



The Last of Love

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Description: In a world overrun by the undead, survival is everything—until love changes the game.

Lena, a former fire captain turned hardened survivor, must escort Fleur, a brilliant but enigmatic scientist, on a perilous journey to deliver a potential cure.

Tension simmers between them, but so does an undeniable chemistry. As they face relentless zombies, hostile survivors, and their own guarded hearts, their bond deepens in ways neither expected.

With humanity's future—and their own—on the line, can love endure in a world falling apart?

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LENA

Lena stood at the front of the meeting room, arms crossed, as the group debated the dwindling supply situation. They were low on everything: food, medicine, ammunition. The familiar tension hung in the air. Everyone was looking to her for answers, for direction, and she couldn't afford to show any sign of uncertainty. Since the outbreak, Lena had become a leader for her compound. She had to have all the answers. She had to be strong.

Lena was only 35, but the weight of leadership had aged her beyond her years. She carried herself with the kind of authority that came naturally to her; at 5'11", she was tall, imposing, and commanded attention without needing to raise her voice. Her presence alone was enough to make people stop and listen, and when she did speak, her voice had that low, steady tone of someone who had seen too much but refused to be shaken.

Her body told the same story. Even through the worn fabric of her firefighter uniform, her muscles were unmistakable. She had broad shoulders, defined arms, and a strength that seemed almost otherworldly in these bleak times. The uniform itself had become a symbol of her past life, but more than that, it was practical. She could move easily in it, and it reminded everyone of what she had once been. It still carried weight. In a world where symbols mattered as much as survival, Lena's uniform was a reminder of order, of the days when saving lives meant rushing into burning buildings, not fighting off hordes of the undead.

Her hair, a dark sandy blonde, had grown longer in the years since the outbreak. She used to keep it cropped short, practical and no-nonsense, but now? There was no time for vanity or upkeep. The world was different. She had other priorities. Most days, she just swept it up and out of her face, tying it back in a tight, no-frills bun. It didn't matter what she looked like, only that she could get the job done. Efficiency over aesthetics. She never had the luxury of worrying about how she appeared to others.

But even as she walked through the compound, her sharp, stoic features set in their usual expression, people would look at her and feel a surge of reassurance. She exuded strength, the kind of strength that had kept their small community standing for the past three years. She didn't smile much— since there wasn't much to smile about. But Lena was their leader; Lena gave them hope.

Yet, behind the tough exterior, there were moments of doubt, of course. They came rarely, creeping in during the quiet hours when no one was watching. She wondered how long she could keep this up. How long before the weight of it all crushed her? How long before her muscles, her discipline, her sheer willpower weren't enough? But those were thoughts she never let show. She buried them, just like everything else.

Lena's focus remained outward. There was no space for self-pity or fear. That's why she wore the uniform. It's why she hadn't changed it, ignoring how the sleeves were starting to fray and the edges worn soft from constant use. It was more than just a piece of clothing. It was armor. It kept her tied to the woman she had been before the world collapsed, to the ideals of service, duty, and responsibility that had shaped her entire life.

The truth was, Lena had always been the one to step up. For as long as she could remember, she had been told that being a Sorenson meant carrying the weight of others on your shoulders. Public service ran in her blood. Her father had been a fire chief; her mother, a paramedic. She had chosen firefighting, drawn to the thrill and

the danger of saving lives from the brink of disaster, following in the footsteps of her father. She never backed down from a challenge, and she never gave up on people.

But now, people were different. The world was different. Saving lives wasn't about pulling people from burning buildings anymore. It was about survival, about making decisions no one should ever have to make. And the hardest part? Knowing she couldn't save everyone. Not anymore.

As Lena glanced at herself in the reflection of the meeting room door, she barely recognized the woman staring back. The stern set of her jaw, the lines around her eyes, the tight bun of hair that had once been carelessly short. Everything about the way she looked screamed resilience, but there was something else, too: a hardness that hadn't been there before. A weariness. She had become a leader not by choice, but by necessity, and she wore that necessity like another layer of armor.

Lena focused back on the meeting. Tensions were getting higher and higher when suddenly Lena was saved by a knock at the door. Lena glanced up, seeming irritated by the interruption but actually relieved.

"There's someone at the gate." A guard fumbled in. "They say they have some important information."

Lena's brow furrowed. "Do they look healthy? Are they alone?"

"She seems to be normal and alone."

"She? Oh boy. Okay." She exhaled slowly, letting the tension drain from her shoulders before pushing away from the table. "I'll go check her out."

These checks had become routine. She had to be careful about who she let into the compound. Since the outbreak, aside from her role as leader in the community, Lena

had also taken on the responsibility of filtering the desperate from the dangerous. They couldn't afford to make any mistakes. One wrong move, and the entire community could be exposed. One infected newcomer, and they could all be wiped out. The weight of it pressed on her constantly. They needed everyone, every able body, and yet they couldn't trust just anyone.

Three years ago, Lena never would've guessed that this would be her life. She had always been career-focused, following in the footsteps of those in her family before her. Back then, she was living the life she had always imagined. At only 32, she had risen to become a distinguished fire captain in New York. This title demanded respect and carried weight wherever she went. Her life revolved around saving others. She was all too familiar with rushing into burning buildings while everyone else was running out. It was exhilarating, but dangerous.

Of course, that kind of success at such a young age didn't come without its disadvantages. She'd made sacrifices. Friendships faded as she prioritized long hours at the station, endless training, and the constant need to be on call. Family gatherings became rare, distant memories. At least they were understanding. But relationships? Those were nearly impossible to maintain with the demands of the job. But who else could say they had the same level of respect and prestige? It was a price she'd been willing to pay, at least back then.

Her commitment to saving lives was the reason she was trusted so completely, the reason she had been chosen to lead, to take charge. Her bravery in the face of danger had made her a figure of authority, someone people looked to in a crisis. And for a time, that had been enough for her. More than enough.

But this? This wasn't the life she had signed up for.

Now she was more than just a fire captain. She had been thrust into a position of total leadership, one that stretched far beyond the scope of anything she had ever trained

for. She wasn't just coordinating rescue missions or leading her team into burning buildings anymore. She was responsible for the survival of an entire community. Defense. Security. Training civilians on how to fight zombies, something that still felt surreal no matter how many times she said it out loud.

And these endless supply meetings. It felt like everything was crumbling around her, and yet here she was, discussing rations and ammunition stockpiles as if they could plan their way out of an apocalypse. It was too much.

As much as it was an honor to be trusted with the role, this wasn't the responsibility she had ever really wanted. She hadn't signed up to be a leader of one of the last standing communities in a world overrun by the undead. She hadn't planned on making life-or-death decisions on a daily basis, or deciding who to let in and who to turn away at the gates. The constant weight of it all pressed down on her like a physical force, a burden that never left her shoulders.

She missed the simplicity of her old life. There had been danger, sure, but it was a danger she understood. There was structure, predictability in the chaos. She could prepare for it, train for it. This, though? This was chaos without rules. It was survival of the fittest in its rawest form, and she had been thrown into the deep end.

It was so much. Too much, sometimes.

And yet she couldn't let herself buckle under the pressure. People were counting on her. And even when it felt like she was just holding things together with sheer will, she couldn't afford to let that responsibility slip. Not now.

She made her way to the security office, flipping on the intercom as she stared into the grainy black-and-white footage on the camera. Her eyes narrowed at the figure standing at the gate, a person she recognized instantly.

Lena scoffed, rolling her eyes. “You’re telling me you didn’t know who this was?”

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The guard gave a sheepish shrug, clearly confused.

She shook her head. Unbelievable. Of course she knew who it was. How could she not? Even through the grainy footage, the woman's stance was unmistakable. She was bold, confident, completely unbothered by the desolation around her. The world could be burning down, and Fleur would stand there like it was just another Tuesday.

“What brings you here to grace us with your presence?” Lena's voice dripped with sarcasm as she leaned into the mic.

The woman on the other side of the gate, Fleur Harrison, stood there looking impatient. She had the same cold expression Lena had seen in a thousand interviews, right before the world fell apart. Fleur, the brilliant geneticist whose studies in viral genealogy had made her both famous and infamous. A woman with a reputation for being a know-it-all with no time for anyone else's nonsense. A woman whom she thought might one day bring hope to end all of this.

“I desperately need an escort.” Fleur said plainly, her voice crisp and without a hint of emotion. Like this was all a formality.

Lena's lip curled. “And you came here?”

Fleur tilted her head slightly, her gaze unyielding even through the camera lens. “Can't you just let me in already? If you keep me out here any longer, maybe I'll get attacked, and you'll never know what information I have. I'm pretty useful, you know!”

Lena paused, her hand hovering over the button that would release the gate. The last thing she needed was this woman, someone who seemed to treat life-and-death situations as an inconvenience, barging into their camp. But if Fleur had information, real information, it could change everything.

“Fine,” Lena muttered, pressing the button to open the gate.

As the metal groaned and slid open, she stepped out to meet her. Fleur moved with the same confidence in person, and now that Lena could see her up close, she wasn’t surprised. Fleur looked exactly as she had in all the photos and news coverage before everything went to hell: poised, composed, and dressed like the apocalypse couldn’t touch her.

