisingly fast and agile given his injured arm and leg. She kicked him in the head, and he went flying backward.

The only things we had that even remotely resembled weapons were the metal bowls that the Loths fed us rotten meat in. I was closer to it, so I grabbed one and handed it to Kimber.



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When the Kerrigan zombie came at her again, she hit him hard across the face. He stumbled backward, and she kicked his good leg out from underneath him so he fell back onto the floor.

Kimber stomped her foot on his chest, and she began smashing him in the face with the metal bowl, as hard as she could. He'd only just turned, so his skull was still strong, and it took several powerful blows before I heard it cracking.

The strikes had been powerful enough to stun him, though, so he wasn't fighting Kimber so much as spasming. Eventually, he stopped moving entirely, but she kept bashing his head until it was a literal bloody pulp.

"Kimber, he's dead," I said.

She hit him one more time and let out the growliest scream I had ever heard a human make. It was enraged and primal, and I wished I could scream with her.

The metal bowl was battered and soaked in blood. Kimber tossed it aside, and she stood in the moonlight, covered in splatter from Kerrigan's zombie corpse. Tears left streaks down her cheek.

I moved toward her, but she shook her head and waved me off.

"I have to clean off his blood first. I'm contagious right now." She knelt down in the straw and started using it to wipe the blood off her, but dry straw wasn't a very effective way to wash her hands.

To be safe, she kept her distance from me. Not too far, but enough that we weren't touching. Neither of us slept, and we didn't really speak. We sat there, leaning against the wall, waiting and watching as the sun slowly rose and illuminated the carnage that had been Private Kerrigan.

Not long after dawn, Elmyra finally returned to visit us. This time she'd brought someone other than her son Bly, the man with the moustache that I had seen when I had escaped the stall.

Elmyra surveyed the mess with a twisted little smile. "Well, it looks like the two of you had quite an adventurous 24-hours."

"You left us in here without food or water with a zombie. Did you expect us to die?" Kimber asked, glaring up at them both.

"You're thirsty then?" the man asked. He stepped into the stall, and I instinctively cringed backward, but Kimber's glare never wavered. Not until he spit in her face did she flinch.

"Waylon!" Elmyra admonished him, sounding genuinely upset by his actions. "There's no need to be disgusting. Get this body and get it out of here. The girls have been through enough."

"Fine, Mama." He let out a sigh of annoyance, but he went over and grabbed Kerrigan's body by his hands. He pulled it out of the stall, leaving a long bloody streak behind on the concrete.

"Sorry about my son, Waylon," Elmyra apologized once he was gone. "He's my oldest, and he takes his role here on the ranch very seriously."

"Why are you keeping us here?" Kimber demanded. "What do you want from us?"

“I’ve already told you,” Elmyra said with her warm smile. “We need help around the farm. Right now, you’re in quarantine because I don’t want anyone else in my family getting infected. With the scene in here, I will need to wait a few more days to be sure you’re still safe to mingle with us. This should all be over by the end of the week, and then your work can begin.”

“We’re going to starve to death before then,” Kimber warned her, and I wasn’t sure if that was true, but it felt true, honestly.

“One of my sons will bring you something later on today,” Elmyra said. “You’ll only be fed this once until you’re let out, so make it count.”

She departed, locking the door behind her once again. It wasn’t much longer after that Waylon returned, this time with a hose. He sprayed down the bloody floor, and when he offered to spray Kimber clean, she accepted, even though the water was freezing cold and came out in a hard blast.

Before he left, he dropped off another bowl of rotten meat, but at least he filled the other one with water from the hose instead of that awful sewage we’d gotten before.

Kimber started shivering from the cold, so I lent her my sweater, leaving me in a tank top for the time being. I grabbed the plate of food and sat down beside her, cuddling up close to share our body heat, and I piled up the clean, dry straw over us, like a blanket.

Together, we ate the rancid meat, and I was so hungry, I hardly even minded the maggots this time. We stared ahead at the drying bloodstain from Kerrigan’s body.

“How are we going to make it out of here?” I asked.

Kimber was silent for a moment, then she said finally, “I don’t know. But we’ll find a

way if we stick together.”

27

Harlow

We passed the time huddled up together in the corner of the stall, trying to keep warm and not think about food. We told each other stories about the movies and books we remembered, because talking about real life was too depressing and way too hard.

We didn't try to escape again. With Kerrigan gone, we didn't have quite the same urgency, and I hadn't been able to find a key or any useful tools when I had been out last time. I wasn't about to leave Kimber behind, and we were both exhausted and weak.

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The best I could do for the time being was hope that things would be better when Elmyra gave us our jobs. Maybe we'd get more food or a better place to sleep. If nothing else, we would be out of this stall, and we'd have a much better chance of finding a way to improve our circumstances.

So we waited, watching the spiders build webs in the corner, and Kimber re-telling the story of Shrek.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I dreamt of food and mangled bodies. Once I woke up salivating after having a nightmare that I was eating all of the zombies, tearing into their decadent flesh with my teeth.

After three days, the morning arrived when Elmyra returned, greeting us with her usual warm smile. "The free ride is over, and it's time to get to work."

"When do we eat?" Kimber asked.

"You've got different jobs, but both of you will eat after you get cleaned up, since you smell something fierce," Elmyra said with a little chuckle. "You'll be around for a while, so I suppose it's time to hear your names. What do you want me to call you?"

"My name is Kimber Maric."

"Harlow Smith."

"Kimber, you'll be out in the fields with my son Wyatt, and Harlow, you'll be in the

main house with me,” Elmyra instructed us, and she motioned to a young man that waited off to the side of the stall, leaning against the open door.

“You’re splitting us up?” Kimber asked, and she’d already moved closer to me in a defensive stance.

“Different work requires different skills, and I don’t think this little flower would last in the fields with you,” Elmyra said it with a wink, and she pointed at me on little flower. “But don’t get all weepy eyed. You’ll see each other again. Now come on. We’ve got much to do.”

Elmyra motioned for me to follow her, and Wyatt stepped between Kimber and I. He looked older than Bly but younger than Waylon, and his shoulders were broader than both of them. It seemed unlikely that Kimber and I could overpower him, even if we weren’t weakened from malnutrition.

Without any other reasonable option, we went our separate ways peacefully. I gave Kimber one last look over my shoulder. I wanted to memorize every feature of her beautiful face, the way her short red hair was wonderfully wild and fell across her forehead, even the way she walked, shoulders back with defiant steps.

Why had Kimber been chosen for the field work, while I was sent to the house like a “little flower?” Was it simply because she was stronger, while I looked frail? Or was it that she was more disobedient, while I seemed compliant?

But I didn’t let myself think too much on that. I needed to pay attention to my surroundings and get the lay of the land if I wanted to escape.

The location and scale made it difficult to get a full scope of the ranch. It was low in a valley, with mountains surrounding us in the distance. Buildings filled up most of my eyesight – barns, stables, machinery sheds. I couldn’t even count how many there

were, because some were hidden behind overgrown brush or abandoned farm equipment.

Gravel roads and dirt trails wound through all the buildings, and we passed quite close to some of them. One looked like it had once been a cattle barn, but it had been converted to hold zombies. They stuck their arms through the slats, reaching out for me and Elmyra, but she paid them no mind and kept walking onward.

I wanted to ask Elmyra what the hell was going on here, because I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to keep so many zombies. But I didn't think she would answer, and I was afraid it would only anger her.

Until I had eaten and gotten cleaned up, I was going to bite my tongue and do all I could to ingratiate myself to her.

We headed away from the loud buildings full of zombies and their putrid stench, and I could see a huge farmhouse sitting on a hill.

It would've been picturesque if it wasn't on a zombie farm. In the front yard was a jungle gym with a slide and a rope swing hanging from a tree. The bleak backdrop of early spring, with a gray sky and the surrounding trees still bare, added an ominous vibe. It was a sprawling home, with probably ten or more bedrooms, and a grand porch that wrapped around the whole thing.

Once we got closer to the house, I realized that it wasn't nearly as nice as I'd originally thought. Still expansive, but exterior paint was chipping, the wood floor of the porch was weathered and warped, and several of the windows were boarded up.

"The house has seen brighter days, but our home has fared much better than most," Elmyra said, as if reading my thoughts. "With some more time, and help from others like you, we'll revive this place back to its former glory."

“I am happy to help,” I replied. “Your home looks like it has a rich history.”

Elmyra paused then, looking admiringly up at the house, and she let out a contented sigh. “It does. It’s so rare to find someone who sees that anymore.”

We climbed the porch, and the floorboards creaked underneath my feet. As soon as we passed through the front door, I was hit by the normalcy of it all. Memories from childhood washed over me, of winter holidays spent visiting my aunt’s cozy house in the country. It was the scent of a woodburning stove and warm fresh bread and cinnamon candles.

Despite the size – the wide hallways and grand rooms – and the darkness of the drawn shades, it was astonishingly homy. In the entry way, there was a painting of the cattle ranch in its heyday, and the rest of the décor seemed to tilt towards a rustic live-laugh-love type. Doilies on antique furniture and horseshoes hanging above it. Wooden hearts on the wall decorated with small handprints, presumably those of Elmyra’s children or maybe her grandchildren.

I peeked around as much as I could, but Elmyra walked quickly. She led me through winding corridors to a small bathroom at the back of the house, right off the kitchen. It had a sink and a wash basin, and a towel and clothes had been left on the toilet.

“Clean yourself up, and I’ll get you something to eat,” Elmyra commanded.

The water from the tap smelled funny, and it stayed cool even when I let it run. But I hardly cared at first. I dunked my mouth right under the faucet and gulped it down.



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By then, the scent of greasy cooking was coming through the door, and I hurried to finish cleaning myself. I still made sure to do a good job, since I didn't want to upset Elmyra, but I definitely went as quickly as I could. My skin was cold from the water, and the towel was filthy when I finished, so I hoped it was good enough.

The clothes that had been left for me were threadbare and ill-fitting – a long sleeve peasant top and an ankle-length overall skirt. They weren't great, but they were clean, and right now, I was far more concerned with eating and surviving than fashion. I raked my fingers through my long blond tangles, and I tied it back in a loose braid with a ribbon.

“Don't you look lovely now?” Elmyra regarded me when I came out of the washroom, but my eyes were fixed on the plate of food on the kitchen table.

Two sunny side eggs, a thick slice of homemade bread, and a diced up fried potato.

“Thank you, is that for me?” I asked her in a rush, despite my attempts to be polite and patient, but I couldn't contain myself.

“Yes. It is. Go ahead.”

I raced over and sat down. I wanted to use manners and go slow and savor it, but I just couldn't. It was delicious, I think, but I devoured it so fast, I barely even tasted it.

“Thank you. That was wonderful,” I told her as I finished.

She was standing to the side, leaning against the kitchen counter and watching me.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Fourteen.” My birthday had been over two weeks ago, and yet it felt like a lifetime had passed.

Elmyra was holding a cup of tea in her hands, and she sipped it before coming over to sit beside me at the table.

“I live in this house with four of my children, a daughter-in-law, and my grandchildren,” she elucidated. “The adults and older children work out on the farm all day, caring for the various livestock and fields so we can thrive during these difficult times. I oversee the farm and take care of the house, but that ends up being too much for one pair of hands. That’s where you and the other house girls and house boy come in.

“We have two other girls right now, Avril and Tallulah, and a boy, Buddy,” Elmyra continued, then she leaned back in her chair and hollered the girls’ names.

A few seconds later, the two of them appeared, and they stood side by side. “This is Avril,” Elmyra pointed to the first girl, and then the other, “That is Tallulah. Girls, this is Harlow.”

I immediately recognized Tallulah as the girl I had seen in the stall before, the one with her arm missing and the vacant eyes. Her cheeks had a bit more color than the last time I saw her, and there seemed to be a bit more of a spark in her eyes, but not much. She mostly stared at the floor when Elmyra spoke.

Avril looked to be a few years older than me, with auburn curls pulled back into a ribbon, and she offered me a thin but polite smile.

“Avril will be the one showing you around.” Elmyra motioned to her with thinly

veiled disdain. “She understands my expectations the best. Why don’t the two of you get started?”

“Yes, Elmyra,” Avril said with another tight smile.

“Tallulah, you can clean the table,” Elmyra instructed, and she went back to sipping her tea.

“You can come with me, Harlow,” Avril said.

I mumbled another thank you to Elmyra, and then I followed Avril down the hall. Like Elmyra, she walked quickly, and only spoke when telling me what a particular room was called as we passed by it – the den, the family dining room, Elmyra’s sewing room, the children’s playroom.

I peeked in all of the rooms as we went past, but with the playroom, I stopped and lingered. It was a perfectly ordinary room for children, with wooden toys and stuffed animals on the floor. Two kids were playing there, little boys who couldn’t be more than five or six.

They weren’t twins, but they definitely looked like all the Loths I had seen so far: sandy blond hair, pale eyes, wide noses, broad shoulders. But otherwise, they were two ordinary little kids, playing with toys and making silly noises.

More surprising than that, though, was what I saw through their playroom window. Behind the house was a carousel, like the kind I had seen at the fair.

“Do they have an amusement park ride in their backyard?” I asked, mystified by the sight.

“Don’t talk to the children!” Avril snapped, then she grabbed my wrist and pulled me

along. “You have so much to learn, and we have so much to do.”

“How is it working here?” I asked in a voice just above a whisper.

“The chores aren’t terrible, and I’ve been worse places,” Avril replied.

“What about the others?” I asked, thinking of Tallulah’s thousand-yard stare. “Do Buddy and Tallulah enjoy working here?”

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“They are hard workers, and that’s all that really matters,” Avril replied simply, and then she lowered her voice, “Don’t be too alarmed when you meet Buddy, but he has his lips sewn shut.”

“I met him before, with Tallulah,” I said, and then, because she lowered her voice, I whispered, “What happened?”

Avril stopped, staring straight ahead, and she pursed her lips. “What happened is that you have to be very careful around the ranch.” Her mouth twitched, like she wanted to say more, and then finally, she added quietly, “But you can do well if you know how to follow orders.”

28

Harlow

The food had given me a slight energy boost, but by the time I finished a long day learning the ins-and-outs of running a semi-off-grid farmhouse that housed a family of at least a dozen people, I was exhausted. All of the healing wounds on the palms of my hands had cracked open anew from the scrubbing and cleaning, and my feet and legs ached since there was no moment of rest during the fourteen-hour-work day.

Avril told me that the final task of each day involved serving the family dinner around the table, followed by washing dishes and clean up. The good part about that was that we were permitted to eat their scraps, and that constituted the second daily meal. Our first meal was eating the scraps of their breakfast, but I had been given my own full plate today since I was so underfed and needed my energy back.