And that irritated Lena to no end.

“Welcome.” Lena said with an irritated and sarcastic tone.

Fleur raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She looked around quickly before locking on to Lena.

Lena crossed her arms, standing firm. “So, what’s this information you have?”

Fleur made a less-than-pleased expression. “We’ll talk once I’m inside. I can’t risk others hearing me.”

Lena rolled her eyes but motioned for Fleur to follow her into the compound. She had no idea what this woman was playing at, but one thing was clear: Fleur was trouble. And as much as Lena hated to admit it, there was something about her that made Lena’s pulse quicken, a fierce pull she couldn’t shake.

Leading Fleur down the narrow hall, Lena clenched her jaw, her mind racing. She

didn't want anyone in the compound overhearing what was about to be said. Not yet. Fleur's arrival had already caused enough disruption, and Lena was determined to keep this conversation private. Her community didn't need false hope. They had been through enough.

She struggled to trust Fleur. The name was too well-known, too attached to promises that, in Lena's eyes, couldn't possibly be real. Could there really be a cure? It was all wishful thinking, a way to keep people clinging to a fantasy while the world fell apart. And hope... hope had no place here anymore. It was a dangerous distraction. Lena had let that go a long time ago. Now, she operated on facts, on what she could see, hear, and feel. Anything else was just a pipe dream.

They reached the meeting room. Lena glanced at Fleur, who hadn't spoken a word during the walk. Fleur's face was unreadable, her eyes cool and calculating. But Lena knew better. People only came here when they were desperate. She opened the door, ushering her in, and closed it firmly behind them, locking it with a quiet click. The sound seemed to echo in the small room, creating an atmosphere thick with tension.

Fleur didn't waste any time. "I need an escort," she said, her voice crisp and to the point.

Lena narrowed her eyes as she leaned against the door, arms crossed. Now that they were alone, something shifted in Fleur. Her stiff, cold exterior started to crack. The aloofness gave way to something Lena recognized all too well. It was desperation. The great Dr. Fleur Harrison, the woman of intellect and renown, suddenly didn't seem as in control as she projected. The fire of urgency was flickering behind her eyes, and Lena could feel it.

"An escort?" Lena's voice came out sharp, skepticism lacing every word. "Who? Why come here? And for what?"

Fleur took a breath, her gaze steady but her posture tense. “I had to leave the lab. It wasn’t safe anymore. I can’t go into all the details. Not yet.”

Lena raised an eyebrow, her distrust deepening. “What makes you think it’s safe here? You think I’m not a threat?”

Fleur’s expression faltered for a split second, then she regained her composure. “Honestly, I’m not sure,” she admitted, her voice softer now. “But I’ve heard of your reputation, and you seemed like the only person who could get the job done.”

“Who knows you’re here?” Lena’s tone was sharp, each question more pointed than the last.

“No one,” Fleur replied, shaking her head quickly. “I told no one, and I snuck out without anyone knowing.”

Lena studied her, weighing every word. She didn’t believe in coincidences, and Fleur showing up on her doorstep felt too convenient, too perfect. “Where exactly do you need to go?”

“I need to get to the research base in Ohio. We need a cure, and I think the information I have could help with that—maybe,” Fleur said. Her voice was steady, but Lena caught the flicker of doubt in her eyes.

Lena let out a short, humorless laugh. “Ohio? I heard that place was just a rumor. Just another wild story to keep people chasing something that doesn’t exist. I know exactly who you are, but this is a huge ask.”

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Fleur's gaze hardened. "I understand that, but I've been in contact with them, and trust me, this could change everything."

"And you're sure no one followed you here? No one knows where you've gone? Trust doesn't come easy in this world," Lena pressed, her irritation rising. The last thing she needed was more attention on her community, especially from people chasing down this supposed cure. If someone found out Fleur was here, it could lead to an avalanche of trouble, and that was something her people couldn't afford. On top of that, Ohio?! It wasn't that far away, but there were places that cars could no longer pass, so they'd have to risk hiking.

"I didn't tell them I was coming here," Fleur said, her voice trembling slightly now, a rare crack in her façade. "I don't want to put anyone in danger. I just... I want to help. I know I can help. And I know you are the person to help me get there. Just trust me." Her voice trailed off, revealing a vulnerability Lena hadn't expected.

Lena's jaw tightened. She couldn't help but be skeptical. She had heard too many stories of people who ventured out in search of something better, something they believed would save them, and never returned. The survival rate for anyone outside the compound was zero to none. She'd seen the look in Fleur's eyes before. She'd seen it in the faces of those who had lost everything but refused to let go of the fantasy that maybe, just maybe, there was something out there that would fix all this.

But she couldn't afford to take unnecessary risks. Not for someone she barely knew. Not for a dream that would likely get them all killed.

"Look," Lena said, her voice low but firm, "I don't know what you think you're

going to find at that base, but I'm not risking my people for a half-baked plan on some kind of fantasy about a cure to save us all."

Fleur's desperation flared again, this time more visibly. "I'm not asking you to risk them. Just me. I can't do this alone."

Lena met her gaze, searching for any hint of deceit, but all she saw was exhaustion and a flicker of something dangerously close to hope, and that was what unsettled her the most.

Lena had her doubts, but she knew one thing for sure: she would have to bring Fleur to Ohio. There was no avoiding it now. Fleur had the knowledge that had the potential to change everything, but the logistics of leaving her community weighed heavily on Lena's mind. Who would she leave in charge? The thought alone brought an uneasy churn to her gut. How could she disappear without anyone realizing she was gone?

Since she was a leader—although she wasn't the only one—she knew her absence would spark rumors, panic even. This community relied on her presence and her strength to hold things together. They needed someone to trust implicitly in her stead, and there was only one person she could think of: Gene.

Gene had been thrust into leadership just like her. He was older, seasoned with the kind of hard-earned wisdom that came from years in the military. A former colonel in the army, a full-blooded American. Though Lena didn't always agree with some of his more hard-lined stances, she couldn't deny his experience. She knew that if he spoke, people would listen without question. That was what she needed to have some peace of mind. Someone to maintain order, someone people trusted as much as they did her.

But still, a knot tightened in her stomach at the thought. Gene had always struck her

as a bit too dismissive, patronizing, almost comfortable in chaos. He seemed to enjoy the control a little too much, but she had no other choice. She knew Fleur was bright and saw potential in her to make a difference.

Lena found Gene. He was sharpening his blade with slow, deliberate strokes. The metallic rasp filled the air, a sound that had become too familiar in this new world. Without wasting time, she brought him to the meeting room that Fleur had been waiting in and told him about the plan.

He looked up with a smirk on his face. "Ohio, huh? Ambitious. But if anyone can pull it off, it's you." Something about his tone made her feel tense.

"You trust him?" Fleur looked at Gene with skepticism, crossing her arms.

Lena turned to face her. "Yes, I do. He's the only one who can take over without causing a panic, and we need someone like that if we're going to leave quietly."

Gene chuckled, his amusement almost irritating in its confidence. "Yeah, don't worry about it. I'll hold down the fort. Keep everything running smooth. You just focus on getting to that lab and getting some answers about this infection. I'm kinda tired of it."

There was something in Gene's tone that didn't sit right with Lena, something too casual about the way he took control, but this wasn't the time for second-guessing. She pushed the feeling aside.

"I'll pack everything we need," Lena said, her voice firm. "We leave at dawn. No one must know my whereabouts unless it's absolutely necessary."

Gene gave a mock salute. "You got it, Captain."

She nodded once, turning on her heel to leave the room. As she walked away, she

couldn't help but feel the tension between them, lingering like a bad taste in the air.

Lena couldn't let it bother her. She had bigger problems. The journey to Ohio was going to be dangerous, and the last thing she needed was distractions. Still, as she gathered her gear and prepared to leave the only home she had known for the last three years, the uneasy feeling in her gut refused to fade.

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FLEUR

Fleur packed her belongings in silence, every move calculated, every breath measured. She couldn't afford to make a sound. The walls in the lab had ears, and the last thing she needed was someone finding out she was leaving.

Today was the day Fleur had to leave. There was no other choice. The leader of the lab, a man who had once seemed like an ally, had revealed his true intentions. His selfish, manipulative plans that made her stomach turn. He didn't care about the people, about ending the virus. He wanted control. Power. The cure was just a tool for him, a way to make himself the new dictator of this broken world.

She couldn't let that happen.

As he outlined his grand vision—how he'd distribute the cure, but only to those who could pay, those who would pledge allegiance to him—Fleur's blood boiled. He talked about restructuring society, how he could rebuild it in his image, and how her work would ensure his dominance. He'd spoken of her role like it was a gift, a reward. He'd guarantee her safety, her comfort. She would never want for anything, he promised. No more worry, no more struggle. A life of privilege, of luxury, while the rest of the world fought for scraps.

But all she could hear was the arrogance, the entitlement. Men like him had always been the problem, using their power to bend the world to their will, to exploit the weak and desperate. Fleur had spent her life fighting against that. Every step of her career had been a battle to make vaccines affordable, to help those who couldn't help themselves. And now, in the face of the worst crisis humanity had ever seen, she was supposed to stand by and watch as this man hoarded the cure like it was his birthright? No. She couldn't be a pawn in his scheme.

This was everything she had spent her life standing against.

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The more he spoke, the more disgusted she became. His plan would guarantee her safety, but at what cost? She would be complicit in his tyranny, another cog in the machine of oppression. He wanted her to believe she would be untouchable, that the world he'd build would ensure her survival and comfort. But Fleur knew the truth: safety bought at the cost of others' suffering wasn't safety at all. It was a prison.

She thought back to all the times she had fought for the underdog, for the people who couldn't afford to fight for themselves. All the long hours in the lab, the battles with corporations who prioritized profits over people. And now, in this new world, it was the same battle all over again. Men still trying to seize power, still trying to control what wasn't theirs to control.

As he droned on about his vision of the future, Fleur had made her decision. She would leave tonight, quietly, without a word. She couldn't risk confronting him; he had too much influence, too many loyal followers. But she had her own plans, and they didn't involve being his puppet. The world didn't need another self-proclaimed ruler. It needed a cure, and it needed to be in the hands of someone who cared about people, not power.

Things had been unstable here for a while now. There was an undercurrent of unease in the community, one she had felt the moment she arrived. She'd grown used to it by now: the distrust, the constant shifting of alliances, the desperate need for survival that brought out both the best and worst in people. Ever since the outbreak, this had been her reality. No community had been able to offer her true safety. She had learned that the hard way, moving from one place to another, always staying just long enough to collect herself before the inevitable collapse forced her to move on.

The lab in New York City had been her last true refuge, but even that had been torn from her when the outbreak began. No more security, no more routine, no more control. Since then, her life had been nothing but a series of near escapes and endless running. Not that it made her any different from the rest of the survivors; none of them had it easy. But while everyone else fought off the undead and scavenged for food, Fleur had been fighting her own war. She'd been chasing the cure, piece by piece, in secret. The hope that kept her going wasn't survival. It was a solution.

In every community, she'd worked quietly, unnoticed, testing, experimenting, gathering the tools she needed. But here? This place was different. Here, she had found something, something real, something that might be the answer to all of this. The breakthrough she had been working toward for what felt like a lifetime.

But with that discovery came a problem. She couldn't trust anyone. Not here, not now. The people in this community didn't know who she was or what she carried with her. If they did, they'd either beg her to stay and save them all, or worse, they'd take the research for themselves and try to use it as leverage. Knowledge like hers had become dangerous. The idea of a cure, something so precious and sought after, could turn people against each other faster than any zombie could.

As Fleur was packing, her thoughts drifted back to the life she'd had before the outbreak, a life that felt like it belonged to someone else now. She had it all. She had an accomplished career and, more importantly, a partner she loved deeply. That thought, though, hit her like a punch to the gut. The memory of her partner, the love they'd shared, was a wound she wasn't ready to reopen. She shook her head, forcing the image away, burying it under layers of focus and determination. She couldn't afford to think about that right now. It was too raw, too distracting.

Instead, she focused on her work. All the work she had left. Before everything collapsed, she had been on the verge of a breakthrough in pathogen research. She was a leader in her field, specializing in viral mutations and vaccine development. Her

goal back then had been ambitious: to make vaccines more affordable, more accessible, so that no one would have to suffer from diseases that could be easily prevented. That mission had felt vital, her life's purpose. But now? None of that seemed to matter.

The only vaccine that meant anything now was the one that would stop this plague, the virus that had decimated the world. Everything else paled in comparison. The entire future of humanity, as bleak as it seemed, might depend on the work she had yet to finish. She was so close to finding the answer, but the risks were enormous, and getting to Ohio was just the first step in a long, treacherous journey.

Fleur's fingers lingered on the zipper of her bag for a moment. She didn't want to leave, not yet, not when she was so close. But if she stayed, it wouldn't be long before someone noticed. She'd kept her head down as long as she could, blending in with the tired, wary faces, working under the radar. But the window was closing. Someone would figure it out. Someone always did.

She pulled the zipper shut, the sound startlingly loud in the quiet room. Leaving immediately was the only choice she had left.

Now she just needed someone to escort her to the research base in Ohio. That base was her last hope, the place where she could safely finish the vaccine. The vaccine she believed could save what was left of humanity. But finding someone she could trust, someone capable of making the journey, wasn't easy. Most people these days were out for themselves, or worse, eager to profit from the chaos.

There was one name that kept coming up: Lena Sorenson. Fleur had heard whispers of her reputation from survivors she had met in different communities. Tall, strong, and unyielding, Lena had been head of the New York Fire Department by the age of 32, a position that spoke volumes about her capabilities. She was a leader of her community in this new world, which meant surviving, making the hard calls, and

protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. It also meant she didn't take shit from anybody. She was made to survive.

Fleur had never met Lena, but she had learned enough to know that she was not like the other leaders she had encountered. Most leaders she'd encountered in this post-apocalyptic mess seemed to be driven by greed or personal gain, but Lena didn't seem that way. The stories about her were consistent. She was firm, fair, and loyal to her community. But even with everything she'd heard, Fleur couldn't be 100% sure she could trust her. Trust was incredibly hard to come by these days. Still, Lena felt like her best shot at getting to Ohio.

It was risky, but risk had become a part of life now. Fleur made the decision quickly, packing only what was necessary. She knew she had to move quietly. If word got out that she was leaving, questions would follow, and she couldn't afford to answer them. Things had been getting dicey in the community lately, tensions rising, and she had learned the hard way not to trust anyone too deeply. Every community she had passed through since the outbreak had its own dark secrets, and this one was no different.

Fleur slipped away in the dead of night, moving carefully, her heart pounding in her chest as she left the safety of the compound. The world outside was treacherous, but she had learned how to navigate it. The zombies were predictable in their own way, and she had studied their patterns enough to avoid their usual haunts. Lena's community wasn't far, and she knew the landscape well enough to stay off the beaten path. Every step was calculated, every movement deliberate. She couldn't afford a mistake.

By the time she reached the perimeter of Lena's compound, the sky was just beginning to lighten with the faintest hint of dawn. She paused, catching her breath, and took a moment to steady herself. Now all she could do was hope Lena was the person she'd heard about. The person who could help her get to Ohio and finish what she'd started.

Fleur hadn't had the luxury of looking or feeling put together in a long time, but first impressions mattered, especially here. She didn't want to look like these past three years had stripped her of her confidence, even though they had. In the brief privacy she could manage, she changed into something cleaner and less worn out by survival. She needed to appear like her old self, cold, calculating, and in control, even if that person felt like a ghost now.

The entrance to the compound was heavily guarded, as she had expected. Fleur approached the gate and pressed the buzzer, trying to keep her impatience in check. She was quickly met by a large, lumbering guard whose expression could only be described as... vacant.

"Uhhh... are you infected?" he asked, his voice slow and uncertain.

Fleur almost laughed at the absurdity of the question, but instead, she scoffed. "If I were infected, do you think I'd be buzzing myself in? Ever met a zombie that can hold a conversation?" She raised an eyebrow, hoping to speed this along.

The guard blinked. He was clearly not the sharpest tool in the shed. "Uhhhm... okay ma'am... one moment."

She clenched her jaw, doing her best to suppress the urge to roll her eyes. This was taking too long. Standing out here, exposed, wasn't part of her plan. Sure, the area seemed clear, but she knew how quickly things could change. Her foot tapped against the ground uncontrollably, nerves starting to get the better of her. Just as she considered pressing the buzzer again, a voice crackled through the intercom. It was strong, firm, with a sarcastic edge.

"What brings you here to grace us with your presence?"

Although Fleur had never heard Lena's voice, she could tell it was hers. Even through

the intercom, her tone carried authority, the kind of confidence that both irritated and intrigued her.

3

LENA

Dawn had finally broken, the faint light cutting through the early morning mist as Lena and Fleur slipped quietly out of the community. It hadn't been home, not really, but it had been a refuge, a place to gather herself and focus. Now, as they left, Lena didn't feel much in the way of nostalgia, though the faces of the people she was leaving behind tugged at her conscience. She could only hope that Gene would keep his word, that he would protect them. It was all out of her hands now.

The first part of their journey had to be done on foot. No cars were kept near the community. Being so close to a military base meant they hadn't needed to venture out often for supplies, a rare stroke of luck in a world where most people were scraping by. They couldn't risk attracting zombies with the noise of a car engine, not until they were far enough away. Once they hit a gas station, Lena would find them a car that looked like it could take them the distance.

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Lena cast a sideways glance at Fleur, wondering if she was up for this. Fleur stood at about 5'7", with a build that suggested she was more than just a brilliant geneticist. Judging by her credentials and all the schooling she must have done, Lena figured Fleur was probably in her early forties. But looking at her now, it was hard to tell. She had that rare kind of agelessness; her face carried a few lines, sure, but her body told a different story. Lean, toned, like someone who had spent years running, not for exercise, but for survival. In this world, endurance was everything. You couldn't get far without being able to run, without having at least some athleticism to fall back on.

As they moved through the overgrown streets, Lena couldn't help but marvel at how quickly nature had reclaimed the land. Trees had burst through the cracks in the pavement, vines crawled up the sides of buildings, and animals roamed freely. It was almost serene, like the earth was healing itself in the absence of human interference. She found herself wondering if the virus had been some kind of cosmic reset, a way for the planet to rid itself of the plague of mankind.