Unfortunately, because I was still learning the job, Elmyra didn't think I was ready to serve the family, and I was escorted off without any supper.

Elmyra assigned her eldest son Waylon to conduct me back to my stable. An escort was needed to ensure that I didn't make an escape and to lock me back into my stall at night, but truthfully, I needed guidance through the maze of ranch buildings. It would take me more than a day to get oriented with such a large, complex property.

It was early evening, and the air was crisp with snow falling from dark clouds overhead. So far, it was little more than a dusting on the ground, but it was enough that we left footprints as we walked.

Waylon kept fiddling with the keys hanging on a chain around his neck, and he attempted awkward small talk with me: "How was your work today? How are you enjoying the family? Where were you from before the world fell?"

To all of those questions I answered politely in as few words as possible. I couldn't risk offending him, but I didn't want to be his friend. Not to mention I was exhausted and anxious to see Kimber again.

"I grew up here, as you likely gathered," Waylon said, still speaking amiably with me as we strolled between buildings full of zombies. "It was a nice childhood, but I do sometimes regret not travelling more. I thought I would be able to when I retired, but life had other plans."

"It is funny how life works out sometimes," I agreed, as if his loss of retirement plans were comparable to the loss of everything I'd ever known.

"I always wanted –" Waylon was saying, but I cut him off with a sharp scream when I saw a zombie running toward us.

The zombie had darted out from between two buildings, and it charged at a manic pace toward us. No chain around its neck, no fence between us. The zombie was free and very fast.

“Watch out!” I yelled instinctively because Waylon was standing between me and the zombie.

He pulled a gun out of his waistband. Right before the zombie reached us, he shot it between the eyes, and the zombie abruptly collapsed on the ground. The blood spilling out stained the snow around it a greenish-red.

“Every now and then, one of them gets loose. That’s why I always carry my gun,” Waylon justified. “We don’t have a lot of ammo, but it’s the quickest way to get the zombies back in order if they escape.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, because he had technically just saved my life, and it seemed like the polite thing to do.

We continued on our way back to my stable, leaving the zombie corpse behind for Waylon to deal with later.

“My brothers use the bow and arrow more, but I don’t think that’s so good at taking care of zombies who are coming for your throat,” Waylon went on, as if I had asked him any follow up questions. “They agree with me, actually, but it’s so hard to keep ammunition on hand these days. Last summer, we even knocked over this big old militia compound, thinking they’d have their armory stocked. But there was hardly any left, and what we took, we spent by winter.”

“Well, I am glad you have your gun so that you can protect us,” I said, and when I gave him a grateful smile, he puffed up and beamed down at me, like I had given him a compliment.

When the stall doors opened, and I saw Kimber resting in fresh hay, tears instantly formed in my eyes, and I ran over to her.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you okay? What happened?” She sat up more as I knelt down beside her. “Did they hurt you?”

“No, no, the work was hard but it was fine,” I said, which was true enough. “I was worried about you. You’re okay? What did you do?”

“You will not believe this at all, but I actually had a pretty okay day,” she admitted almost hesitantly, but her lips were slowly curving up into a smile. “They put me to work cleaning out the barns for cattle and goats. I got to work with animals all day, and it’s fairly warm inside the livestock barns. Walking by the zombie cages wasn’t exactly a highlight, but the rest of it wasn’t so bad.”

“Really?” I asked, and relief washed over me again. Kimber was safe, away from the Loths and the zombies.

“What about you? How was it inside as a house girl?” she asked with a wry smirk. “I heard that’s what they call you.”

“It was... It was housework.” I shrugged and tried to brush it off, but Kimber noticed my hands.



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“Damn, Harlow. They’re literally working you to the bone.”

“No, it wasn’t too bad,” I assured her. “It’s because my hands were already torn up. And I had the most wonderful breakfast today with eggs and potatoes and fresh bread. What about you? Did you get to eat?”

“Yeah, they feed the field hands once a day at lunch, but we got a big pan of meat and vegetables. And it’s mostly not rotten, so that’s an improvement.”

Kimber had settled back into the hay, and she wrapped an arm around me so I would curl up beside her. It helped to keep the chill at bay, and I always felt better with her like this.

“So where do we go from here?” Kimber asked softly when I rested my head on her chest.

“I don’t think I’m strong enough,” I said. “And it’s still snowing and cold. I don’t know how well we’ll fair against the elements if we have to make a break for it with only the clothes on our backs.”

She pulled some of the clean hay over us, insulating us from the chill inside the stable.

“Do you think that Lazlo will come for you?” Kimber asked.

I didn’t like to think too much about Lazlo, because it always ended up with me worried about what was happening to him. But I thought about him often enough that

I could answer Kimber. “If he’s alive, and he’s able, and he knows how to find us, then yes. I believe he would. But I don’t know about any of those things. And if he did find us and came here, what can he even do against the Loths? They’re armed and have trained attack zombies.”

I swallowed down my fear and my hopes, and I decided finally, “It’s better if he doesn’t, so that he’s safe. It’s better if we don’t count on him to save us.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s take some time to regain our strength, rest as much as they let us, and start looking for a way out. And when summer comes around, we’ll be ready to go.”

29

Harlow

The work at the house was physically demanding but easy enough to master. In fact, I already had a better handle on my duties than Avril, despite the fact that she’d been here months longer than me. She vacillated between forgetful and repetitive, and she had a tendency to drop things, including an antique picture frame when she’d been showing me how to dust.

The upside of Avril’s struggles was that I was left to my own devices within a matter of days, since my abilities easily matched hers.

One afternoon, when I was sweeping the kitchen, Elmyra’s middle son Wyatt came in. Most of his time was spent in the fields, and the little interaction I did have with him, he rarely spoke directly to me or anyone outside of his family.

“Where is Mama?” he asked, his words sharp.

“She told me she’d be outside with the grandkids on the carousel,” I relayed to him.

He cast his eyes toward the far window of the kitchen, and he let out an annoyed breath. “Can you fetch her for me? I need her help with something out in the barns.”

“Sure.” I set aside the broom and wiped my hands on the front of my skirt. “I’ll be back quickly.”

I went out the backdoor off the kitchen and hurriedly walked toward the carousel. Until now, I had only been able to catch glimpses of it from the house windows, and I was actually eager to see the ride up close.

All of the paint was chipped, half of the colorful lights were burnt out, and the mirrors in the center were cracked. The horses were faded shades of purple, blue, and green, and their faces had been carved with a creepy maniacal kind of glee. The distance had done the carousel many favors, because it was actually quite run down.

Elmyra was standing in front of it, her arms folded over her chest, as she watched her grandkids languidly spin around on the amusement ride. I wasn’t paying them much mind until one of the children began snapping and gnashing at the carousel pole that ran through his steed.

I stopped short in surprise, and my first instinct was to scream or run, my usual responses when I saw a zombie. But I only froze and tried to make sense of what I was witnessing.

There were five passengers on the carousel: three uninfected children that I had met, and two zombies.

One of the zombies was a child of about ten, and he was secured to a horse with a belt around his waist and rope binding his hands together.

The other was an old man, and he'd been a zombie long enough that he'd started to decay, with flesh flaking off his face like old paint, leaving dry red tendrils of muscle exposed. Much like the child zombie, he had a rope tied around his waist and attached to a pole, securing him in place. Unlike his younger counterpart, though, he wilted against the horse, with no attempts to escape, no signs of anger or hunger.

The child zombie was wild and vicious, snapping his teeth and biting at anything he could reach. Under his ashen skin, he was covered in purplish bruises, and his wrists and ankles were raw and bloody, as if he'd been frequently bound.

Even with all his flailing and growling, the uninfected kids appeared completely unbothered. They sat on the horses on the far side away from the zombies, and the youngest one was laughing in delight.

"Harlow?" Elmyra said in a way that made me worried this wasn't the first time she'd called my name, and she was looking back over her shoulder at me. "Did you need something?"

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“Um, yes, sorry. Wyatt... your son Wyatt wanted to speak with you... about something,” I stammered through my shock.

She frowned. “He doesn’t like coming around when I’m with Zeke and Colt. Wyatt thinks anyone who is affected is an abomination that needs to be corrected.”

Her attention returned to the carousel, and she waved at the kids as they went past. Since she seemed in no hurry to move, I went over and stood beside her.

“Zeke is my husband, and Colt is my grandson. He’s Wyatt’s nephew,” Elmyra answered the questions I had been too afraid to ask. “Just because they’re sick doesn’t mean they’re not still part of the family.”

“It is remarkable you’ve been able to keep the family together,” I said, because it seemed like she was expecting me to say something.

“Well, I come from a remarkable family, and I don’t only mean the one I married into,” she boasted with a proud smile. “Have you ever heard of the Wonderous Wearghams?”

I shook my head shamefully. “No.”

“You’re young.” She tried to wave it off, but disappointment hardened her smile, and she turned her gaze back to her grandkids. “It was a huge travelling circus, with all kinds of acts and animals, and we went all over North America. I was one of the Wonderous Wearghams, and I was born at the tail end of the golden age of the circus.

“Even then, we toured all over, and I put on shows sometimes two-three times a night,” Elmyra went on. “My grandfather once outbid the Barnum & Bailey Circus for a rare white lion because he knew the importance of being the best, and he wouldn’t let anything stand in his way when he wanted something.

“My whole family worked in the circus, aunts and uncles and cousins and siblings, and I had a hand in all of it. Working from sun up until sun down,” she said, almost like she was bragging. “When the circus finally went under, and I knew that I’d have to settle down and get married, I looked for a family that had a legacy.”

She took a deep breath and regarded as much of the acreage as we could see from where we stood. “This ranch was built on the Loths’ blood, sweat, and tears, and when I married Zeke, I added my own.

“When Zeke got bit, most other women would’ve killed him, or at least left him to die.” She smiled lovingly at the old man zombie as he slowly rode by again, and he only stared blankly ahead with glassy eyes. “I married him in sickness and health, and I had already seen him through hell and high water. This lineage we’ve created with our kids, mine and Zeke’s family are tenacious, hardworking, and loyal. That’s how we were able to keep our entire family together when so many others lost everyone.”

Elmyra was still smiling as she spoke, but her voice had a vehemence to it. Her love for her family and legacy bordered on zealotry. Or maybe it surpassed it completely.

“I bought this carousel when my first grandbaby was born, because I wanted them to feel connected to their legacy on both sides of the family,” she illuminated on her ownership of such an extravagant possession. “I let them ride with Zeke and Colt because they can never forget their connection to each other. Blood never betrays blood.”

Then she paused, long enough that I felt like she was waiting for a response, so I

quietly said, “That’s very commendable of you.”

Elmyra turned and faced me. “I’m telling you this because while you’re here, I want you to feel like you’re almost part of the family, too. You are adding your blood, sweat, and tears to our legacy, and maybe someday, it can be your family, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I have two sons without a wife, and five grandsons who will want one someday,” she said, so sweetly and so kindly, and my blood still ran cold. “I like you, Harlow. You’re clean, respectful, and you do what your told. It doesn’t hurt that you’re pretty enough that the boys will like you, too.”

“I-I’m only fourteen,” I reminded her uneasily.

“You’re too young,” Elmyra agreed, and she put a maternal hand on my shoulder. “My grandsons are still young, too. But in a few years, you might not be.”

I swallowed down my fear and nausea and forced myself to smile and say, “Thank you.” Because certainly from Elmyra’s point-of-view, she was giving me a wonderful gift, and I had to treat it as such instead of the sickening nightmare it truly was.

“But Wyatt is waiting on you,” I said, because I didn’t want to talk about marriage with her any longer.

“I best not keep him waiting then.” Elmyra called to her grandchildren, “Abel, Honora, Toby! Come on! It’s time to go in!”

With the flick of a large switch, Elmyra turned off the carousel. The three uninfected children clambered off and dashed toward the house, and she followed behind them more slowly.

“What about the others?” I asked, referring to the zombies still tied up to the ride.

“Oh, I’ll get them later.” She waved it off. “They like the fresh air, anyhow.”

I followed her and glanced back over my shoulder once. The little boy zombie was still flailing and growling, his wrists growing bloodier as he fought against his restraints.

30

Harlow

It had been a week since Elmyra had trusted me to serve the dinners, and for being a rustic ranch family meal, it was surprisingly formal. Nobody dressed up fancy or anything, but the men did shower and change out of their work clothes.



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The meal always contained three courses. The first one was served promptly at 6 p.m., and every uninfected man, woman, and child in the Loth family was expected to be seated around the table by the time an old grandfather clock struck six.

There were eleven of them in total, so it was a very, very long table. The seating arrangement changed daily, although I had no idea how it was decided. Only two chairs remained a constant – one head went to Elmyra, and the other was left empty for Zeke.

A plate was actually put out for the zombie patriarch, even though he never attended a meal. We were meant to serve him as if he was still there. After the family finished eating, Bly would take the food out to feed Zeke personally, but from the kitchen windows, I had spied him eating it himself. He never fed his father.

Usually, two of Elmyra's sons sat closest to her. The youngest one, Bly, seemed to be the most constant, so maybe he was her favorite. Waylon (the eldest with the salt-and-pepper horseshoe moustache) and Wyatt (the middle son who never spoke to the servants) traded places on and off.

The others were more scattered around. Mercy usually sat the closest to her father's empty seat. She was Elmyra's only daughter, and the youngest child in the family. I rarely interacted with her, because she was so quiet and stayed in her room all day reading, but I had immediately noticed that she appeared to be several months pregnant.

Elmyra's widowed daughter-in-law Alma sat with her children, Gatlin and Honora. Waylon and Wyatt each had kids of their own, although I wasn't completely sure

which ones had fathered which boys. Silas was a sullen teenager who cursed until his grandmother yelled at him, and the preschool aged Abel and Toby played with their food as often as they ate it.

The family all sat down together, and as soon as the grandfather clock finished chiming, they all bowed their heads and prayed, thanking the lord for their bounty. As soon as they were finished, the first course was served.

Tallulah and Buddy stayed back in the kitchen, where they did most of the cooking and plating, while Avril and I served the family in the dining room.

The first course was always a soup or a stew with some kind of bread or pastry. The bowls were set on the table, so I carried around the big pot of stew while Avril ladled it out. It was a very special kind of torture, carrying around this hot, heavy, fragrant pot of food and being unable to eat any of it. At the end of the night, if I were lucky, I could lick some of their bowls clean.

We had only just begun – Elmyra was always served first, and then we moved to her right, tonight that was Waylon – when Avril fumbled and spilled a ladle full of hot soup right onto Waylon’s lap.

“You clumsy bitch!” he shouted and immediately jumped to his feet.

“Waylon, language!” Elmyra snapped at him, but his rage was fixed on Avril.

She was already crying, apologizing for her mistake, and Waylon backhanded her across the face anyway. He struck her hard enough that she fell to the floor.

I was left standing there, holding the heavy pot of stew, burning my hands, and I didn’t know what to do so I wouldn’t incur Waylon’s wrath or make things worse for Avril.

“Tallulah!” I yelled, because I knew I couldn’t do this on my own.

The family settled back into their seats some, and Waylon had refocused his attention on drying his pants with a cloth napkin. Tallulah appeared in the doorway like the specter she was.

“Come here. You need to serve the soup,” I told Tallulah, and I glanced back over at Avril and more quietly said, “Avril, go back into the kitchen to help Buddy.”

And then, because I wasn’t sure what Elmyra would think of me giving orders, I looked to her with a deferential smile. “If that works for you, Elmyra,” I said. “I don’t want the family to be subjected to cold food.”

“Nor do I,” Elmyra agreed with a laugh. “Serve away, Tallulah!”

Avril scurried out of the room, and Tallulah and I were able to serve the rest of the family without incident. When we were done, I grabbed a rag from the kitchen and returned to wipe up the dining room floor and clean up any lingering mess.

“I think I’m liking this new one,” Waylon commented, referring to me. He slurped down his soup and watched me as I wiped the floor near his feet.

“Harlow has been quite resourceful and helpful,” Elmyra approved.

Still watching me while I was down on my hands and knees, Waylon suggested, “We ought to keep her around and make sure that nobody else runs off with her.”

“I thought you were done with all that,” Alma said, sounding disgusted. “It’s not necessary, and you know it.”

“Oh, come on, Alma,” Waylon barked back. “We mark the cattle, we mark the

zombies. We've got signs all over this place with the Loth name on it. We mark the things we mean to keep."

"He's right," Bly chimed in. "You don't know because you're not really a Loth."

I went back to the kitchen and finished helping the others get ready for the next course. We still had a few minutes while the family finished eating, and the roasted quail was resting in the oven.

"How are you doing?" I asked Avril.

She kept her head down as she cut the strawberries for the final course, but I could already see the bruise forming on her cheek.

"I'm fine," she lied.

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I lowered my voice a bit and glanced over my shoulder to be sure that the family wasn't listening. "Waylon mentioned something about a mark. Do you know what that means?"

"No idea." Avril shook her head and blinked back tears. "But the family only talk to me when they have to." Her terrified scowl deepened. "I really hope I don't have to see the King."

That was the second time I heard someone mention "the King," but I still hadn't learned who it was. The patriarch Zeke, maybe? I was about to ask Avril more about it, but Tallulah uncharacteristically interjected herself into the conversation.

"I know what the mark is," she said.

Tallulah was standing in the middle of the kitchen in a shapeless sack of a dress. The hem hung above her ankles, and she grabbed it and pulled it all the way up to her hip.

There she had the three letters LFR – Loth Family Ranch – stylized into a circle, and it was marked into her flesh in a dark pink scar. The family had branded her, and claimed her as theirs.

31

Harlow

"What's it like out in the barns?" I asked Kimber that night. We laid together as we always did, on a pile of fluffed hay. My head was on her shoulder, and her hand

played absently with mine.

“I told you,” Kimber said, annoyed because she hated talking about what we did on the ranch. “It’s not too bad. I work with this guy, Gacy, and we get along well enough. Mostly it’s just shoveling shit and petting cows.”

“How are the Loths? Do you see them often?” I asked.

“Wyatt comes around a lot, but he doesn’t talk much. Just tells us what to do and leaves us alone for the most part,” she said. “I see Waylon and Bly doing stuff with the zombie herds, but I never get anywhere near them.”

“What are they doing with the zombies?” I wondered, not for the first time.

“Gacy says that the Loths capture any zombie that comes around and adds them into the hordes. They watch for ones that seem docile or smart or something, and they take those out to be ‘trained’ with other domestic zombies.” The way she described that last part, it didn’t sound like Kimber completely believed it.

“Waylon’s able to work with them somehow, and a domesticated zombie is a good hunter and can even be something like a guard dog,” she went on. “I’ve seen them roaming free from time to time, following Waylon as he gives them orders to go this way or that. They stumble around like regular old zombies, but they do seem to do what he says. I don’t fully understand how any of it works, though.”

“What do they use the zombies to hunt?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Food. Humans. Remember how they captured us?”

“What about the rest of the zombie horde? The ones that aren’t domesticated?” I pressed.

“I really don’t know what they do with them,” Kimber said. “Maybe they think it’s better to have the horde in a cage instead of roaming free. Bly seems to be in charge of the wilder ones, and I don’t see him that often.”

I tilted my head, so I could see her face when I asked, “But you get along with Wyatt okay? And your friend Gacy, he’s nice and everything?”

“Yeah, he is.” She craned her head to look down at me, and her eyes had gone worried. “Why are you asking all this stuff? Are they treating you badly in the house?”

“No, no, they’re fine,” I insisted quickly. “It’s fine. They like me, actually.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? They’ll be more likely to keep you safe,” she reasoned, and now she was studying my response.

“Yeah. I think it’s good,” I said, hoping it sounded convincing, and I curled up closer to her.

She ran her fingers through my hair and said, “Maybe we should try to get out of here sooner. We’ve had time to build up some strength.”

“The last of the snow from that big snowstorm just finally melted,” I reminded her. “We need to wait until it’s warmer to make a break for it. Until then, we can keep making nice with our captors.”

The next morning, Bly retrieved Kimber for her work after dawn. Elmyra usually came down to get me shortly after that, and she’d escort me up to the house so I could make breakfast. But today she was running late.

It was cold in the stable alone, without Kimber to cuddle up against for warmth, so I

paced back and forth, rubbing my arms and watching the sunrise through the cracks.

Finally, the stall door slid open, and there stood Waylon, grinning down at me. “Morning, Harlow.”

“Good morning,” I said, even though it didn’t feel good anymore. “Is everything okay with Elmyra?”



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“Oh, Mama’s good. Mama’s always good,” he declared with his toothy smile. “She’s got Avril making her breakfast this morning because you and I have an errand to attend to.”

I gulped. “And what is that?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It ain’t so bad, and it won’t last too long.”

He stepped aside and motioned for me to exit, and I walked out of the stall. I had nowhere to go, and I wasn’t about to leave Kimber behind, so I tried to steel myself for whatever was about to happen.

Waylon directed me down the dirt paths between the buildings, and he met my slow pace so he walked alongside me. We passed through buildings of zombies, all of them moaning and reaching their arms out at us as.

“That’s where we’re headed there,” he said, pointing to the building marked with a skull-and-crossbones made out of actual human bones (or hopefully zombie).

“What are we doing there?” I asked, and I hated that I couldn’t completely keep the tremble out of my voice.

He stopped just outside the door and let out a heavy sigh. “I know it isn’t pleasant, but it’s what needs to be done. It won’t make any sense to you, but it is better that I’m the one doing this. I’ll make it as quick as I can.”

“You still haven’t told me what you’re doing.” I looked up at him, but he wouldn’t

meet my gaze.

“You’re getting marked to keep you safe,” Waylon said, and he opened the door.

It was smaller inside than I expected, and at first glance, it looked like a workshop. Tools everywhere, a workbench against a wall, sawdust covered the floor, and everything was so dirty. Waylon flipped on an overhead light, and I quickly realized that it wasn’t so much dirty as it was bloody.

Everything in the shop was stained rust red and zombie green. The workbench was a butcher’s block, and the tools around were all sharp or serrated. Chains with meat hooks hung from the ceiling, and there were decomposing body parts nailed up on the wall.

“This is my brother’s shed, not mine,” Waylon tried to comfort me as I looked around in horror. “But here’s where the tools are.”

“Can’t we do this somewhere else?” I asked, since I would rather be anywhere else than in this gruesome butcher shed.

“I promise it’ll be over soon, and I’ll make it as quick as I can,” Waylon told me again. “Lean over the table. It’s better if you’ve got something to hang onto.”

I did as he instructed, and that’s when I noticed the electric branding iron humming on the table beside me. The LFR design was already glowing red, so it was ready to go.

“Here.” Waylon handed me a strap of leather. “It’s to bite down on. If you weren’t going to work with my mama all day, I’d offer you a shot of whiskey to help with the pain, but that wouldn’t be good for either of us.”

I put the leather between my teeth, and Waylon told me to pull my skirt up on the right side. The cold air dimpled the skin on my thigh, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Okay,” Waylon said, and then I felt the brand against my skin.

Even though I knew what was coming, the searing pain was still overwhelming. It felt like fire was stabbing through the meat of my leg, and I could smell my own flesh sizzling. I bit down on the leather as hard as I could, and I still ended up crying out.

“It’s all done,” Waylon told me, but the pain raged on, burning down my entire thigh. “It’s over now.”

I spit out the leather strap, but I stayed leaning against the bench, letting tears slide down my cheeks as I gasped for breath.

Waylon pulled my skirt down for me, moving carefully so as not to worsen the pain.

“I know you don’t want to be in here, but we can stay in here until you’re ready,” he told me softly. “I’ll tell Mama it’s my fault that you were late.”

I cried, because I couldn’t help it, and because my leg hurt like hell and I was cold and hungry, and because life was so impossibly hard, and I didn’t know how to make it any better.

A moment later, Waylon draped his heavy flannel jacket over my shoulders, and I realized dimly that I had been shivering.

“Buddy isn’t branded,” he said quietly. “You saw what Wyatt did to his mouth.”

“Wyatt sewed Buddy’s mouth shut because he wasn’t branded?” I asked through my tears.

“No, he sewed his mouth shut because he means to turn Buddy into a zombie later on,” Waylon elaborated. “If his mouth is sewn up, he can’t bite anyone, and then once he’s fully tame, Wyatt will slice his mouth open again. It makes it all easier for him, I guess.”

He shrugged, as if he didn’t really understand it himself, but it also didn’t seem to bother him all that much that his brother had a practice of preparing healthy humans for zombification in advance.

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“Wyatt’s allowed to do that because Buddy isn’t branded,” Waylon clarified. “He doesn’t belong to anyone. You are ours now. You aren’t meant for Wyatt’s experiments.” His smile turned affectionate, something between proud father and creepy stranger.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, somehow feeling horrified, afraid, and grateful all at once.

A middle-aged man had branded me as proof of ownership, to protect me from his brother who tortured people in his butcher shed, and he’d done it because I think he had a crush on me.

How could I survive any of this?

I calmed myself down and wiped my eyes. My leg was still throbbing, but I thought that it would be that way for a long while.

I handed Waylon his jacket back without saying anything, and the two of us headed out of the shed and back up towards the house. The only thing I knew for certain was that I couldn’t trust anybody in the Loth family.

32

Harlow

“How the fuck can they brand a person?” Kimber shouted in anger and disbelief.

We’d been reunited in our stall after our long days at work, and I had shown Kimber

my brand. Her immediate response had been horror but that quickly turned to rage, and I had to literally hold her back from attempting to climb the walls so she could bash Waylon's head in.

"If you hurt him, they'll kill us both," I warned her in desperation, and that finally got through to her.

Her body slacked, but the normally soft features of her face were hard with barely contained anger. She helped me sit down, and she crouched beside me to get a better look at it. It was bloody, crusty, and inflamed, and it somehow hurt even worse than it had this morning. A painful heat radiated all down my leg, and it exploded into agony whenever the wound itself brushed up against anything, which happened constantly thanks to my heavy denim skirt.

"I never want to think of myself as naïve, especially not after all the shit I've seen the last couple years." She was looking down at the brand with tears standing in her eyes, and her jaw clenched. "But I still can't believe how bloody barbaric humans can be."

"I'm okay," I insisted and put my hand over hers. "It'll heal, and I'll be fine."

"When we get out of here, I'll fix that up for you," Kimber said, and she motioned to the sleeve of vibrant tattoos that she'd given herself down her arm. "I'll get another kit or make one or whatever, and we'll turn that into something beautiful on your leg. You won't be marked by them forever."

"Thank you," I said thickly.

Kimber leaned over, and ever so gently, she brushed her lips against the unmarred skin below the brand. It was the lightest of touches, and the sweetest of kisses I'd ever had.

I curled up in the crux of her arm, my head resting on her chest, and she ran her fingers through my long tangles of hair.

“So, what story do you want to hear tonight?” she asked.

“Whatever. I’m too tired to pick.”

“Okay. We’ll go with one of my favorites then,” she said. “Once upon a time, there was a man named John Hammond who dreamed of owning a theme park of living, breathing dinosaurs.”

Kimber hadn’t made it very far into her retelling of Jurassic Park when we heard voices coming from outside. Usually, at this time of night, all of the Loths were up in the house, and the only sounds were of the farm animals and zombies.

But this was clearly human voices, talking to one another. They were close enough that we could hear them, but not enough that we could really understand them.

Then I heard a more familiar voice, protesting loudly and clearly, “No, I don’t want to go!”

“That’s Avril,” I realized, and Kimber looked to me. “I work with her in the house.”

Kimber got up and hurried over to the crack in the exterior wall, the one we used to guess the time of day. She started prying at it and scraping it with her fingers, and I limped over to join her. With some effort, she managed to make the crack just large enough that we could both peer through.

Down the gravel road past our stable was another barn, and the main door had been left open. Outside that, Waylon was holding a kerosene lamp in one hand and his gun in the other. They had bright electrical spotlights throughout the ranch that they could

use, but Waylon had chosen something dimmer to attract less attention.

Beside him was his brother Wyatt, and they were talking to two men I had never seen before. One of the men had a leash that was tied to two muzzled zombies – likely domestic ones based on their calm demeanors, but they were still muzzled – and the other held Avril gruffly by the arm.

“You sure these things will really hunt for us?” the one holding the zombies asked, sounding skeptical.

“I’ve used them myself. They’ve tracked humans, deer, and rabbits no problem, but they do struggle with birds,” Waylon explained. “I don’t think they like looking up.”



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“Well I don’t give a shit what they like,” the other man snapped. “I want to make sure they can follow orders.”

“These are two of our best, and they’ll do fine for you,” Waylon insisted.

The man holding Avril leered at her. “Will she do as I command?”

“We’ve never had a problem with her here,” Waylon guaranteed him.

“Then why are you getting rid of me?” Avril asked, and she was crying and trembling. “If I haven’t done anything wrong, why can’t I stay here?”

“Because it’s time to move on,” Waylon told her. “We have all the house staff we need.”

“Are we done then?” Wyatt interrupted, sounding annoyed. “You got what you wanted, we got the ammo and the whiskey.” He held up two big boxes that rattled when he shook them and a bottle of liquid. “Why don’t you get on home?”

“It’s late. We thought we’d stay the night,” the other man said in surprise.

“We keep this area free of wild zombies, so you’ll be safe in your travels, and Mama doesn’t accept any guests in the house,” Waylon said. “It does get cold, though, so you best get a move on.”