The world had changed, but in some ways, it felt safer now. Sure, there were zombies lurking about who might try and eat you, but at least you didn't have to worry about getting mugged—or worse—like you did before the outbreak. There was something simpler about it. Lena had encountered plenty of zombies over the years, but most of the ones they'd run into lately were slow, shambling things. The fresh ones, the dangerous ones, were rare now. But if you ran into one, you'd know. Their milky eyes gave them away, but by the time you saw those eyes, it was probably already too late.

Even the slower zombies still posed a serious threat. Sure, they shuffled along at a frustratingly slow pace most of the time, but they had sharp olfactory senses that

made up for their lack of speed. They could smell a living person from a distance, and their hearing? That was even more sensitive. But the sensitivity depended on the age of the rotter.

For the newer ones, the moment they caught a whiff of fresh prey or heard the slightest noise, they were relentless, moving with a single-minded fury that didn't stop until they sank their teeth into flesh.

What made them even more dangerous, though, was their tendency to travel in packs. One zombie? Manageable. A group? That was a different story. They flocked together like animals, moving in herds, and once they had you in their sights, it was over. Alone, a zombie could be handled, but in numbers they became a deadly force.

As they walked, Fleur started rambling about pathogens, infections, and blood. Lena could tell it was nerves, but damn, the woman didn't know when to quit. She was droning on about some trial involving a foot-long needle and brain injections when Lena finally cut her off.

"Can we just walk in silence? Don't you worry someone might hear us?"

Fleur shot her a look, clearly annoyed but trying to keep her composure. "Talking helps the time pass," she said. "Doesn't it help you?"

"Nope," Lena replied flatly. "I'd rather focus with silence."

"It's difficult for me to understand how someone in a leadership position could be so cold and bitter," Fleur said, frowning.

"Well, believe it. Everyone has to find their way to survive out here," Lena shot back, eyes scanning the horizon.

Fleur fell silent, pouting in a way that almost made Lena smirk. But at least now she could pay attention to their surroundings. The silence let her listen for anything out of place, any movement in the distance. There couldn't be any distractions. They couldn't afford mistakes.

After another few hours of walking, they reached an abandoned gas station. It looked untouched since the outbreak, which was a good sign. Cars littered the parking lot, and, even better, there were gas pumps. This was exactly what Lena had been hoping for.

"Did you pack any medical supplies?" Fleur asked as they approached the building. "I couldn't bring much with me."

"I've got bandages," Lena replied, keeping her eyes on the cars.

"Bandages? That's it?" Fleur sounded incredulous, as if she'd expected Lena to be carrying a whole trauma kit.

Lena rolled her eyes. "What did you expect? I can't take precious supplies from the community. We've got what we need to get by. Times are hard, in case you hadn't noticed."

Fleur pursed her lips, clearly unimpressed with sarcasm. "Well, there's a medical office right over there," she said, pointing across the street. "I'm going to check if there are any supplies we can take."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Lena said, narrowing her eyes. "Why don't you stay here? I'll handle the car."

"My 'precious, intelligent little behind' is going to get us medical supplies that could save our lives. If one of us so much as scratches ourselves on a rusty nail, we're dead."

So how about you worry about getting us some wheels, Ms. Former Firefighter?" Fleur retorted, arms crossed.

Lena sighed, biting back a retort of her own. The woman had a point, even if her attitude grated on her nerves. "Fine," she said, turning toward the nearest car. "But don't take too long. We need to move fast."

Fleur gave her a curt nod before heading toward the medical office, and Lena watched her for a moment before focusing on the task at hand. They didn't have time for bickering. The sooner they found a car and got out of here, the better.

Lena filled up a few empty cans with gas, surprised there was any left in the tank. This place must've been far enough off the beaten path to keep scavengers away. After loading everything into a reliable-looking Subaru, she decided to walk around back, mostly to pass the time while Fleur was off on her little medical mission.

That's when she saw it.

Blood, splattered across the grass and parking lot, thick and dark, but not yet washed away by rain. It was old, but fresh enough to raise every red flag in Lena's mind. Instantly, she was on high alert.

"Damn stubborn ass had to get medical supplies," Lena muttered, annoyed at how reckless Fleur was being. She had no idea how many zombies were near. Was it one, two, or a whole horde? But she knew one thing: they were likely dormant, just waiting for some noise or a scent to set them off. And what were she and Fleur? Walking, talking stimuli.

Suddenly, she heard a loud crash from inside the building.

Without hesitation, Lena bolted into the medical office. Her heart sank when she saw

Fleur, pale and breathless, struggling to keep a zombie at bay with nothing but an IV pole.

“Why didn’t you call for help?!” Lena snapped, half-angry, half-incredulous.

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“I was handling it,” Fleur shot back, panting, her stubbornness as infuriating as ever.

Was this woman insane? Lena grabbed another IV pole, moving swiftly, and with one heavy swing, knocked the zombie’s rotten, softened head clean off. But before she could catch her breath, there was another crash. It was followed by the unmistakable sound of moaning. Lena’s stomach dropped as it dawned on her: this wasn’t just a medical office for treating patients. It was a place for storing the dead.

And now the dead were waking up.

Lena yanked Fleur behind her. “Stay behind me,” she ordered, her voice sharp.

For once, Fleur didn’t argue. Maybe she was finally starting to understand the gravity of their situation. Lena could feel the fear radiating off her, though Fleur was doing her best to mask it.

Lena tried to stay calm, but inside, she was spiraling. She had no idea how many zombies were coming or how many they’d have to fight off. She swung at each one that approached—WHACK!—decapitating them with brute force. But the more they killed, the more seemed to stagger out from the shadows. Lena was a well-trained fighter, but everyone had a limit.

The further they ventured into the building, the worse it became. The cold autumn air had shielded them from the smell at first, but now the stench of rotting flesh hit them full force. It was suffocating, the kind of smell that could bring someone to their knees. Lena fought back the urge to vomit, running on pure adrenaline.

But Fleur, remarkably, didn't flinch. She barely seemed phased by the smell. Lena couldn't wrap her head around it. Who was this woman? How could she be so calm when everything around them was falling apart?

But Lena couldn't afford to dwell on that, not now. "Let's just get out of here," she grunted, her voice strained. All that mattered was surviving the next few minutes and finding a way out before they were completely overrun. She grabbed Fleur's hand and ran.

Before Fleur could react, Lena snapped into firefighter mode. She was quick, methodical, scanning the surroundings and calculating the best escape route. Her training kicked in, allowing them to slip out of the building before the situation spiraled any further. But they weren't out of danger yet. There were five zombies that stood between them and the car, lingering near the gas station. Lena couldn't afford any mistakes now. One wrong move, and this could be their final trip.

Lena grabbed a bar of metal with a sharp end from the floor, moving swiftly towards the threat. With each swing, a zombie's head hit the pavement with a sickening thud. One, two, three... until all five were decapitated. No hesitation, no wasted motion.

"Get in the car," she barked.

Fleur, still catching her breath, obeyed without protest. Once inside, Lena locked the doors, grateful the keys were already in the ignition. She started the car and they sped off, leaving a staggering trail of zombies behind them. As they drove, Lena couldn't help but wonder if the zombies could track their scent, but she pushed the thought away. They just needed to put enough distance between themselves and the chaos.

After driving for what felt like hours, Lena spotted a secluded cabin. It looked abandoned, likely a vacation home that had been left behind before the outbreak. Isolated enough to offer a safe place for the night.

“Let’s stay here,” Lena said, cutting the engine. “We’ve had enough of a thrill for today.”

Fleur didn’t argue, too shaken to do anything but agree. “Okay.”

The adrenaline still hummed through their veins as they entered the cabin. They had known the risks, but neither of them expected to face a near-death experience so soon. Lena collapsed onto the couch, exhaustion finally catching up with her. Fleur sat beside her, more tentative, her usual confidence shaken.

“If you’d just listened to me, none of this would’ve happened,” Lena said, the frustration seeping through her.

Fleur flinched, guilt flashing across her face. She looked... vulnerable, something Lena hadn’t seen before. Fleur was always the composed one, the brilliant scientist with all the answers, but now? Now she looked human, uncertain.

“You’re right,” Fleur admitted softly, her voice cracking. “I was stupid. I thought medical supplies were a priority, but I should’ve known. I knew it was that kind of office. I should’ve figured there would be zombies.”

Lena wanted to stay angry, but seeing Fleur like this, the regret etched on her face, she couldn’t. She exhaled deeply, letting the tension drain from her shoulders.

“In emergencies, we sometimes miss the obvious,” Lena said, her voice softening. “We make mistakes.”

“Thank you,” Fleur whispered. “Thank you for saving me.”

Lena turned to look at her, taking in Fleur’s appearance. Her dark curls, streaked with grey, were a mess. For the first time, Lena noticed the lines around Fleur’s eyes, the

way exhaustion clung to her. She knew Fleur was older, maybe in her forties, but it struck her just how much the outbreak had aged her. What kind of hardships had she faced? What had she lost? Probably just as much as everybody else.

Their eyes met, and something inside Lena came to life. Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was the relief of surviving, but she felt it, this undeniable pull. And from the way Fleur held her gaze, Lena knew she felt it too.

Without thinking, Lena leaned in, pinning Fleur against the armrest. Fleur didn't waver, didn't pull away. Lena could feel the warmth of Fleur's skin as their arms brushed, sending a shiver down her spine. The softness of Fleur's touch was unexpected, a contrast to the hardened world they lived in. It had been so long since Lena had been this close to anyone, and the sensation stirred something deep within her, a hunger, a vulnerability she wasn't sure she was ready to confront.

Fleur's scent filled the small space between them, a mix of citrus and wood that was both fresh and grounding. It wrapped around Lena like a tether, pulling her in. She couldn't remember the last time she had been close enough to someone to notice these small, intimate details. The familiarity of it was intoxicating, almost overwhelming. Lena's chest tightened as the weight of the moment settled on her.

As she leaned in, her breath soft against Fleur's cheek, her pulse quickened. She could feel their energy pulsating, the underlying current of something more than just proximity. It was magnetic, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Lena wasn't sure if she could resist it. There had been something unspoken in the room when Fleur had told her everything earlier, a tension that neither of them had addressed. Now, that tension was thick, and she was hungry to taste it.

Lena wasn't one to let her guard down easily; she couldn't afford to, especially not in this world. Fleur had gotten under her skin in a way no one had in years, and that terrified Lena more than she wanted to admit. Her gaze dropped to Fleur's lips for

just a moment before flicking back to her eyes, and the intensity there was impossible to deny. Fleur wasn't backing down, wasn't looking away. She was holding Lena's gaze, her own breathing just as unsteady. There was something powerful about that. In the middle of this chaos, in a world where death lurked around every corner, there was still room for something raw and real. Something Lena had long since buried.

And yet, in this fleeting moment, Lena felt it rise to the surface. The desire to reach out, to touch, to let herself feel again. She didn't know if it was wise, didn't know if she could handle whatever this was between them. But the electricity crackling in the air told her that maybe, just maybe, it was worth the risk. The air between them felt electric, and before Lena could stop herself, she kissed her.

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But as quickly as it happened, Lena jerked back. “I’m sorry. I don’t?—”

Before she could finish, Fleur reached up, grabbed the back of Lena’s neck, and kissed her again. This time it was deliberate, hungry. Fleur bit Lena’s lip, and the heat between them grew, their breaths mingling as they lost themselves in the moment. The world outside, the zombies, the danger, all of it faded. Lena’s hands moved with an urgency she hadn’t felt in a long time, pulling Fleur on top of her with a need that bordered on desperation. Their bodies pressed together, and Lena felt an intense, primal connection surge through her. She wanted to lose herself in the kiss, to explore every sensation, every whisper of warmth that Fleur’s body provided. The kiss deepened, becoming more urgent, more animalistic, as though they were trying to merge into one entity.

Fleur’s fingers tangled in Lena’s hair, tugging gently as she moaned softly against Lena’s lips. The sound was like a spark igniting Lena’s desire, fueling her need to explore every inch of Fleur. She trailed kisses along Fleur’s neck, feeling the warmth and softness of her skin under her lips. Each touch elicited a shiver from Fleur, her body responding eagerly to Lena’s touch.

Lena’s hands roamed over Fleur’s back, pulling her closer as if she could sink into her. She could feel Fleur’s heartbeat against her own, a steady rhythm that matched the pounding in her chest. It was a beautiful, intoxicating chaos, a dance of passion that Lena didn’t want to end.

The room seemed to disappear around them, leaving only the two of them wrapped in a cocoon of desire. Lena’s kiss was insistent, demanding, and Fleur responded in kind, her own hands gripping Lena’s shoulders as if she were afraid to let go. The

intimacy of the moment was overwhelming, and Lena's mind raced with the intensity of it all. She had never felt so alive, so raw, so entirely connected to another person. She had forgotten this feeling was possible in a world so broken and fucked up.

Lena's heart was pounding. She knew they were both on the edge of something dangerous, something beautiful and fraught with complications. But right now, in this moment, all she cared about was the sensation of Fleur's body against hers, the taste of her lips.

There was no room for hesitation or second-guessing. Only the need to savor this connection. Lena's hands roamed over Fleur's body, feeling the heat and softness, and she kissed her deeper, harder. Every part of her was consumed by the need to hold on to this feeling, to keep it from slipping away into the chaos of their world.

But as things intensified, reality crashed back into Lena's mind. She pulled away, catching her breath. This was too much, too fast. They were on a mission, and things needed to stay professional.

Lena cleared her throat, standing up awkwardly. "We should get some rest. I'll sleep on the couch, and you can take the bed. I'm sorry—I don't know what came over me."

Her head was spinning, an emotional whirlwind that left her breathless and disoriented. She had to be cold. She had to shut this down and protect her heart and the mission ahead. The kiss had opened a door she wasn't sure she was ready to walk through, exposing a raw, unguarded part of herself that had long been shielded by the harsh realities of their world.

Fleur nodded, her face a mask of composure, as though nothing had just happened. "Oh, okay. Yes that... sounds good. We'll leave at first light. We've got to make up for today's lost time. I'm sorry too. My head is a... mess."

Lena forced a smile, trying to shake the tension that lingered between them. “Agreed. Let’s stay focused.”

As Fleur disappeared into the bedroom, Lena lay back on the old, ripped couch, staring at the ceiling. She’d been through hell and back today, but this... this was something she wasn’t sure how to handle.

4

FLEUR

The kiss lingered in Fleur’s mind like a persistent, seductive whisper. Her mind kept going back to the feeling of Lena’s strong arms pushing against her, the firmness of Lena’s grip igniting something primal within her. The way Lena had stared at her, as if looking straight through to her soul, left Fleur breathless. It wasn’t just physical; there was something between them, something electric that left her body humming. She loved the feeling of Lena’s weight, the strength of her presence, the way their bodies fit together so naturally. Fleur’s thoughts swirled, replaying that kiss over and over. She could still taste Lena on her lips, the intensity of their connection burning like an imprint on her skin. The hunger she felt hadn’t diminished; it had only grown.

She didn’t want their night to end on just that fleeting moment. Nor did she want to think about the daunting journey ahead. After tossing and turning in her sleeping bag in the old rickety bed, she started replaying their kiss over and over, and decided to take matters into her own hands.

Fleur pushed the door open quietly, hoping Lena was still awake. She was relieved to see that Lena hadn’t drifted off yet. Instead, Lena was sitting up on the couch, reading some old book she’d found lying around, her face etched with deep thought. The sight of Lena looking so lost in her own world made Fleur smile.

Fleur tiptoed to the kitchen, her footsteps barely making a sound on the creaky floor. She wasn't sure why, but she found herself yearning for a bit of normalcy, even in this chaotic world. She rifled through the cabinets and finally spotted a dusty bottle of red wine. It wasn't exactly practical in their current situation, but nothing about their world felt practical these days. Sometimes, she thought, you had to cling to the little luxuries just to remind yourself of what life used to be.

She grabbed two glasses, blowing away the dust, their delicate clinking the only sound in the otherwise still cabin, and fished out a corkscrew from a drawer. The old, heavy bottle seemed almost out of place among the rustic surroundings. Fleur paused for a moment, her fingers tracing the label as she contemplated the comfort it might bring.

Lena was still lost in thought as Fleur made her way back to the living room. As she approached Lena, Fleur noticed how her presence startled her.

"Hope I didn't scare you," Fleur teased softly as she stepped closer. "I can't sleep."

Lena looked up, her eyes wide and slightly disoriented, as if she had been jolted out of a trance. The flustered look on Lena's face was almost endearing to Fleur, a stark contrast to the usually cold, business-like demeanor Lena projected.

Fleur sauntered over to the edge of the bed, her smile widening. "You looked like you were a million miles away. Mind if I join you?"

Lena's cheeks flushed slightly as she fumbled for a response. "Uh, sure. I guess."

She quietly set the glasses and the bottle on the coffee table. She took a deep breath and opened the bottle with a practiced twist. The pop of the cork was surprisingly loud in the stillness of the room, making her wince slightly. Fleur eased herself onto the couch beside Lena, trying to suppress a grin.

“I hope you like red. It’s all there was. I mean anything you find these days is a win, right?”

“I suppose so. I’m more of a beer person, but I guess I’d say red wine would have to come in second,” Lena admitted with a hint of playfulness.

Fleur raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. “Good to know. I’m always curious about what people like to drink when they’re not thinking about saving the world or fighting off zombies.”

There was a pause, and a slight tension lingered in the air before Lena asked thoughtfully, “So tell me, what do you miss most about the world before this virus took over?”

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Fleur looked down at her glass, swirling the red wine thoughtfully. “What do I miss? Hm... I haven’t really allowed myself to think of that,” she said, her voice trailing off slightly. “Instead of diving too deeply into it, I’m going to tell you about the food I miss the most. That’s all I can handle to think back to most of the time.”

Lena leaned in with a small, genuine smile. “Alright, then. What’s the one thing you’d crave if you could have anything right now?”

Fleur’s eyes lit up as she responded with a playful grin. “Well, what I really miss is a McDonald’s cheeseburger meal with some large fries and a Diet Coke. Wow, I’d love that right now.”