The men grumbled to each other, but they turned and started heading away, dragging the zombies and the weeping Avril with them. I wished there was some way that I

could help her, but since I couldn't, I could only hope that the men she went with would treat her better than the Loths had. That maybe her future with them would be brighter than it was here.

“What all did we end up getting?” Waylon asked after they'd gone.

“Two boxes of ammo, and a half-pint of whiskey. They didn't have honey, though. Mama won't be happy about that.”

“Mama isn't happy about anything anymore,” Waylon said with a sigh. He closed the door, and the two of them headed back toward the house.

“Did they just sell someone for ammo and whiskey?” Kimber asked incredulously.

“Yep,” I replied. “Maybe she'll be happier with them. I mean, they can't be much worse than the Loths.”

“There is no bottom to pain or depravity,” she said thickly. “Things can always hurt worse. We can always be more cruel.”

33

Harlow

By the time I saw the first flower of spring, the brand on my leg had turned into a pink puffy scar, and it only hurt when I bumped against something or when I moved my leg certain ways.

The weather was getting warmer, and I was getting healthier. Kimber and I were getting closer to when we could escape.

That's what kept me going through my long days cleaning for the filthiest, laziest family of the post-apocalyptic world. They did so few tasks for themselves I was surprised they didn't have me wiping their ass for them.

"Harlow, are you busy?" Alma asked while I was dusting a sitting room that I had never seen anyone sit in (but Elmyra would have my hide if she spied a speck of dust in it).

Alma was standing in the entrance of the room, with her young daughter Honora hanging off her skirt and staring up at me with her wide eyes.

"Elmyra instructed me to dust this room," I said.

"It can keep until later." Alma waved it off, and her face was lined with exasperation. "I need your help."

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Wrangling kids," she said wearily. "Honora and Toby have been fighting all day, and I need to get down and see Kaleb."

"Sure," I said, mostly because I wasn't allowed to say no.

I didn't mind the younger kids, but I didn't have a whole lot of experience with them. And I had no idea who she meant by Kaleb, since I hadn't met anyone with that name the whole time I'd been here.

"Great." She gave a quick smile, then turned and shouted down the hallway, "Toby! Come on! We're gonna go see your mama!"

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As far as I could tell, Toby was the youngest of the family, but I had no idea who his parents were. He always called Alma “Auntie Alma,” so it wasn’t her, but I hadn’t really seen him interact with Wyatt, Waylon, or Bly.

He was a chubby little boy, with wild blond hair that hadn’t been cut in ages, and he wore overalls that were slightly too big for him. When he ran down to greet us, he nearly tripped over the cuffs.

“Toby, take Harlow’s hand,” she commanded. “She’s gonna be your keeper until we get down to your mama.”

“Where is his mama?” I asked, as he grabbed onto my hand with one of his sticky little ones.

“Just down the hill.” Alma waved me off again, and then she headed for the front door with Honora in tow.

I stayed a few steps behind her, but Toby didn’t seem to mind. He was kind of skipping along and singing to himself, and I was surveying the land, looking for gaps in their fencing.

Alma led me down the hill to another stable. It looked remarkably similar to the one I lived in with Kimber, except this one was cleaner, better kept, and there wasn’t barbed wire winding around the bars on the top half.

Each of the stalls had zombies in it, but none of them reached out through the bars as we passed. Alma stopped and started opening the door. I could see zombies standing

right inside the stall, without muzzles or chains or leads, and she was opening the door right to them.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I was still hanging onto Toby’s hand, and when I took a step back, I pulled him with me.

“I’m visiting my husband Kaleb.” Alma spoke like it was obvious, and the door was wide open. Three zombies were standing right there, two men and a woman, staring ahead at us.

“And Mama!” Toby exclaimed, and he started straining at my hand as he tried to pull towards the female zombie.

“Let him go,” Alma said. “That’s his mother, Tabitha. She’s safe.”

“She’s safe?” I echoed in dismay, and I refused to let go of the little boy. I didn’t care what this woman said, or that I didn’t really know Toby, I wasn’t about to let him get torn up by a zombie.

“Harlow!” Alma yelled, growing more irritated. “Let him go. He’s not your kin.”

Toby was prying at my hand, and somehow the stickiness of his grubby grip had become slippery, and he pulled free. He darted away from me and ran straight to the female zombie. He threw his little arms around her legs and hugged her tightly to him, but the zombie never reacted. She stood there, staring ahead at nothing.

“See?” Alma smirked smugly at me, then she turned her attention to one of the male zombies.

As she approached him, I realized that he did look quite a bit like the other Loth men, although his skin had that ashen color that looked like death. He had a gash on his

arm, and he was missing two fingers on one hand, but otherwise, he was relatively healthy and composed compared to a lot of other zombies.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Alma said to him. Her daughter still clung to her side, seeming much less interested in seeing her father than Toby was in seeing his mother.

Alma reached into her pocket and pulled out a cut of raw meat. It looked like steak, still bloody and fresh, and she held it out to her zombie husband.

He sniffed it, then grabbed it from her. He turned his back to her and crouched down on the ground before tearing into the meat, eating it like a wild animal who was afraid of getting his food stolen.

Toby’s mother sniffed the air, but she didn’t even turn her head to watch Kaleb eat. Her son kept hugging her, and he was babbling, telling her about his day and his toys and things I couldn’t understand.

After Kaleb finished his meal, Alma went over and crouched down beside him. She gently rubbed his back, and when he let out a grunt, she leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder. Her other arm was still around her daughter, hugging her to her.

“I miss you so much, Kaleb,” Alma whispered.

In another context, it might have been a sweet scene. A family in a loving embrace. But Kaleb the zombie snarled, and Alma had to jerk away so he didn’t bite her face.

His aggression immediately dissipated, though. He stood up and wandered aimlessly around the stall, the same as the other male zombie had been doing.

“Why aren’t they biting you?” I asked Alma. “Why aren’t they attacking me?”

“They’re tame,” she replied. “It takes a lot of time and persistence and love and raw meat, but it can be done. For some of them.”

I was about to ask her how they tamed them, but our conversation was cut short by Kimber. I knew her well enough that I could even recognize the sound of her screaming bloody murder, like she was right now.

34

Harlow

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Alma looked towards the sound of Kimber's screams, and she pulled Honora closer to her.

"You can't do this!" Kimber yelled. "Stop it!"

I started running down the corridor, and Alma called after me, "Harlow! Where are you going? Harlow! Get back here!"

But I never stopped or even slowed.

I raced alongside the wire mesh fence that held back the zombie herd, and their loud groans and growls almost drowned out the sound of Kimber.

I found her outside one of the barns I hadn't been to before. It had been a cattle barn at one point, with open walls, but those were covered with sheet metal and thick metal wiring. There were layers of it on top of layers, welded into place, and it honestly looked like overkill, even as a zombie defense.

Kimber was, fortunately, on the outside of the barn, but she clung to the metal gate across the entrance. Her arms strained between the gaps, reaching for something on the inside, while Wyatt and Bly stood several feet back, watching her.

"Kimber!" I yelled as I ran over to her. "What's going on?"

"Gacy!" She turned back to me, and her eyes were wide with horror. "They're feeding Gacy to the zombies!"



“It’s the only way he’ll eat,” Bly told her haughtily. “Like how some snakes prefer to eat live prey. The King is like that. He enjoys the hunt.”

I peered through the large gaps in the gate, but it was dark inside the barn, with most of the light coming in through the gate where we stood. Inside it looked like any other dirty barn, but it was empty. The only thing in there was a scrawny teenage boy – presumably Gacy, since he didn’t seem to be a zombie.

“There’s nothing in there,” I said in confusion.

“No, he’s in there,” Bly assured us. “Can’t you hear him?”

From inside the barn, there was a rumbling sound, almost like a zombie breathing, but it was such a deep timbre and too loud.

“Gacy, come here,” Kimber said. “Maybe you can fit through the gaps.”

“We made sure a human can’t fit through,” Bly said. “And I wouldn’t recommend sticking your arms through when the King comes out, but if you wanna lose a limb for that dipshit Gacy, that’s on you.”

When the King finally emerged from the shadows, I gasped and grabbed onto Kimber’s arm. She was still reaching for Gacy, but we had to get back, as far back as we could.

What came out toward us was definitely a zombie, but it was not a human. This was a massive gorilla, and his black fur came off in thick patches, revealing leathery gray skin taut over rippling muscles. His bottom lip had been torn, exposing his terrifying large and sharp teeth. One of his eyes was glassy and fogged over, but the other was bloodshot with green blood.

Even on all fours, the King was taller than Gacy, and he stomped toward him slowly. Gacy screamed, and he turned back and ran toward us, toward the gate.

I tried to pull Kimber back, but she was stronger than me. When Gacy reached through the gaps, Kimber grabbed his hand, and they clung to each other as the gorilla zombie came up behind him.

“You have to get me out of here,” Gacy sobbed. “Please. I’m sorry. I promise I won’t screw up again. Just please, don’t let me die like this.”

“Gacy, hang on,” Kimber said, and she turned back to yell plaintively at Wyatt and Bly. “Let him out! Please! I’ll make sure he never makes a mistake again! This is inhumane! You can’t do this!”

“The King is hungry, and he needs to eat,” Bly said with a smirk and an indifferent shrug of his shoulders.

The gorilla exhaled, and he was close enough that I could feel his hot fetid breath on my face. I looked back, and he was standing behind Gacy.

“Squeeze through the gaps,” Kimber told her friend, as if he wasn’t already trying, as if his skull could even fit between the slats.

The King grabbed Gacy by his legs, and he started screaming. He gripped Kimber’s hands tightly – I could see the way his fingers dug into her skin – and then, the gorilla yanked him backwards.

It happened so quickly and so slowly all at once. Gacy was alive and screaming, then there was the sound of tearing flesh, and blood was pouring out of his mouth. His hands still clung onto Kimber, even as the zombie gorilla ripped his torso in two.

Gacy's grip finally relaxed, and Kimber was screaming as his blood spilled all over her.

"Let go of him," I told her, because we couldn't get away until she did, and I wanted to be away from all this. The air smelled of blood and shit, and I could hear the gorilla crunching on bones and flesh.

Finally, Kimber released him, and I pulled her away. We didn't make it very far, though, because she collapsed on the ground and threw up. I knelt beside her and rubbed her back. I didn't know how else to comfort her after she'd watched her coworker get torn in half by a zombie gorilla.

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“You’re not supposed to be out here, Harlow,” Waylon said, as he approached us.

“I only came to help,” I said.

“Nobody needs your help feeding the King.” Waylon made a shooing motion at his brothers. “Looks like the show is over anyway. There’s plenty of work to be done elsewhere on the ranch.”

“Come on then,” Wyatt said, and he nudged Kimber with his boot.

“She can’t go back to work,” I insisted. “Not after witnessing that, not when she’s covered in blood.”

“Well, we’ll hose her off and throw her back in the stall then,” Bly said. “She’ll be fine.”

“Can I go with her?” I asked.

“You’re needed elsewhere,” Waylon said.

He led me back toward the house, but we walked slowly down the road together.

“How are you doing with the King’s feedings?” Waylon asked at length. “I know they aren’t pleasant to watch, but he won’t eat anything but live food.”

For once, I was too upset to be polite, and I snapped at him, “Why do you care about how I’m doing? Do you even care?”

“I do, and maybe I shouldn’t,” he said, responding to my indignation with consideration. “I can see you’re smart and trying to make the best out of everything. You remind me of my wife a bit. She died before all this zombie mess, thankfully, but I still miss her.”

“Well, I’m not your wife. I’m a teenager, and I’m not here by choice,” I reminded him coldly.

“I know,” he admitted. “Is it wrong that I want to keep you safe anyway? Or would you rather I leave you to my brothers?”

“No, of course not,” I said, and I softened a little, because I did need his protection from his sadistic siblings. “I appreciate your concern. Today has been... brutal. I’m probably in shock. I mean, how do you have a zombie gorilla? I didn’t think any animals could even be infected with the zombie virus outside of humans.”

“It turns out that it’s not just humans – it’s all primates. Chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas, and the like,” Waylon clarified. “Mama heard about it from folks we were trading with, and she knew some circus people that used to have a gorilla, so she went to work tracking it down. Would you believe that Mama traded a steer and a cow, four horses, two of our best hunter zombies, and all of our house servants for that guy? “

“Why did she even want a gorilla zombie?” I asked.

“She figures that if we can get him to be a trained guard zombie, nobody would ever be able to hurt us,” he said, like it was totally reasonable logic to get a zombie gorilla. “No matter that we’ve never been able to train any of the zombies well enough that they can free roam our property without getting hurt or hurting someone. Or that since the King is so fucking big and powerful that we can’t get anywhere close to him to even attempt to train him.”

He let out an exasperated sigh before finishing with, “But Mama is that way. Once she gets an idea in her head, she won’t ever let it go.”

“Persistence and resilience benefit those in a zombie apocalypse,” I said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That’s why I branded you.”

I looked up at him. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You’re always looking on the bright side.” He smiled down at me. “And I would hate to lose a spirit like yours so that Bly can feed that damn gorilla.”

While becoming the child bride to a grown man with a sadistic, enmeshed family had never been my dream, his fondness for me was something that I had to use to my advantage.

35

Harlow

While Kimber had gotten the worst of the splatter from Gacy’s death, some blood had gotten on me. Once Waylon took me to the house, I went straight back to the kitchen to wash my hands, and he left me alone to finish my chores.

When I heard footsteps behind me as I scrubbed my skin raw, I assumed it was Tallulah or Buddy, so I didn’t bother to look back. They were usually in the kitchen this time of day to start prepping for dinner.

But then someone grabbed me by my braid and yanked me backward, so I went flying across the room and crashed into the refrigerator.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Bly sneered, and he stood over me, towering above me with disgust and anger burning in his pale eyes.

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammered.

He bent down low, so we were nearly eye-to-eye. “You’re nothing!” Bly shouted, and spittle from his lips landed on my cheeks. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, but no less filled with rage. “You are nothing. You and your stupid little friend. Neither of you even deserve a name, and when you die, we’ll toss you in for the zombies to eat. There will be no headstone, no mourners, not even my fawning brother Waylon.”

I didn’t respond. I stayed curled up against the fridge, avoiding his eye contact and trying not to upset him further.

“How dare you leave my niece and nephew alone?” He straightened up. “You are so damn lucky that no harm came to them. Because if something had happened to Alma or the kids...” His scowled deepened, and he kicked me in the side hard enough that I barely kept the vomit down.

“You ran off to protect a slave, and you left two Loth progeny open to danger!” Bly yelled, and then kicked me again to punctuate his fury. “You should put yourself in front of danger to protect them! You are meant to sacrifice yourself for this family’s well-being! We are all that matters. You are nothing, and you always will be.”