Lena’s eyebrows shot up in mock astonishment. “McDonald’s? Really? That’s what you miss the most? And Diet Coke? I heard that stuff is terrible for you. Didn’t your fancy studies teach you anything? What about a beautiful steak or a proper home-cooked meal?”

Fleur laughed, the sound bright and carefree. “HEY! I don’t care what they say. That was my guilty pleasure after a long, grueling day. I was never really one for the high life; I just liked indulging in those simple, small joys. Let a girl be!”

Lena shook her head, smiling warmly. “I can relate to that. Sometimes it’s the little things that keep us going.”

Fleur tilted her head with a mischievous glint. “Alright, since you’ve judged my fast-food cravings, I’m expecting something truly spectacular from you. What do you miss the most?”

Lena chuckled softly. “Well, if I’m being honest... I’d say just a really reallyreallygood slice of pizza. The kind with the cheese pull that takes your breath away!”

Fleur’s eyes widened in playful mock surprise. “Pizza? Pizza, really? That’s so New York of you.”

“And McDonald’s is soooo American of you,” Lena shot back with a grin.

They both laughed, the tension from earlier conversations lifting in the air as their banter continued. It almost felt like normality. As if the world around them was back to the old days, pre-virus.

“I’m very curious though,” Fleur said, leaning in. “What made you become a firefighter? Was it your height? Did everyone tell you that you had to do this?”

Lena smirked at the jab. “Actually, I was kind of bred to do something in public services. Both my parents were involved for as long as I can remember.”

“Oh really? What did they do?”

“My father was a fire chief in my hometown, and my mother was a paramedic.”

“Wow. That does sound like you were destined to follow in your father’s footsteps. Was that something you actually wanted to do?” Fleur asked, her curiosity genuine now.

Lena considered the question for a moment, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the arm of the couch. “I don’t really know. I don’t really care. It’s what I’m good at, so I don’t regret it.”

Fleur raised an eyebrow, intrigued by Lena's pragmatic attitude. "That's a positive way to look at it. But did you ever have dreams outside of firefighting? Anything you wished you'd done differently?"

Lena's gaze turned introspective as she pondered the question. "I suppose there were times when I wondered what it would have been like to pursue something else. I was always good at science, math, things like that. But I never really had the chance to explore those interests. Everything was so focused on public service and following in my parents' footsteps."

Fleur tilted her head, reflecting on Lena's words. "It sounds like you were shaped by a strong sense of duty and responsibility. Did you ever feel pressured to live up to that legacy?"

Lena sighed, nodding slowly. "Yes, definitely. There was always this expectation to live up to the family name. It wasn't overtly pushed on me, but it was there, in the background. I think that's why I didn't really question it too much. I just fell into it."

Fleur smiled softly, understanding the weight of inherited expectations. "I can relate to that. My own journey was quite different, but I also had expectations to meet."

Lena's interest was piqued. "Really? How so?"

Fleur took a deep breath, her expression becoming more reflective. "I've been bright from a young age. I had a thirst for knowledge that couldn't be quenched. My parents weren't really involved in my education. They sort of just sent me off to a school for advanced students and left me to navigate it on my own."

"That sounds incredibly difficult. How old were you?" Lena asked, her tone both curious and empathetic.

“I was about 12 years old when they sent me away,” Fleur admitted, her voice tinged with a mix of nostalgia and regret.

“12? That’s insane! I can’t believe they’d do that!” Lena exclaimed, sitting up in shock. “Were you scared? Did you feel abandoned?”

Fleur nodded, her eyes distant. “At the time, it felt like I was being abandoned. I resented them deeply. But now, with everything that’s happened, I see it differently. It was a harsh path, but it shaped me into who I am today. It made me resilient and independent.”

Lena leaned forward, genuinely interested. “So, you’ve made peace with it then?”

Fleur gave a small, wistful smile. “Yes, I have. I’ve learned to appreciate the strength it gave me, even if the process was painful.”

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Lena reached out, her hand brushing against Fleur's. "I'm sorry. It sounds like you've had to be strong through a lot. But maybe that strength is what makes you so capable now."

Fleur didn't want to linger on the heavier parts of their conversation, but her curiosity about Lena remained strong. She shifted in her seat, her gaze thoughtful as she considered how to broach the subject in a way that felt natural.

"So. I can assume you don't have a partner back in your community?" Fleur asked, her voice soft but probing.

Lena shook her head, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her wine glass. "No. Love was never really on the agenda. Not before the outbreak, not after. It felt too risky. What about you? Did you have to leave any lovers behind?"

Fleur hesitated, her gaze dropping as she took a deep breath. "I had a wife."

Lena's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Had? What happened?"

Fleur's expression grew somber, the pain etched into her features. "She... didn't make it."

Lena's eyes softened with sympathy, her hand instinctively reaching out to touch Fleur's arm. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Fleur's gaze remained distant, the memories evidently weighing heavily on her. "It was... a long time ago, now. But it still feels like yesterday sometimes. I thought we

were forever.”

Lena nodded, her own emotions swirling beneath her calm exterior. “I can only imagine how hard that must have been. Losing someone you love, especially in these times...”

Fleur let out a sigh, nostalgia and pain flickering in her eyes. “She was everything to me. My rock, my inspiration. She believed in me when no one else did. Losing her... it was like losing a part of myself.”

Lena’s fingers tightened on Fleur’s arm, offering silent support. “It sounds like she meant the world to you.”

“She did,” Fleur said softly. “And in a way, she still does. I carry her memory with me, even though it sometimes feels like a burden.”

Lena looked down, her voice reflecting her own vulnerability. “I think we all carry pieces of our past with us. It’s part of what makes us who we are.”

Fleur glanced at Lena, sensing the weight in her words. “And what about you, Lena? What’s your story? You said love wasn’t on your agenda. Did you ever want it to be?”

Lena chuckled softly, shaking her head. “I suppose I never really had the chance to explore that side of life. My focus was always on my career, on helping others. I didn’t leave much room for personal connections.”

Fleur studied Lena, her curiosity growing. “Do you ever regret that? Not having time for love?”

Lena’s expression was contemplative. “Sometimes. But I’ve made my peace with it.

There are always trade-offs in life. I chose to dedicate myself to my work, to make a difference in other ways.”

Fleur nodded, understanding the sacrifice all too well. “It sounds like you’ve found fulfillment in your own way. I respect that.”

Fleur’s gaze met Lena’s. “Thank you. It’s been hard to talk about. Sometimes it feels like it’s been an eternity, and other times it feels like a stab to the heart.”

Lena nodded, her own heart aching at the thought of the loss Fleur must have endured. “It must have been incredibly difficult. Losing someone like that... I can’t even imagine. Tell me more about her.”

“Well. She was a bit like you, actually. Pragmatic. A no-nonsense type of woman.”

“She sounds like she was great.”

“Yeah, I think you two would’ve gotten along.”

They shared a quiet moment, the weight of their conversation settling between them.

“Enough about my love life and grief,” Fleur said with a wistful smile. “I’m very curious. Shouldn’t a strong, young, successful woman have a slew of lovers?”

Lena smirked, a chuckle escaping her lips. “I had lovers here and there, but when work is your life, it’s hard to maintain relationships.”

Fleur nodded, understanding all too well. “I get that. Sometimes work can take over everything, leaving little room for personal connections. It was the same with me and my wife. The more I delved into my research, the more it pulled me away from home.”

Lena's gaze softened, recognizing the familiarity in Fleur's words. "It's a double-edged sword, isn't it? You strive to achieve greatness, to make a difference, and yet it often comes at the expense of the people you care about."

Fleur sighed, her eyes distant. "Exactly. I wanted to make vaccines accessible to everyone. But in the process, I lost sight of what mattered most in my personal life. It's a sacrifice I made willingly, but that doesn't mean it was easy."

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Lena looked happy to have someone understand her and Fleur felt the same.

Lena leaned back, her expression contemplative. “It’s a tough balance. Sometimes it feels like no matter how much you give to your work, it’s never quite enough. And in the end, you’re left with the echoes of the sacrifices you made.”

Fleur looked at Lena with a newfound respect. “And yet, here you are, still pushing forward. It’s admirable, really.”

Lena shrugged, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “We all do what we can to make a difference. It’s not always easy, but it’s what keeps us going.”

“Well, at least right now we’ve got each other to rely on. In a world like this, that’s something to hold onto. I’m grateful you’re escorting me. I wouldn’t have pushed if I didn’t believe in it.”

Lena nodded, her smile growing more genuine. “You’re welcome. And absolutely. Here’s to making the most of what we have and finding strength in unexpected places.”

They clinked their glasses in a moment of understanding, each drawing comfort from the connection they were beginning to build. As the night unfolded, their conversation continued.

“So. Gene. That guy is a piece of work,” Fleur muttered, swirling the wine in her glass, flicking out a bit of dirt she’d missed.

Lena raised an eyebrow. “Oh, he’s not that bad once you get to know him. He’s just high-strung, is all.”

Fleur shook her head. “He said some... interesting things to me after you left. It kind of left a bad taste in my mouth.”

Lena leaned in. “What did he say?”

Fleur hesitated for a second before speaking. “He said that humans are now just mindless zombies.”

Lena’s eyes widened. “He said what?”

“That’s not all,” Fleur continued, taking a small sip of her wine. “He also mentioned that if there was a cure, people would be angry at scientists.”

Lena frowned, confusion settling on her face. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would anyone be angry at the people trying to save them?”

“That’s what I said. But now it’s got me wondering,” Fleur admitted, her voice trailing off. There was a seed of doubt in her tone, one that was hard to shake.

Lena placed a hand on Fleur’s arm, reassuring her. “Don’t think about what he says too much. Gene likes to get a rise out of people. Especially people who intimidate him. And a strong, intelligent woman like you? That must scare the hell out of him. Most guys can’t handle it.”

Fleur let out a soft, mirthless laugh. “I’ve met men like him before. They think they’re smarter than everyone else, and they get defensive when they feel threatened, especially by women with something to say.”

“Exactly,” Lena agreed. “Gene’s the type to talk big, but when push comes to shove, he folds. Don’t let him get under your skin.”

Fleur sighed. “I know. I just... I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t have to,” Lena said, her voice soft yet firm. “You just have to trust me.”

“How are you strong enough to trust in this world?” Fleur asked, her voice carrying concern. “When so many people are after power? So many people are willing to step on others to get even just a sliver of it?”

Lena’s gaze grew thoughtful, her expression serious. “If I were to dwell on those fears and suspicions all the time, it would make me a terrible, paranoid leader. You can’t lead effectively if you’re constantly second-guessing everyone around you. True leadership requires a degree of trust, even in a world that’s broken. Without it, you risk becoming a tyrant or losing the support of those you rely on.”

Fleur leaned in slightly, her eyes reflecting a mix of admiration and skepticism. “But isn’t it dangerous? You’re putting yourself out there, exposing a vulnerable side. How do you manage the balance?”

Lena’s lips curved into a small, understanding smile. “It is dangerous. Every leader faces that risk. But trust is also a way of showing strength. It’s a gamble, but it’s a gamble worth taking. If you can’t extend trust, you end up isolating yourself. And in times like these, isolation can be just as dangerous as betrayal. I don’t usually answer this many questions, you know, you’re lucky!”

Fleur couldn’t understand Lena’s trust in others. It felt foreign, almost reckless, to her. Fleur had been burned too many times, each betrayal and loss chipping away at her faith in people. She had learned to rely on herself, to keep her guard up. But watching Lena, with her unwavering belief that people could be better, stirred

something in Fleur. It was as if Lena saw the world through a different lens, one where humanity wasn't doomed to repeat its mistakes.

Lena finished her glass, setting it down with a quiet clink. "I think we should turn in. We need our strength, and we gotta start early tomorrow."

Fleur nodded, a small sigh escaping her. "You're right. Are you sure the couch will be comfortable, though?"

"I've slept on worse for the past three years. This feels like a feather bed compared to what I've been sleeping on," Lena replied with a smirk.

"Okay. Well, suit yourself," Fleur said, though a part of her was tempted to offer Lena her bed instead. She knew better than to complicate things.

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As she wandered back into her room, the quiet between them seemed heavier now, filled with the weight of everything they had shared. After their conversation, Fleur couldn't help but feel closer to Lena.

It was unexpected, this connection she had found. She had opened up to Lena in a way she hadn't allowed herself to in years, and in return, she'd glimpsed a side of Lena she hadn't anticipated. The layers of cold, business-like demeanor peeled back, revealing someone who still trusted others despite all the reasons not to. Fleur admired that, even envied it a little.

Settling into bed, Fleur found her mind wandering to Lena, to their conversations, to the gentle fire between them. She had thought of Lena as distant, hardened by the years of leading and fighting, but now she saw the softness beneath, the optimism, the belief in people. It made her heart stir in a way she hadn't expected.

She didn't want to think about what the future might hold, didn't want to complicate things further. But now, with the silence of the night pressing in, she couldn't help it. Could this, whatever it was between them, be more? Or was it just the circumstances, this apocalyptic world pushing them together? Fleur's thoughts swirled as she drifted off, Lena's presence lingering in her mind long after the room went dark.

5

LENA

It must've been around 5 a.m., the quietest and coldest part of the morning. Lena could feel the weight of time pressing on her shoulders. They needed to move, and

soon. If they didn't reach the mountain path before midday, the journey would become a lot more dangerous. Once they got to the rough terrain, they'd have to leave the car behind, and the idea of hiking through unfamiliar paths in the dark didn't sit well with her.

The night before was still replaying in Lena's head, like a scene she couldn't shake. Fleur had shown her a side she hadn't expected, a side that was vulnerable yet guarded, intelligent but also deeply human. Sexy and addictive. It made Lena curious, more curious than she was comfortable admitting. She liked this new layer she had glimpsed. Beneath Fleur's cool, confident exterior, there was something raw, something quietly simmering beneath the surface. It made Lena feel... something. But despite how much she liked seeing Fleur in this new light, it also left her with more questions than answers. She also needed to protect her heart and feelings.

Why were so many people so desperate to get to Fleur? The way they talked about her, as if she was some key to power or control in this chaotic world, Lena still couldn't make sense of. There was something missing, a piece of the puzzle that Fleur hadn't shared, and Lena could feel it. But pushing for more answers felt wrong.

She didn't want to pester Fleur, especially after last night when they had finally connected on a more personal level. The weight of Fleur's past still hung between them, unspoken and heavy. Lena knew whatever it was that made Fleur such a target had to be dangerous, something that could shift the balance of power in ways she couldn't fully understand. The way Fleur had avoided certain details in their conversations made it clear that she was carrying knowledge too risky to share, at least not yet.

Lena wanted to believe that Fleur had told her as much as she could, but a part of her also couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was more, something vital Fleur was holding back. It wasn't just her curiosity, it was an instinct, the kind of gut feeling she'd relied on to keep her alive all these years. She knew Fleur wasn't being

dishonest, but Lena also knew that sometimes, protecting the truth was a form of survival.

But how long could that wall stand between them? Lena glanced at Fleur, who was quietly preparing for the hike, her face calm but her eyes betraying a hint of the storm that likely raged beneath her composed exterior. She wondered if, when the time came, Fleur would trust her enough to share the full story, to let her in completely.

Lena wandered into the kitchen, grabbing whatever food she could find, a few cans, and stuffing them into her pack. Her mind was already calculating the distance ahead, the potential hazards. Then she moved to wake Fleur.

“Time to?—”

But Fleur was already awake, standing by the door, dressed and ready to go.

“Did you sleep at all?” Lena asked, noticing the faint shadows under her eyes.

“I slept a bit,” Fleur shrugged, her voice nonchalant. “I’ll be fine.”

Lena eyed her for a second, unconvinced but choosing not to press the issue. “Okay. We need to get going. Today we drive to where we can but then leave the car behind and start hiking.”

“Yup. Got it,” Fleur said, her tone light, but Lena could hear the weariness creeping into her words.

“I’ll meet you in the car.”

By 5:30 a.m., they were on the road. The tension in the car was subtle, but the day ahead kept their minds busy. The sun began to rise higher, casting long shadows over

the landscape as they drove. Within half an hour, the soft hum of the tires against the road and the gentle sway of the vehicle lulled Fleur to sleep. The occasional zombie lurked along the roadside. They were too slow to cause a threat. Too weak and too decayed.

Fleur's head leaned against the window, and for the first time in a while, she looked peaceful.

Lena kept her eyes on the road, careful not to disturb Fleur. She needed the rest. The hike ahead would be brutal, and every bit of sleep would help. Lena's thoughts drifted, lingering on the journey that lay ahead. The mountain pass was notoriously treacherous, with its jagged edges, hidden pitfalls, and the constant threat of the infected lurking in the deeper parts of the wilderness.

As the paved road gave way to dirt and gravel, Lena felt the car jolt with each bump. She winced every time the tires hit a pothole, but Fleur slept through it all, her exhaustion deeper than Lena had realized. The car finally came to a stop as the road disappeared entirely, swallowed by the looming forest ahead.

Lena cleared her throat, her voice gentle as she reached over and shook Fleur's shoulder. "We're here."

Fleur stirred, blinking as she stretched. "Already? I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep." She rubbed her eyes and yawned.

"You needed it," Lena said, opening her door. The air outside was cool, crisp, and carried the scent of pine and damp earth. "But we've got to be quiet from here on. This mountain range isn't just tough. It's dangerous. You can fight, can't you? Like really fight?"

"Okay, captain," Fleur teased, her voice still groggy but playful. "I'll be as silent as a

mouse. And yes, I can fight pretty well. You haven't seen my best ability just yet!"

Lena rolled her eyes, though she couldn't hide the small smile that tugged at the corner of her lips. Despite the tension of the mission, Fleur's lightheartedness had a way of softening the edges of her own seriousness. And the danger of their upcoming hike.

They stepped out of the car, and the forest loomed around them, thick with shadows and the rustling sounds of life hidden beneath the canopy. Lena's muscles tensed, her instincts on high alert. She adjusted her pack and glanced over at Fleur, who was already scanning the area, her expression shifting from playful to focused. Lena took out her map, scanned it and looked up.