He kicked me again, and I couldn’t focus on what he was saying any longer. All I could really do was try to shield myself from the pain that was already overwhelming me. I was curled up in a ball, and his steel-toed boots still found the tender flesh of my abdomen, kicking it over and over.



“Bly, please!” Elmyra interrupted his assault. “She still has chores to do. Who will serve the dinner if she can’t?”

“She deserted the family when we needed her,” Bly insisted, but he had finally stopped kicking me.

“And you have punished her enough,” Elmyra said. “Harlow, have you learned your lesson?”

I swallowed back my tears so I could answer, “Yes.”

“You will never desert your post again?” Elmyra pressed.

“No, never, I promise,” I said emphatically.

“See?” She smiled over at her son. “It’s all taken care of.”

Bly grumbled some complaint, but he stalked out of the room and let me be. Elmyra frowned at me for a moment, then shook her head and called for Tallulah.

“Help Harlow get cleaned up,” Elmyra commanded when Tallulah arrived. “Then both of you return to your chores. I still expect you to finish everything you are meant to do. Your injuries should not slow your work at all.”

Tallulah helped me to the bathroom, where I threw up and washed my face, but there wasn’t time for anything more than that. The linens in the bedrooms needed to be changed, the laundry needed to be washed, the bedroom floors needed to be swept, and there was still more to do beyond that.

When I finally returned to the stall, it was late in the evening, because I was still finishing my chores until after dinner. Kimber was curled up in the fetal position, and

her clothes were still damp, so someone had actually hosed her off.

My body hurt all over, but I kept it to myself. Kimber had been through enough today. I piled the hay around her, and I lay down behind her and wrapped my arm around her.

“We have to get out of here,” she said, and her voice was hoarse from all the crying and yelling she’d done today.

“We will. Soon.”

She rolled back, so she could look over her shoulder at me. “I don’t know what I would do if something like that happened to you. I’d go crazy and try to kill every one of those assholes.”

“Same.” I kissed her forehead. “I don’t think I could’ve survived any of this without you.”

As I held her, I softly sang an Emeriso song that I had loved before the virus took over, and the music stopped.

“In the darkness of my mind, I’m lost and feeling blind/A heartache that won’t fade, a love that can’t be saved/I’m suffocating in the shadows of my fears/But I’ll wear this broken smile to hide my tears.”

“Is that an old Emeriso song?” Kimber asked.

“Yeah.”

“Music used to be so melodramatic before the world ended,” she commented, and I couldn’t help but laugh, even though it hurt my ribs to do it. “But you should keep

singing it anyway.”

So I went on: “The echoes of a love that's lost still haunt my soul/I'm battling these demons, trying to be whole/But I'll rise from the ashes, stronger than before/And in this earthly symphony, I will roar.”

36

Harlow

*Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 10:16 am*

It had become more apparent than ever that I needed to ingratiate myself to the Loths if I meant to survive.

I fully grasped how swift and brutal the Loths' punishments could be. Kimber had told me that Gacy had been fed to the King for accidentally tossing a cowpie onto Bly's foot, and I had been beaten for leaving Alma alone in an environment she kept insisting was safe. I had also come to understand why Avril had made so many mistakes.

After weeks of licking plates clean for sustenance, and working myself to the bone from dawn until into the night, and sleeping in straw in a cold stable, while also taking the occasional beating or backhand, my body was in worse shape than ever before.

All of my joints hurt, weakening my grip, and my skin was blistered and torn, which lead to dropping things with increasing frequency. The brand was still painful at times, slowing my movements, and the constant hunger left me in a fog. Sometimes, I wouldn't even notice right away when Elmyra or Tallulah were talking to me.

Since my work performance could no longer be counted on to earn favor with the Loths, I had to hope that Elmyra and Waylon would be fond enough of me to spare me from the worst punishments. At least until Kimber and I figured out a way to escape.

A few afternoons after the King had killed Gacy, I found Elmyra relaxing in the sitting room for once, working on a cross stitch. I had only just dusted the room the day before, so I grabbed a broom and went in under the guise of sweeping. She didn't

look up from her stitching, and I floundered to find a way to start a conversation with her.

There were pictures all over the walls, old photographs and paintings of family members. What better way to cozy up to Elmyra than pretending to value her family legacy as much as she did?

“Who is that?” I asked, and when she looked up, I pointed at an old sepia colored photograph of a man with a handlebar moustache and top hat.

“Oh, that’s my grandfather, Waylon Weargham,” she said, smiling at the pleasant interruption. “As the Master of Ceremony for the Wonderful Wearghams, he was an amazing showman and kept the family together, even when business was winding down.”

“He must’ve been very special to you if you named Waylon after him,” I commented.

“He was.” Elmyra set aside her cross stitch, and she leaned on the arm of her chair as she eyed me up. “And you’ve been growing special to my Waylon, haven’t you? I’ve noticed how long he takes to escort you to your room at night.”

Every evening, when he walked me back to the stable, he talked to me about his day. I mostly just listened, but I knew better than to do anything that would upset him.

“He is kind to me, and I’ve tried to be kind in return. Did I do something wrong?”

“On the contrary,” she said. “You’ve excelled in your position since Avril’s absence, and you’ve made life on the ranch better for the family. Aside from a few mistakes here and there, you’ve been a welcome addition.”

“Thank you, Elmyra. It means so much to me to know that you feel that way,” I said

and turned my attention back to sweeping.

“Have you ever birthed a baby?” Elmyra asked.

I looked back at her in bewilderment and growing terror. “I-I have never been pregnant.”

She laughed warmly at that. “No, of course, you haven’t. You’re much too young for that sort of thing. I meant, have you ever assisted in any births? My daughter Mercy is growing closer to her due date, and I was hoping to have more experienced hands on deck, aside from myself and Alma.”

I smiled in relief and shook my head. “No, I haven’t ever even really known any pregnant women. I was my mother’s only child.”

“Hmm.” She scowled a bit at that, likely judging my mother for not spawning a lineage the way that Elmyra had. “You and Tallulah will have to do then. You can bring water and towels as good as anyone I suppose, and Mercy won’t be the first woman to give birth in this home.”

“I will do my best,” I assured her, and this time, I did mean it. While I wasn’t a fan of any of the Loths, Mercy’s unborn baby certainly shouldn’t be punished for their failings. “It must be such an exciting time for you all.”

“Another grandbaby is always a joyous occasion,” Elmyra agreed, but she didn’t sound like she really meant it.

“Is... the father excited?” I asked carefully, since I realized that I had no idea who the baby’s father might be.

Elmyra let out a humorless laugh. “Your guess is as good as mine on that one.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She looked over at me, as if suddenly aware that she was sharing family secrets with the servants, but then she sighed. “There’s no one for you to gossip with, so it doesn’t matter what I say to you. We don’t know who the father of Mercy’s baby is. She won’t tell us.”

The puzzlement must’ve been written all over my face, because Elmyra went on, “You’re thinking what I did. Surely, there can’t be that many options? Not her brothers, certainly, and not the house boy. Wyatt castrated Buddy a long time ago. Men come to trade with us, but Mercy never meets with them. She sometimes visits the zombies, but I don’t know that would work”

Then she forced a smile. “It doesn’t matter, I suppose. The baby will be here soon, and he or she will be a Loth. That’s all that counts.”

“Of course,” I agreed, and went back to sweeping the room, so that Elmyra would not think me lazy.

“What do you think about moving into the house?” Elmyra asked.

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I froze for a moment. I did not want to live apart from Kimber, and I definitely didn't want to spend more time with the Loths. But how exactly could I deny such an offer from Elmyra?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Waylon has suggested that the stable might not be the best place for you," Elmyra elaborated. "If you lived in the house – in your own room – it would be far easier for you to help with the household. Especially with the new baby coming, we will be in need of help during the night. The rooms we have for servants are small, but they're warm, and the bed is comfortable enough."

She tilted her head, watching me carefully. "What do you think, Harlow? Would you like to live in the house?"

"Yes," I lied and forced a grateful smile. "Of course I would. That would... that would be amazing."

"I haven't decided yet. It's too soon, I think." She leaned back in her chair, immediately retracting her offer when she thought that I might actually want it. "We haven't had a servant living in the house in quite some time, and you haven't been here that long. I'm not sure if we can trust you with so much access to our home."

"I understand." I nodded, my smile still in place even though I wanted to vomit. "Please let me know whatever you decide."

"I will." Elmyra turned back to her cross stitch. "Now, I should stop chatting with



you and let you get back to your work. There's still so much left to do today."

I went back to my chores, working as diligently as I could. I was relieved when my day came to an end, and I could return back to the stalls with Kimber.

As he escorted me back, Waylon told me a "funny" story about a zombie who'd impaled himself on the fence earlier that day.

"That does sound hilarious," I said, but I wasn't able to muster my usual faux enthusiasm conversing with him today. My heart was weighed down by the thought of being torn apart from Kimber.

I'd lost Lazlo, and before that Remy, and before that Lia, and before that Sommer, and before that a dozen more people that I loved, starting with my mother.

I couldn't lose anybody else. I didn't think I could survive it anymore.

"Is something wrong?" Waylon asked, and I realized I had been silent for too long. "You seem quiet tonight, Harlow."

"No," I said, but then decided there was no point in denying it. If I didn't want to lose Kimber, I needed Waylon's help. "Elmyra told me that you've suggested I move in the house."

"It wasn't really my suggestion," Waylon disagreed, sounding rather sheepish. "More of a conversation we were having. You'd have your own room, and it's a lot nicer than a horse stable."

"You don't have to sell me on sleeping somewhere that isn't a filthy stall," I said.

"Then what's wrong?" he asked.

“Elmyra sounded hesitant. I don’t think she wants me in the house.”

“Really?” Waylon asked, seeming genuinely surprised that his mother wasn’t keen on moving his teenage servant/potential paramour into their historic home. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, she told me she still needed to think it over,” I said, and then, I took a risk and decided to nudge him further, adding, “And she was also kind of chastising me for how long it takes you to walk me back at night.”

“She said that?”

“I’m concerned that she doesn’t like our... friendship,” I replied carefully. “What if she tries to intervene?”

Waylon was quick with, “I would never let her do that.”

“You can’t be with me all the time,” I contended. “You’re out in the fields, and I’m alone in the house with her. If she gets mad about us, she can take it out on me however she likes.”

“She wouldn’t do that. But... if you’re worried, we can be less conspicuous,” he suggested. “We’ll cut our walks shorter.”

I paused and looked up at him, doing my best to appear heartbroken about the thought of not spending more time with him. “When will we see each other?”

He smiled, and in the dim light, his eyes twinkled. “I’ll come to you at night, once everyone is asleep. We can go up in the hay loft and talk.”

“You would do that to see me?” I asked.

“I would do a lot more to see you,” Waylon vowed in a low voice. “I should head back before Mama starts to worry, but tonight, I will visit you.”

37

Harlow

Kimber leaned against the stall wall next to where the door would slide open, and I sat on the floor braiding my hair as we waited.

“You’re sure he’s going to come?” she asked, not for the first time.

“I am pretty sure. He said he would.”

She scowled and shook her head. “I don’t trust him.”

“You know that I don’t either. But I also don’t see a better chance to get out of here.”

“I can overpower Wyatt and run up and kidnap you from the house,” Kimber said, as if she was some kind of superhero instead of a malnourished teenager.

“Even if you could overpower Wyatt, you know the moment you touched him, they would set the domestic zombies after you. And those are ridiculously fast,” I reminded her. “You would be zombie food before you even made it to the house.”

“Yeah, they definitely would feed me to the zombies,” she agreed wryly. “You know, before all the end of the world shit, when I was just a normal angsty tween growing up in Portland, I always thought it would be cool to die by zombie. Boy, was I proven wrong.”

“I always thought it would be cool to die of old age on a big comfy bed, surrounded by my loved ones,” I said.

“Yeah. That way does sound a lot nicer.”

“But I would settle for anything other than starvation or zombies at this –”

“Shhh,” Kimber silenced me. “I hear something.”

I stood up and listened for the sound of footsteps approaching, and I saw the warm glow of a lantern coming down the corridor.

I glanced over at Kimber and whispered, “Ready?” She nodded, but it didn’t matter if she was ready or not. The door was sliding open, and we’d have to act now.

Waylon held the lantern up near his head, illuminating his happy grin. “Good evening, Harlow.”

“I wasn’t sure if you would really come tonight,” I said, and the relief in my voice was genuine.

“I told you I would, and I’m a man of my word,” he pledged.

I hadn’t made any move toward him, and he remained in the corridor. If he didn’t step inside, it would be much harder for Kimber to get a jump on him, but I couldn’t make it conspicuous that I was drawing him into a trap.

“You still don’t trust me, do you?” Waylon asked.

“I find it hard to trust anyone anymore.” I toyed with the long sleeves of my shirt and took a step backward, moving away from him.

“That is likely why you’ve survived for so long,” he said thoughtfully. “But I am more than willing to do what it takes to earn your trust.”

Finally, he stepped forward, closing the gap between us, and entering the horse stall. He didn’t bother to look around, and he was so focused on me, he must’ve forgotten that Kimber even existed.

He was taller than her, and probably stronger if his biceps were any indication, but she was stealthy and slid into the shadow behind him. Before he noticed her, she jumped onto his back and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Waylon cried out in surprise and dropped the kerosene lantern. Kimber grabbed onto the keys dangling around his neck and tore them off right before he bit her arm. She released him and dropped to the ground, and I rushed over to her.

“What the hell, Harlow?” Waylon shouted in dismay, and he pulled his gun from the waistband of his pants.

I was crouched on the floor beside Kimber, and he pointed the weapon right at us.

“I don’t want to die!” I yelled at him, and my voice cracked. “Please! I never wanted to hurt you, but I can’t stay here. Your family will kill me, and I don’t want to die.”

“I can protect you! That’s why I marked you,” he insisted. “I was moving you into the house! You could’ve been safe and happy here, Harlow. I would’ve seen to it.”

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“Do you really think anyone is safe and happy here?” I asked him dubiously. “Your niece and nephews cuddle with zombies, and no one knows who fathered your sister’s baby. Your family hunts down uninfected humans and turns them into slaves or zombie food. This is not a happy family ranch anymore, Waylon. It’s a fucking house of horrors.”

He kept the gun pointed on us, but he lowered his eyes. “This is my home and my legacy.”

“The hay is on fire!” Kimber shouted, and both Waylon and I glanced over to see that the broken lantern had caught onto the dry straw that filled the stall.

Waylon cursed and started stomping at the fire with his boots.

“We gotta go!” Kimber grabbed my hand, and then the two of us were on our feet.

We ran down the corridor, and she stopped and unlocked the other stalls with the keys she had taken from Waylon. Many of the stalls were empty, and the one that usually housed Buddy and Tallulah only had Buddy tonight.

“Where’s Tallulah?” I asked, but he only shook his head. That was all he could really do with his mouth sewn shut.

As soon as Kimber set the other hostages free from their stalls, they took off running every which way, but that was probably for the best. Since we didn’t have any weapons, and the stable was on fire, our only hope for escape was getting lost in the chaos.

Once we had opened all of the stalls in our stable, we ran outside into the night. There were other barns, with other uninfected people locked up, and we hurried toward them to set them free.

As we ran, I saw an animal rush by from the corner of my eye, and I froze while Kimber continued on the quest. In the dim light from the growing fire behind us, I could've sworn that I had seen a large beige animal.

"Ripley?" I called, even though I was certain I was wrong. How could Remy's lioness have gotten here?

When it walked out in the shadows, I realized how wrong I was, and my heart dropped. It was a massive wolf, with calculating eyes staring right at me.

"Harlow?" a voice said, and now I knew I was losing my mind, because I swore it sounded just like Lazlo. "Harlow!"

I turned around, and there he was. His hair was shorter, his beard neater, and he all around looked better than the last time I saw him, but it was him. Somehow, someway, he was standing here in the Loth ranch, smiling at me under the starlight.

I didn't think. I ran towards him as fast as my legs could carry me, and I leapt into his arms. He caught me easily, and the instant I felt his arms around me, tears sprung in my eyes.

"You found me, I can't believe you found me," I cried into his shoulder.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," he replied thickly. "I promise I'll never lose you again."



Harlow

The reunion was short-lived because a warning bell started going off. The fire had grown large enough in the stable to attract the attention of the main house, or maybe they had an automatic alarm. Either way, a loud bell was waking up everyone and everything on the ranch, and flood lights flicked on between the buildings, so there weren't as many shadows to hide in.

When we reached a fork on the paths, I turned one way, and Lazlo the other.

"It's quicker this way to our mule on the hill," Lazlo said and pointed to the southwest corner of the ranch.

"We can't leave without Kimber." I jerked my thumb back toward the buildings. "She's setting the others free."

"Kimber's with you?" Lazlo asked, pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, I wouldn't have survived if she wasn't here. I can't leave without her."

"What about Kerrigan?" he asked.

I shook my head grimly. "He didn't make it."

He nodded his understanding and jogged over to join me. As we weaved through the buildings, we glanced inside, and they were all empty. I called for Kimber, but she never answered.

I saw other uninfected humans – many of them severely malnourished and mutilated, the way Tallulah and Buddy had been. They were running every which way, and the acrid smoke was filling the air as the fire in the stable raged on.

The Loths were somewhere nearby. They were shouting at one another about the fire and their enslaved humans escaping, and I avoided them as we looked for Kimber.

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But then I faintly heard music. Some kind of old school rock n'roll that sounded familiar but I couldn't quite place. It didn't help that the music was slightly muffled from the walls inside the butcher shed, where Waylon had branded me. Had they sound-proofed their torture room for screams?

"We have to check there," I said, even though the thought of going back into the butcher shed made me want to vomit.

"You think Kimber is in there listening to music?" Lazlo asked in disbelief.

"We have to check," I repeated.

I opened the door, and the blast of the music and the metallic scent of fresh blood hit me all at once. Standing with his back to me was Wyatt, shirtless underneath his denim overalls stained all red and green. He was at his butcher block, and all I could see were the limbs draped off of it – a bony girl's legs and an arm.

One of her shoes was falling off, dangling off her toe so it nearly touched the zombie corpse slumped on the wall beside them. She appeared to be naked from the waist down, revealing the LFR mark on her hip.

The brand hadn't been enough to protect her from Wyatt's butcher shed. Or had Wyatt been the one to brand her, making her his to do with whatever he wanted?

Wyatt turned around, and that's when I finally saw the girl. It was Tallulah, her mouth agape and her eyes blank.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Lazlo demanded.

“Who the hell are you?” Wyatt asked, and then, he cocked his head, likely hearing the warning alarm for the first time because I’d opened the door.

He suddenly lunged at me, but Lazlo pushed me out of the way. I fell to the floor of the shed, covered in blood-soaked sawdust that stuck to my skin. Lazlo punched Wyatt, and I scrambled out of the way. As Wyatt stumbled backward, Lazlo grabbed an axe off the wall. Before he could even get to his feet, Lazlo brought the axe down right in the center of Wyatt’s skull with a sickening crack.

I looked away as the blood started spurting, and I got to my feet. I rushed to Tallulah to help her, but she was cold and lifeless.

She was on her back, vivisected from her bow to sternum. A section of her intestine had been cut and reattached to a rotten tube of zombie intestines.

“Was he... connecting a human to a zombie?” Lazlo asked. “What on earth for?”

“I don’t know. His mom says he’s trying to correct the zombies, but...” I shook my head and closed Tallulah’s eyes with my hand. There was nothing more I could do for her.

“Was she your friend?” Lazlo asked.

“Sort of. She was someone, though, and she deserved better.”

I grabbed a tool that looked like a giant icepick off the wall, and then I headed back outside where the air wasn’t completely filled with the hot scent of Wyatt and Tallulah’s blood.

“I’m sorry,” Lazlo said as he followed me, and I noticed he had a distinct limp now. “Not just for your friend, but everything you must’ve gone through here. I should’ve found you sooner.”

“All that matters is that we get out of here alive today,” I said, because I didn’t want to think about anything else.

“I always expected better of you than this, Harlow,” Elmyra said from behind us, and a zombie howled beside her.

39

Harlow

I slowly turned back around to face the matriarch of the Loth Family Ranch. She was still in her housecoat, and with her hair nicely plaited to the side, she looked every bit the pioneer woman she pretended to be. Except, of course, for the fact that she had a zombie on a leash, like some kind of messed up guard dog. The zombie was a young strong man, gnashing his teeth at us and straining at his lead.

“How can you betray us like this?” Elmyra asked, sounding genuinely distressed and bewildered. “We welcomed you into this family, we offered you food and shelter, and you would’ve had even more. And this is how you thank us?”

“You starved me and made me sleep in a barn for animals!” I shouted back at her. “You branded me and offered me up to a child bride to your middle-aged son! I didn’t start this fire, but I hope that all that is left of your family is nothing but ash.”

“You spoiled little bitch,” Elmyra snarled, and any warmth finally evaporated, leaving only unbridled rage burning in her eyes.

A whistling sound cut through the air, then Elmyra's eyes widened in surprise, and I saw blood pooling at the corners of her mouth. Her hand holding the lead fell to her side, and her other hand went to her throat when I finally noticed the arrow jutting through her neck.

Elmyra sputtered and fell back to the ground, and the zombie sprinted toward us. Lazlo lunged forward and stopped it with an ax to the chest. The zombie only fell to his knees, but he still gnashed his teeth. Another arrow suddenly split him between the eyes, and the zombie finally fell dead on the ground.

A woman came out from between the buildings. I had never seen her before, and she didn't look anything like the Loths. Her hair was long and black, her skin was a tawny color, and she carried a bow in her hands.

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“Nova, there you are,” Lazlo said, sounding relieved.

She glanced over at me as she approached us. “Is this Harlow?”

“Yeah, yeah. Harlow, this is my friend Nova. Nova –”

“We can do proper introductions later, because we need to get out of here,” Nova said.

“I’m not leaving without Kimber,” I insisted.

Nova was standing right in front of me, but she looked past me and reached over her shoulder for the arrows in the quiver on her back. “Then you better find her right quick, because the Loths are not the worst of our troubles anymore.”

I looked over my shoulder to see three zombies running straight at us. The Loths must have unleashed their domestics to hunt us down.

Nova’s arrow took down the one in the center right away – she shot him directly through the eye, and he fell backwards on the ground. Lazlo took out another with an ax, and I drove the icepick in the eye of the third. Unfortunately, it got stuck inside the gooey brain, and I couldn’t get it back out.

“We gotta move, more are coming,” Nova said, and Lazlo grabbed me by the arm.

Half-a-dozen more zombies rounded the corner, snarling and spitting, and it was way too many to fight off, so running was the only option.

We cut through a narrow gap between the sheds and lost a few of them that way, but these ones had been trained to track and follow, so they kept on us better than the average zombie.

When we made it back out onto the open gravel path, a wolf suddenly came out of nowhere, and dove at the zombie trailing right at Nova's heels. And then another wolf – this one larger and silvery white – tore off the leg of a zombie.

“Where are the wolves coming from?” I asked.

“Oh, those are with us,” Lazlo said, as if that was a reasonable explanation.

Since the alarms had been going, I'd been able to hear the cows mooing most incessantly, but their sounds seemed to be growing louder.

A herd of cattle suddenly started pouring out of a barn, and they were running right towards us. Behind us were snarling zombies, although the wolves had slowed them down some.

We ducked in between the closest buildings we could, and we leaned back against the wall, catching our breath as the cattle ran past and trampled the zombies.

“Will the wolfdogs be okay?” Lazlo asked.

Nova nodded once. “They know how to dodge hooves.”

“So where exactly is Kimber?” Lazlo asked, looking down at me.

“I think she let those cows out, so she's probably close by,” I said. “She's trying to set everything free.”



As soon as the cows made it by us, we went back out onto the gravel path and maneuvered around the half-dead zombies that the stampede had left in their wake. I headed toward the other cattle buildings. The wolves weren't around, but Nova assured me that they would find us again.

Kimber wasn't in the first building, or the second, but neither were any of the livestock, so that meant we were on her trail as she released all of the animals.

We raced through the second building, down the length of it and out the door, but when we did, we practically ran right into Bly and a badly injured Waylon. His clothes were covered in ash, and the fabric had been burned entirely off the left arm and leg. The exposed flesh was bloody and red and already blistered, from where the flames had been.

"Where do you think you're going?" Waylon demanded to know, and he pointed his gun right at my head.

We were close enough, it was nearly point blank, and he would put a bullet between my eyes before Lazlo had a chance to get him with the ax or Nova could grab an arrow.

40

Harlow

"We don't have time for this, Waylon," I told him calmly, but I wasn't sure if I could reason with a man who had a gun pointed to my head. "The ranch is on fire and zombies are running loose. We all need to get out of here if we want to live."

He let out a joyless laugh and never took his eyes off me. "You think you can destroy my family, my ranch, everything that's ever mattered to me, and then just run out of

here?”

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“The fire was an accident. You were there. You saw it,” I reminded him.

“What does she mean you were there?” Bly asked, then he let out an annoyed groan.

“Were you galivanting around with the house girls again? If you’d have left them alone the way me and Wyatt warned you, none of this would’ve happened!”

“Shut up, Bly! You don’t even know what did happen!” Waylon snapped at him.

“Waylon, please. You’re already injured,” I persisted. “You need to move while you can and get somewhere safe.”

“Now I’m supposed to believe you give a shit about me?” he asked with a smirk.

“Too little, too late.”

“What was that sound?” Nova asked, but I could hardly hear anything over the pounding of my heart.

“Don’t worry I’ll shoot your friends when I’m done with you,” Waylon said.

“No, Waylon, I hear it, too. What is that?” Bly asked, and then I heard it. A deep, reverberating zombie howl followed by a loud stomping sound. “Shit, Waylon, it’s the King.”

When the zombie gorilla let out another booming howl just behind me, the gun in my face no longer felt like the most imminent threat. We all looked back to see the decaying beast lumbering toward us at a terrifyingly fast pace.

Waylon fired a shot at the King, with the bang deafeningly close to my ear, and for a moment, I couldn't hear anything but a loud ringing. Lazlo grabbed my arm, and we were running away as fast as we could.

I looked back over my shoulder, even though I knew I shouldn't. Waylon couldn't really run with his injuries, so he kept firing at the King, but the zombie never even slowed. He reached Waylon and had him torn apart within a matter of seconds – limbs ripped off, blood spraying, viscera spilling out.

Bly was running right after Lazlo, Nova, and me, but that still left him lagging behind us. The King leapt on top of him, and that's when I finally stopped looking. I didn't need to see anyone else get ripped to shreds.

“Harlow!” Kimber shouted.

I ran to the sound of her voice. She was hiding under some old farm equipment, and we crawled underneath on our bellies, so we were concealed under the thrasher with her.

“Did the Loths let the gorilla out?” I asked.

“No, that was me,” Kimber admitted. “It didn't seem right leaving him in a cage for the Loths to play with and torture.”

“Is everything set free then?” I asked.

“Everything I could find,” she said.

“Good. Because we really need to get out of here,” Nova said.

When the King finally ran by to continue his rampage, we crawled out from under the

farm equipment, and Kimber had her first chance to appraise Lazlo and Nova.

“What are you doing here?” Kimber asked.

“Long story I’ll tell you about later, but I came looking for you guys.” He hugged her, and she seemed surprised, but she hugged him back. “I’m glad you’re okay. Thank you for taking care of Harlow.”

“Anytime.”

He let her go, and then the four of us went back to finding our way off the ranch. It was easier to see now that most of the farm buildings were engulfed in flames, and all around I could hear zombies and the King.

The wolves rejoined us as we made it to the fence that surrounded the interior of the ranch. Lazlo and Nova had cut a hole in it when they came in, which meant that the zombies would be able to escape again. But it was also a way that other uninfected humans and livestock could get out.

We had a trek up a steep hill, and the adrenaline from the night was coming down, leaving me shaky and exhausted. I stumbled a few times, but Kimber or Lazlo were always there to catch me and help me back up.

A mule was waiting for us at the top, just as Lazlo had told me. He helped me and Kimber up onto the mule, while Lazlo and Nova stayed on the ground, walking beside us and the wolves. We went off into the dark forest, travelling as far as we could into the night.

It took us longer to get home than it had for Nova and me to get to the Loth ranch. Harlow and Kimber moved slow, but they were not in good shape. They were thin and filthy, and their eyes had this panicked faraway look to them.

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The little I had seen of their life on the ranch had been absolutely horrifying and dehumanizing, and sometimes when I looked at Harlow, I almost suffocated under the guilt of it.

I should've found her sooner. I never should've let her out of my sight. I should've looked and looked until it killed me.

Even with the length of the journey, neither Harlow nor Kimber said much, but Nova and I didn't press them. They ate all the provisions we'd brought – some venison jerky and dried apples – and gulped down as much water as Nova permitted. They were clearly exhausted, but they hardly slept when we stopped to camp out.

Kimber attempted to make friends with the wolfdogs, but Frost and Sable were still wary around strangers. Harlow didn't seem that interested in anything outside of food and water, but I hoped that would change for the better with time and rest.

When we finally arrived at Nova's farmhouse, Kimber complimented the farm and asked about meeting the other animals, but Harlow said nothing until we were alone in the kitchen.

I had been a little afraid that Nova would want to chain them up downstairs, the way she had with me, but Harlow and Kimber made the journey from the ranch without any obvious signs, so it seemed like a safe bet that they were uninfected. For me, the risk was worth it, since locking them in the basement would traumatize them even more.

Fortunately, Nova seemed to agree, because she led them right into the house and

started talking about their accommodations. They would apparently be taking her room on the second floor, since it had a large queen-sized bed, and she went upstairs with Kimber to show her the full washroom where she could shower and get a change of clean clothes.

Harlow lingered by the front door, as if afraid to step too far into the house, and she pulled at the ratty long sleeves of her shirt.

“Is it safe here?” she asked, and she spoke so quietly, I leaned in to hear her better.

“Yeah,” I assured her, but then quickly corrected myself because I didn’t want to make guarantees that weren’t true. “I mean, I don’t know Nova that well, but she’s been good to me since I’ve been here. She helped me find you without expecting anything in return.”

“Good,” she said, but she didn’t seem any more relaxed.

After Kimber came downstairs, singing the praises of a hot shower, it was Harlow’s turn in the bathroom. Nova went out to tend to the animals and see how they’d fared with our extended absence, while I stayed in the kitchen doing my best to throw together a feast for the girls.

When she came down from the shower, with Nova’s sweater baggy on her, Harlow seemed much closer to her normal self. The color had returned to her cheeks, and she looked at my quick potato dumplings and wild turkey with hunger – which was really the first emotion I’d seen in her eyes other than abject horror.

Once again, Harlow and Kimber devoured their food in haste. They’d gone back for seconds and licked their plates clean before Nova and I had even finished our firsts.

“If it’s okay with you, I think I would like to head up and get some rest,” Harlow said



after a barely suppressed yawn.

“Yeah, we could both use the rest,” Kimber agreed, and to her point, she looked like she was about to fall asleep sitting up at the kitchen table.

“That’s fine,” I said, because I wasn’t about to deny them that. Harlow got up, and I followed suit, asking her, “Can we talk for a second first?”

“Sure,” she replied but she sounded uneasy.

“Just come to my room for a minute.” I motioned for her to follow me to the back of the house.

“I’ll help Nova clear the table,” Kimber offered, and I momentarily left them to deal with the dishes.

I flicked on the light in my bedroom, and Harlow gave the groovy neon wallpaper a curious glance.

“What did you need from me?” she asked.

“I wanted to give you your stuff back. I didn’t know exactly when would be the right time, but I thought you’d like to have it again.”

I opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out her sketchbook along with her battered copies of her dictionary and Little Women. Harlow rushed over and practically snatched the sketchbook from my hands.

“You saved this?” she asked in a trembling voice, and she ran her hand over the cover without opening it.

“Of course I did. And I kept this too.” I took off her golden cross necklace that I’d been wearing tucked under my shirt, and when she looked up at me, I carefully draped it over her head.

She touched it gingerly with her fingers, saying nothing for a moment, and then she suddenly began to weep. Tears poured down her face, and what came out of her mouth was something like a wail and a scream.

Her legs went out from underneath her, and I caught her, holding her in my arms as I lowered us both to the floor. She clung to me as she sobbed into my shoulder, with the raw agony pouring out of her, and all I could do was hold her.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered into her hair, my own voice thick with tears. “I will never let anyone hurt you like that again, Harlow. I promise. I am so, so sorry. I love you so much.”

“What’s going on?” Kimber asked, suddenly in my room and looking down at us with concern.

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“She’ll be okay,” I told her because I needed it to be true.

Kimber sat down beside me on the floor and gently rubbed Harlow’s back as she cried, and the three of us stayed that way for a long time, until Harlow finally cried herself out.

Afterward, Kimber helped her up to bed, and I sat on the floor, trying to sort myself out from all of this.

Frost came into the room and laid down beside me, resting his gigantic head on my lap. I stroked his thick fur and exhaled roughly.

“How are you doing?” Nova asked, leaning against the doorframe as she peered in on me.

“Better than Harlow.” I shook my head and clenched my jaw. “I never should’ve stopped looking for her. I could have prevented all of this.”

“No, her tears weren’t only for what happened in the past month,” Nova said. “I mean, I don’t really know Harlow, so I shouldn’t speak for her, but I am certain the last couple years have been an absolute living hell for her, the same way it has been for all of us.”

“But it would’ve helped if I had stopped that nightmare ranch cherry on top of her hellscape sundae.”

“Yeah. And it would’ve helped me a lot if Sage never got infected, but she did. Shit

happens. People make mistakes, and other people get hurt. It fucking sucks. But so it goes.”

“How is Sage?” I asked. “Did she do okay with us being gone for so long?”

“Yeah. She seemed fine. Hungry, but you know, she usually is.”

“I don’t think we should tell Harlow and Kimber about her,” I decided. “After everything at the ranch, they probably don’t want to deal with any more captive zombies.”

Nova nodded in agreement. “Let them get settled in first.”

“So...” I was hesitant to ask the question, but I had to know the truth, so I pushed on.

“You’re okay with all of us staying?”

“I’m expecting you all to help out around here once everyone is up for it, because we’re going to need to expand the gardens to feed everyone,” she said. “Maybe even add some birds and goats. We’ll have to figure out how to make it work, but I’m not gonna send you out to live in the wilderness with the zombies. At least not as long as we manage to get along here.”

I breathed deeply in relief and smiled up at her. “Thank you. I really don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“You probably would’ve died, so you’re welcome,” she replied nonchalantly. “But don’t make me regret keeping you alive.”

“I will try not to,” I said with an uncertain laugh.

She motioned back behind her to the living room. “I left you blankets and pillows on

the couch, if you want to get to bed.”

“You’re taking my bed because it’s your house,” I realized.

“That is correct. The couch isn’t too bad, though.” Nova came over to me and offered her hand, helping me to my feet.

“It definitely won’t be the worst place I’ve slept.”

42

Harlow

It still didn’t seem real. Sometimes, when I closed my eyes, I was afraid to open them, because I was certain all of this would disappear, and I would be back at the ranch.

But then I breathed in deeply, and the air was fresh and clean. Well, maybe not clean, because there was still livestock here, but it was nothing compared to the putrid stench of a horde of zombies.

Kimber and I had been at Nova’s farmhouse with her and Lazlo for nearly a week. The first few days, Kimber and I had done little more than eat as much as we could and rest as much as our nightmares would allow.

But now I was feeling more like myself, and it was time to be useful. Kimber had volunteered to muck the animals with Nova, and I spent the morning helping Lazlo with laundry and the various other house chores.

By the afternoon, though, I was in dire need of a change of pace. It wasn’t that I minded the housework itself as much as I didn’t want any reminders of my time at the

Loths. Even something as simple as sweeping the floor had caused a dark ball of anxiety in my stomach, and I jumped at the sound of Lazlo's footsteps creaking on the floorboards.

"You've been cooped up enough today," Lazlo said, gently taking the broom from me. "It's finally getting warm outside, and Nova said that the wild asparagus should be coming in. Why don't you head out and gather some for supper?"

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“Sure.” I smiled gratefully up at him. “That would be wonderful. Do you know where to look?”

“There’s a stream along the western edge of the farm, and Nova says it’s supposed to grow right along that.” He limped over to a closet and pulled out a basket and gloves, and when he handed them to me, he added, “It’s okay if you don’t find anything, either. Nova has lots of canned and frozen vegetables.”

“Got it,” I said and started toward the door.

“If you get chilly, you can come back and grab a jacket,” Lazlo said. “And there’s no rush. You can take as long as you want, but if you get tired, don’t be afraid to come back empty handed.”

He was looking at me again with guilt and apologies in his eyes. He had found me and gotten me away from the Loth farm, but in his mind, it had not been soon enough. Yes, I would’ve loved it if I had never had to spend a single moment in that godforsaken place, but I didn’t fault him for not knowing where I was.

It didn’t matter how much I told Lazlo that I didn’t blame him, and I was only grateful that Kimber and I were here now. He might not ever forgive himself, and I would have to accept that. I just wished he’d stop treating me like I was a small child or irrevocably broken.

“Lazlo, I got it. I’ll be fine,” I said firmly, but I softened it with a smile. “I’m basically going to be in the side yard. It’s no big deal.”

His expression turned embarrassed, and he nodded. “Right. I know. Sorry. Go have fun. And let me know if you need anything.”

“I will,” I said and headed outside with my basket, feeling a little bit like Little Red Riding Hood.

The wolves added to the vibe. Since Nova was back with the other animals, showing Kimber how to care for them, the wolves were free roaming the yard. They usually spent all their time with Nova, but they would almost certainly eat a chicken or a goat if given the opportunity.

The two majestic animals jogged leisurely through the long grass simply because they could. Frost seemed to like me, occasionally coming over for pets, and he even slept at the foot of the bed I shared with Kimber. Sable kept her distance, though. Kimber had been able to pet her already, but she had a way with animals that I didn’t.

Lazlo had been unnecessarily worried about the weather, since it was a warm, sunny day. Birds were singing, and the breeze brought in the scent of early spring flowers.

The stream was easy enough to find, with the banks overgrown with bright bluebells. Some stalks of asparagus had sprouted out, and I realized belatedly that I wasn’t exactly certain how to tell if they were ripe or not.

While I mulled over the maturity of wild asparagus, I suddenly got the strangest whiff of something putrid, and my heart stopped. Even though it was very faint, it was unmistakably the scent of the Loth farm. Of zombies.

I heard it breathing before I saw it – that awful death rattle – and I turned around slowly. The zombie stood at the top of the embankment, watching me. She was a woman in tattered clothing and her lips chewed off, and she tilted her head, as if studying me.



“They found me,” I whispered in horror, and the basket fell out of my hand. Some of the Loths had survived, and they had used a zombie to track me down. They had found me again, and they were going to drag me back to the ranch. They would never let me escape.

They found me. They found me. They found me.

I should fight, I should run, and I knew it, but all I could do in that moment was stand frozen in place, and then I began to scream.

As soon as I did, the zombie started to howl, and she ran at me.

Finally, my legs could move, and I started running up the embankment, through the grassy field between the forest and the farmhouse. I raced as fast as I could, screaming for help the entire time, and I heard the zombie behind me.

“Harlow!” Lazlo shouted. I could see him running out the front door, but he was still so far away from me.

The wolves moved so fast, like a blur in the grass. They ran the opposite direction, toward me then past me, and Frost growled as he pounced on the zombie.

I just kept running, and I was crying by the time I reached Lazlo. He pulled into his arms, holding me close, and telling me that I was safe now.

“How do you know that?” I asked through my tears. “The Loths found me again!”

“No, no, that wasn’t the Loths,” Lazlo said.

I was about to ask him how he knew that, when I heard Nova shrieking. I finally looked back and saw her sprinting across the yard, running at full speed to where the

wolves had dismembered the zombie.

“No, no, no!” Nova wailed, and she chased the wolves away from the zombie corpse before collapsing beside it. Then she let out an earthshattering, “NO!”

“Is... is Nova crying over the zombie?” I asked Lazlo uncertainly.

“Yeah,” he replied. “That was her sister, Sage.”

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Sage

12 August

While I usually attempt to update my journal immediately after important events, I have delayed in writing because I have been in mourning. Adam – our resident infected with the zabies virus – died in a freak accident.

A violent summer storm had downed a few trees on the property. We had Adam secure in his indoor habitat, but when a tree fell, it broke through a wall, and he was able to get outside before we could clear the debris from the outdoor area of his enclosure.

The morning after the storm, I went to check on him, and I discovered him dead after impaling himself on the splintered trunk of a broken tree. He likely tripped while walking and fell in such a way that the wood severed his spinal cord through his throat and went up into his skull.

His death was likely instantaneous, and I do not believe he suffered in his last moments.

I was just beginning to understand Adam, and I cannot begin to understand this virus until I understand the infected. The loss of Adam has set my research back dramatically, and I don't know when we will find another possible patient. It took months for us to build the relationship we had with Adam.

The world is almost gone, and we are still losing people at an exponential rate. There

simply is not time to deal with a six-month setback, and that is me using a generous timeline.

It was with that in mind that I have taken an aggressive but I believe necessary course of action. I have deliberately infected myself with the lyssavirus genotype-8.

Adam's cadaver is still on our property, because I have been performing an autopsy in hopes of learning more. The most notable part of that is his brain. At 1.2 lbs, it is less than half the size of the average brain of a healthy adult human, both because it appears to have shrunk substantially and because it is filled with so many tiny holes, it has become porous. In addition, the entire organ is a pistachio green in color.

I do not know for certain how long the rabies virus remains viable once the host is dead, and I was concerned that if I waited too long, it would be ineffective.

Yesterday morning, at 8:07 am, on the eleventh of August, I went out to where Adam's cadaver was stored. I used a syringe to take the blood from his arm, and then I injected it in myself.

I did not consult with my sister before doing so, because I knew that she would do everything to prevent me from doing it. I know, because I would do the same if it was her. But this is the only way I can truly understand what is happening inside the infected. This is the only way I can ever actually know what is going through a "zombie" brain.

When I did tell her yesterday, things did not go well. There is no point in divulging a personal argument between my sister and I, but I will say that an argument did take place. After much discussion, Nova finally agreed to help me with the illness. In large part, I know, because she had no other option.

We have fitted the basement with a set of manacles to keep me chained to the wall.

That will be helpful in the early days, when I will likely be at my most violent. We also have the catch all pole, gloves, and muzzle that worked well on Adam, and Nova already knows how to properly use them on an infected human.

As of right now, I am still living in the house with her. That will change at some point, but I am not sure when.

All of yesterday, I felt fine. Anxious, of course, about the impending illness, but physically, I was fine. This morning, I woke up feeling rundown, so it took about twenty-four hours for my symptoms to really begin.

As the day has progressed, I have been feeling worse. Lethargic, weak, too hot, too cold, and nauseated. Most alarmingly, my sister's wolfdogs don't want to be around me anymore. They had previously been very fond of me, but the female one has even begun growling at me.

This afternoon, Nova decided that we should be kept separately so no one is hurt. She put them in their outdoor enclosure, and I had to say goodbye to them. I likely won't see them again, at least not as the Sage I am now.

That was quite difficult, emotionally speaking, both for myself and Nova. I worry that I may not have thought through all that I will say goodbye to. I have been solely focused on trying to understand a virus that I might not ever be able to understand.

Who will I be? Will I still be in there? And if so, will I be able to communicate that to Nova? Or will the interior of "zombie" remain unknowable to the uninfected?

12 August

It's the middle of the night. I was going to wait until I hit the 48 hr mark to update, but I couldn't sleep, and I don't suppose it matters if I wait or not.

My mind is racing, and it's hard to keep track of all my thoughts. I did not do enough planning before this. I thought I had planned so much. I have always been the planner in the family, much more than Nova. She was the impulsive one, and I was the planner.

And yet I did this without enough thought. I think I wouldn't let myself think about it, because I knew I'd talk myself out of it. I have always been obsessed with knowing the most and being the smartest, and it's been driving me mad that I couldn't know this. I couldn't understand this.

Even after all the time I spent with Adam. Watching him. Hanging out with him. In his habitat, giving him food and toys, taking his blood, teaching him to trust us. Even after that I still could not answer the questions I had:

When Adam was infected, did he become a zombie or was he still human? Are zombies humans? Or is it something else? Is it a remashing of all our parts into an entirely new entity? Is the path from uninfected human to infected human closer to that of a human giving birth to a new being made with parts of the host? Or is it more like reincarnation?

“We are made of star-stuff” as Carl Sagan famously said. Are zombies made of us the way we are made of stars?

13 August

I'm still in my room, but Nova has locked the door. I feel like shit today. Everything hurts. It hurts to even right this. I can't stop sweating, and I'm always cold. She opened the window to let the breeze in, because I said I wanted to smell the air, and it's hot out, so I thought maybe the heat would help, but the heat isn't making it in here. It just isn't.

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I know that I was stupid. I know, I know, I know. But I just wanted to know. I had to know. How else could I know what it was like to be a zombie if they couldn't tell me? They couldn't tell me anything. Adam learned to understand words and commands, but he never repeated them. He never said anything other than groans and howls.

It didn't seem like a terrible idea when I did it. I mean, of course it did. But it seemed worthwhile. Madame Boverly died of radiation poisoning. Sometimes people have to give everything, even their whole bodies, to advance science and life for the rest of humankind.

No. Not Madame Bovary. Madame Curie. Marie Curie. Marie.

144 August

My name is Sage Boone, Ph.D. I no I don't have much time left in my head. Itsssss going like a buzzing like thoughts are bees and they buzz

buzz

biuzz

I am looozing myself, and it's worse than I knew. Pain was what scared me before, but that's not the worst.

The worst is saying goodbye to myse;f.

I am sorry, Nova. This was wrong and dumb.

buzzbuzzbvzzz

I miss you, I love you, I'm sorry

dkd

jljdssss

ddjfcc

surrrrrudfy

44

Lazlo

Everyone was inconsolable, and I had no idea what to do.

“There was a pet zombie on the property, and you never told us?” Kimber shouted at me.

She'd come running when Harlow started screaming, and her initial concern turned to anger after I told her what had happened.

“She's not a pet, and it's complicated.” I held my hand palm out, trying to placate Kimber while her eyes blazed. “Can you please take Harlow into the house, and we'll talk about it later?”

“You bet we'll fucking talk,” Kimber snapped, but she immediately softened when



she turned to Harlow, slipping her arm around her shoulder and murmuring words of comfort.

While they went inside, I made my way over to where Nova was still in the field, crying over her sister's body. Frost had really done a number on Sage, and blood and viscera stained the grass all around.

"Nova," I said softly as I approached.

Her back was to me, and she stopped crying long enough to ask, "Can you put the wolfdogs in their enclosure? I know they were only doing what they were supposed to, but I can't be around them right now."

"Yeah, of course," I said. "Do you need anything? Do you want help... with Sage?"

"No. I need to take care of her myself," Nova said flatly.

"I'm sorry. I know how much you cared about her."

More harshly, she said, "I need to be alone for now."

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The best way that I could help Nova was by listening to her, so I nodded and went inside the house. I came in the front door just as Kimber was coming down the stairs, and she scowled at me as she went over to the sink to pour herself a glass of water.

“How is Harlow?” I asked, since Kimber was alone.

“She’s taking a bath. She got some zombie blood on her.” Kimber took a long drink of her water, and then she leaned against the counter and continued to glare at me. “Now will you tell me what the hell is going on with Nova? How did she know so much about the Loths? Was she trading with them? Did you buy a domestic zombie from the fucking Loths?”

“No, no!” I answered quickly. “Nothing like that. Sage was her sister. When she became infected, Nova tried to take care of her, the same way she took care of the sick animals.”

She relaxed a little, but she was still clearly dismayed when she asked, “Why didn’t you tell us about her?”

“Because of everything you’d been through at the ranch,” I rationalized. “Sage is usually locked up, out of sight, so I didn’t think you’d even see her at all. I didn’t want to freak you both out over something that I stupidly believed wouldn’t hurt you.”

“You can’t have secrets like that.” Kimber shook her head vigorously. “Not in the world we live in. It’s too much to try and protect us from everything.”

“I could say that to you,” I countered gently.

Her stance turned defensive, and she lifted her chin slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I see the way you look after Harlow, and honestly, I’ve been wanting to thank you for that,” I said. “I don’t know if she could’ve survived without you. But I am under the impression you’re trying to be strong for her. You both went through hell. It’s okay that neither of you are fully okay right now. I guess all I am trying to say is that I appreciate all that you do for Harlow, and I hope that someday you can trust me to help you the way you help others.”

Kimber lowered her eyes and considered my words. “I can work on that, if you promise you’ll be honest with us from now on.”

“I will,” I promised. “I don’t think I have any more secrets, but I’ll be more open with you both about dangers when they arise.”

“That’s all I really ask.”

“Do you think that Harlow will ever forgive me for not finding you both sooner?”

Kimber smiled sadly at me. “She already has. How were you supposed to know we were kidnapped by a sadistic family and their domestic zombies? That is luckily not a common occurrence, even in our fucked-up world.”

45

Lazlo

For Sage, there was no fire. Nova buried her under a big oak tree in the front yard. I’d offered to lend a hand on the digging, but she insisted on doing it alone, so it wasn’t

until the sun set that she finished.

When she came in, she went straight to the sink to wash her hands, and I was sitting in the living room, pretending to read a book but really waiting for her.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Exhausted.” She finally turned around to face me, and her eyes were red rimmed from tears. “Where are the girls?”

“Harlow and Kimber are up in their room.”

“Hmm.” Nova frowned and glanced up at the stairs. “Do you want to go somewhere and have a drink?”

“Is there a bar down the street that I don’t know about?” I asked.

“No.” She grabbed the jug of blackberry moonshine from on top of the fridge. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

I didn’t really want to deny her, but I was definitely surprised when she headed up the stairs instead of out the door. At the landing at the top, Nova paused to knock on the door of the bedroom now occupied by Harlow and Kimber.

“Yeah?” Kimber said without opening the door.

“Just wanted to let you know that Lazlo and I will be up in the attic,” Nova told her. “So you don’t freak out if you hear us moving around. We’re not zombies or anything.”

After that, she pulled down the attic ladder from the ceiling, and she climbed up

ahead of me. It was a small space in the shape of an a-frame, and it was dusty from disuse. There was a mattress leaning against one wall, and some boxes of holiday decorations in the corner.

The one very cool thing about the attic was a giant round stained-glass window, depicting shooting stars across the night sky.

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Nova flipped down the mattress and patted the spot next to where she sat on it. I joined her, and she took a long swig of the alcohol straight from the bottle.

“So, what do you think?” she asked and passed me the bottle.

“Of the attic?” I shrugged and took a sip of the alcohol. “It’s a decent space, and that window’s fantastic.”

Her smile turned sad and sentimental. “Sage bought that for me as a house warming gift. There was a round window there, but it was all cracked and warped. After I inherited the place, she went out and had that custom made for me. It has four shooting stars – one for me, one for Sage, one for each of our grandmothers who raised us.”

“That was very kind of her,” I said.

“Yeah, she was very kind.” Her face twisted up as she held back tears. “She never... she never would’ve hurt Harlow, you know. If she weren’t infected. Sage never would’ve hurt anybody. And I know it’s better this way. That Sage would’ve rather died than hurt someone, and I hate that it came down to that. That she kept finding a way through the damn fence.”

“Everything you’ve told me about Sage, I know she was a very kind, generous person.” I put my hand gently on Nova’s back. “I am so very sorry about how things turned out.”

“Me, too. But it did, and now it’s over, and I have to think to the future.” She wiped

roughly at her eyes and looked over at me. “So, the attic. If we clean it up, what do you think? Would it work for Harlow and Kimber?”

“Like... for them to stay?” I asked, taken aback.

“Yeah. You sleeping on the couch won’t work long-term, and honestly, I want to get back to my bigger bed so Frost and Sable can sleep in bed again.” Her eyes went faraway at the mention of the dogs, but she shook it off and went on, “I’ve been trying to figure out solutions for the four of us to make it work here.”

“Wait. Are you asking us to move in?” I asked. “Like permanently?”

“I mean, if you want to,” Nova amended. “I won’t force you or anything. But the girls have been through so much, and your knee isn’t great anymore. You can go out and try to find something better, obviously, but it’ll be a lot harder for all of you than it would be if you stayed.”

“All of that is true,” I agreed carefully. “But what about you? Is that what you want? This is still your house, your farm, your life. If you don’t want us here, we can leave once we’re back on our feet, so to speak.”

“Before you showed up, I maybe wasn’t doing that good on my own. I’d been pretending that Sage and the animals were enough for me. But it had been months since I talked to anybody.” She straightened up and very seriously, she asked, “Since we’re officially going to be roommates now, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.” I took a deep breath and readied myself for a difficult or complex question.

“Were you ...” She narrowed her eyes, studying me. “Were you in that band Green Day or something?”

“No. I wish.” I laughed. “But I was in this band called Emeriso.”

She snapped her fingers excitedly. “Yes! That was it! You had that song ‘Earthly Symphony!’” Offkey, she sang a few lines of it with most of the words correct. “That was really popular the year I graduated high school.”

“Yeah, that was a long time ago,” I said with another laugh to hide my embarrassment, and then I took the moonshine and had another drink. “It’s such a silly thing.”

“No, no,” Nova said, then she shrugged. “Well, I mean, yes. It was kinda silly. But you were a legit rock star, back when that meant something. That is both a little silly and very cool. Life’s weird that way.”

“I will agree that life is very, very weird,” I contended.

“You were the singer and guitarist, right?” she asked. “Do you still sing or anything?”

“Nah. Not anymore. It’s seemed so frivolous in light of, you know, everything.” I waved my hand vaguely around to represent the entirety of the zombie-filled world. “I don’t have a guitar, either.”

“Life shouldn’t be only about survival.” Nova put her hand on my leg, warm and comforting, and when she looked over at me, her dark eyes glimmered like onyx. “Humans are one of the only animals on this planet that make art just for the sake of making art. We sing because we like the sound of music. We play because we like to have fun. It’s a precious, special thing, and it’s something that we should never lose.

“The virus has taken so much from us,” she went on. “But we can’t let it take everything. We have to hang onto happiness when we find it, wherever it can be found.”



“I never realized you were such an optimist,” I said.

“I’m definitely not. But I like being happy.” She smiled. “Maybe we’ll find you another guitar. There’s a settlement called Emberwood about four days ride to the west. I go there once or twice a year to trade. I could maybe get my hands on some instruments the next time I go.”

“If you’re up for it, that would be fantastic,” I said. “And we can get another mattress for Harlow or Kimber.”

Nova frowned at that. “Laz, they’re not going to want another bed.”

“What do you mean?”

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“I mean, every time I’ve seen them in my bed, they’re curled up together, and they look at each other like they can hang the moon,” she elaborated. “It may have been a very long time since I’ve been in a relationship, but I know when two people are in love, and those girls are in it deep.”

“Really?” I stared at the wall, replaying all the times I’d seen Harlow and Kimber interact. “I’ve known for a while that Harlow had a crush on Kimber, before we were separated even. But I didn’t realize they were like... together.”

“They might not be. Yet,” Nova clarified.

“Should I do something? Should I say something?” And then I blanched when something occurred to me. “Do I have to give her a sex talk?”

“Maybe?” She shrugged unhelpfully. “Not right now, while they’re still recovering. Maybe not until Harlow tells you that they are actually together. My sister has some old medical books about sex and STDs and what not. Maybe you can drop that on Harlow’s bed one day for some light reading.”

I groaned. “Raising a teenage girl was definitely not something I had considered when I thought about a zombie apocalypse.”

“Life rarely goes the way we expect. Why would the end of the world be any different?”

Harlow

It had taken nearly a month to get it just right, but our attic bedroom was finally finished. Nova and Kimber had travelled to Emberwood to find supplies, and they'd come back with fabric, a roll of wallpaper, and a guitar. The last one was for Lazlo, but the rest was for mine and Kimber's room.

It had truly become a sublime little retreat up here. With Nova's sewing machine, I made bedding and curtains, and I had been able to use some old rags to make a big rug that covered almost the entire floor.

Kimber had made a headboard for us out of scraps of wood from around the farm, and she'd woven a string of white Christmas lights through it, so we could sleep under twinkling lights. It helped both of our night terrors to stay out of the complete dark.

Summer had finally rolled onto the farm. Kimber had taken over a lot of the animal care, and she had gotten especially close to an opossum called Batty. Lazlo and I bounced back and forth between running the house and working in the gardens, where Nova spent the majority of her time. Frost and Sable had finally accepted us all into the pack, and I'd even made friends with some of the other cuddly barnyard animals.

I had started sewing again, making clothes for all four of us and mending other garments and blankets. Nova was on the lookout for angora goats or rabbits, so I could eventually make my own fabric.

Kimber had also picked up the supplies she needed to build a little tattoo gun, and she'd been practicing with it on an old deer hide to make sure it all functioned properly. So it wouldn't be that much longer until I could finally fix the brand on my leg.

With the window wide open, letting in the warm breeze, I sat on our bed with my sketchbook across my lap. Outside, I could hear the sound of farm life – the birds and the animals, Nova talking to the wolfdogs, and faintly, Lazlo singing as he hung the laundry out to dry on the line.

Kimber came up to our attic bedroom after spending the morning outside, and she flopped down on the bed beside me.

“How is your sketching coming?” she asked, smiling up at me.

“I’m almost done.” I tilted the book to show her the design I’d made of a big flower with stars in the petals. “I call it a ‘cosmic cosmo.’ What do you think?”

“It’s really beautiful. You’re so talented, Harlow. I should have you design a tattoo for me someday.”

“I would be happy to do it.” I leaned over and kissed her gently on the mouth. “But then again, I would be happy to do anything for you.”

“I might just take you up on that offer,” she teased, and I set aside my sketchbook so I could curl up with her. “What are you going to do for the rest of your day?”

“I don’t know. Spend time with you and Lazlo and Nova and the animals, and I’ll help you all wherever you need it.”

“So the same thing that you do every day?” she asked.

“That’s the plan,” I admitted with a laugh, until she silenced me with a sweet kiss.