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“This way,” Lena said, leading the way up the path. Each step felt heavier now, the weight of the journey pressing down on them. The trail was narrow and winding, rocks jutting out in uneven patterns that made the hike more challenging.

As they moved deeper into the wilderness, the light banter between them faded, replaced by the quiet sound of their footsteps and the occasional distant cry of a bird. They continued walking, stepping over logs, hopping over creeks, and carefully watching for anything suspicious when they reached a wall. Lena took out her map again.

“It looks like if we want to get around this wall, we’ll have to take a one-hour detour according to the map,” Lena said, her finger tracing the route.

“A detour? Why don’t we just climb it?” Fleur asked, glancing at the imposing structure in front of them.

“Do you have any experience climbing?”

Fleur shrugged. “I’ve done some climbing in a gym before.”

Lena raised an eyebrow. “I think climbing indoors with a soft cushy mat to fall on is going to be a bit different from climbing a 20-foot outdoor wall. They can be pretty dangerous.”

“We need to save time and energy. I think it will be best,” Fleur insisted.

“No. I think it’ll be best if we just go around,” Lena countered.

Fleur sighed but nodded. “Okay. But I think it’ll be a big waste of time.”

“It’s better safe than sorry.”

“You’re right. Okay, we’ll go around.”

They continued walking, weaving through the dense forest, when suddenly Fleur’s hand shot out, grasping Lena’s arm. Her eyes were wide, her voice low as she whispered, “We’re being followed.”

Lena stiffened, her gaze darting around. How could she have missed it? She had always been sharp in sensing danger, but Fleur had caught it first. Her pulse quickened as the sound of rustling leaves reached her ears, followed by a low growl.

Out of the bushes emerged a wild boar, its tusks sharp and glistening, the animal snorting angrily as it eyed the two women. It was much larger up close, muscles rippling under its fur as it pawed at the ground, preparing to charge.

“Shit,” Lena muttered, her hand instinctively reaching for her weapon.

But before she could act, Fleur tightened her grip on Lena’s arm, stopping her. “No. Don’t. You’ll just agitate it more. Let me handle this,” Fleur said, her voice steady despite the looming threat.

Lena looked at her incredulously. “Handle it? That thing could gore us!”

“I know,” Fleur responded, her eyes never leaving the boar. “Just trust me.”

The boar snorted again, lowering its head. Fleur moved slowly, raising her arms to make herself appear larger, her heart pounding but her mind calm. She grabbed a handful of dirt and leaves from the ground, tossing it toward the boar’s face. The

animal hesitated, blinking as the debris hit its sensitive snout.

She quickly moved, picking up a long branch from the ground and waving it in front of her. The boar, confused and momentarily blinded, backed up a few steps, unsure of what was happening.

“Back away slowly,” Fleur instructed, her voice firm. Lena followed her lead, moving one step at a time as Fleur kept the boar at bay with the branch, waving it to create distance. She used the terrain to her advantage, guiding the animal toward a steep incline, knowing the boar would have difficulty maneuvering the slope.

The boar snorted angrily again but found itself unable to charge as Fleur led it further away, closer to the incline. The moment it realized it was near unstable ground, the animal hesitated, eventually retreating back into the thick brush with a final snort of frustration.

As soon as it was out of sight, Lena let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

“You... you actually did it,” Lena said, still in shock.

Fleur turned to her, breathing heavily but with a small, triumphant smile. “It’s all about outsmarting them. They’re not as smart as they are dangerous.”

Lena blinked, looking at her with newfound admiration. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Fleur shrugged, trying to downplay her bravery, though her heart was still racing. “I’ve learned to deal with different kinds of threats. Not every battle needs to be fought with fists or weapons.”

Lena couldn't help but grin. "I guess I have to admit, that was impressive. I was ready to shoot it."

"And then we'd have to deal with an angry, injured animal. Not a great idea. Plus, you need to save your bullets."

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Lena nodded, her expression serious now. “Thanks. You probably saved us a lot of trouble.”

Fleur met her gaze, her eyes softening as she saw the appreciation in Lena’s eyes. “We’re a team, right?”

Lena smiled, feeling the bond between them deepen. “Yeah. We are.”

They continued walking, the tension from the encounter slowly fading, though Lena couldn’t help but glance over at Fleur with a mix of awe and respect. There was more to her than met the eye, and Lena found herself wanting to discover every layer.

Hours passed, and it was smooth sailing for the most part. The occasional infected rotter to slay. The sun was now sinking low on the horizon, casting a warm, orange glow through the trees. Both Fleur and Lena were feeling the toll of the day’s events, their muscles aching and fatigue setting in after everything they had endured.

“Let’s find a spot to set up camp,” Lena said, her voice tired but steady.

“Sounds great. I need to sit down, and I’m starving,” Fleur replied, rubbing the back of her neck, her stomach growling in agreement. Her mind wandered over the supplies shoved deep down in her rucksack.

They found a secluded area that seemed safe enough, away from the main path and tucked behind a cluster of thick trees. It was quiet, too quiet almost, but they didn’t have many options. As they set up the tent, they avoided lighting a fire. There was no telling who or what might notice the smoke. They didn’t want to attract any dead, or

humans either.

Lena grabbed her can trap out of her main rucksack. It consisted of a piece of rope with cans attached which looped around their camp area, an ideal method to alert them of any intruders.

“Today... wow. You really amazed me. I was worried that you’d slow me down, but you saved us out there,” Lena admitted. She wasn’t used to giving compliments so freely, but it felt deserved.

Fleur smiled, a light blush coloring her cheeks. “Well, I did take plenty of biology courses. And although my focus is humans, animals have always piqued my interest.”

“Yeah, well, aren’t we lucky you had that knowledge. I’d be pretty pissed if a boar killed me after years of surviving in this shit show,” Lena said, giving a small smile.

“It’s not really about luck, though,” Fleur countered, her voice more thoughtful. “It’s about knowing what you’re dealing with. You have knowledge when it comes to surviving and leading people. I have knowledge when it comes to animals and the undead. It’s just applying it when the time comes. Simple!”

“I guess we make a great pair, then,” Lena said, a hint of humor in her voice.

Lena couldn’t help but replay the kiss they had shared the night before, the way it made her feel like the ground had shifted beneath her. The way she yearned for more.

The memory of Fleur’s lips against hers, soft yet commanding, lingered like a fire in her chest. But it wasn’t just the kiss. There was something about the way Fleur had handled the boar, the calm confidence in her movements, the way she had outsmarted the beast with such precision. It was as if Fleur had tapped into some untapped well of strength that Lena hadn’t expected, and it left her completely captivated.

Fleur inched closer to Lena, her breath warm against Lena's skin. Every inch of space between them disappeared, and Lena's pulse quickened. Her attraction for Fleur overpowered any last sliver of caution she had, the pull between them like a force of nature. Lena's body felt like it was on fire despite the evening chill settling in around them.

"Is this okay?" Fleur whispered, her lips hovering just above Lena's.

Lena's throat tightened, her voice barely escaping her lips. "It's great," she breathed, her voice cracking with anticipation. She couldn't hold it back.

Fleur pushed her down gently, her mouth pressing against Lena's with a hunger that sent waves of heat through her. Lena's arms instinctively wrapped around Fleur, pulling her closer, their bodies flush against each other. Fleur's thigh slipped between Lena's legs, and Lena moaned softly at the friction. Their movements were synchronized, natural. Both of them grinding against each other as the desire took over.

Before they could even think, they were ripping each other's clothes off, fingers fumbling and hands exploring every inch of bare skin they could reach. The feel of Fleur's body against hers was electrifying. Lena's breath hitched when Fleur bit her lower lip, sending a thrill through her, and then began kissing and biting her way down Lena's neck and chest. The cool evening air seemed to disappear in the heat they created.

Lena arched her back, desperate for more, her mind swimming in a haze of want. Fleur's mouth was everywhere, tasting, licking, and teasing, as if she wanted to savor every moment. Lena's hands gripped Fleur's back, her nails digging in slightly as Fleur continued her trail down Lena's body.

Fleur kissed Lena's breasts, gently biting her nipples while her hands ran up and

down her body, making her way to the top of her waist. Her lips hovered just above where Lena needed them the most, teasing her with soft kisses. Lena couldn't take it anymore; she was trembling, her need for Fleur so intense it was overwhelming. "I..." Lena gasped, her body aching for Fleur's touch, her voice a quiet plea.

Fleur didn't hesitate, her mouth finally meeting Lena's throbbing clitoris, her tongue moving with slow, deliberate strokes. Lena's head fell back, eyes fluttering shut as her breath came in shallow gasps. Every flick of Fleur's tongue sent a wave of pleasure through her body, and Lena's hips moved instinctively, seeking more. She was lost in the moment, her body completely surrendered to Fleur's touch. Nothing else existed, just the heat between them, the friction, the sheer electricity of it all.

As Fleur's fingers slowly pushed deep inside of her, Lena's world blurred, every sensation amplified. She bit her lip to stifle her moans, her body trembling with each pulse of pleasure, each desperate thrust. The fucking got harder, faster, deeper. But she couldn't be too loud. She couldn't attract attention. She could only move her body in time with the motion of each mind-bending thrust.

Just as Lena felt the intense climatic release building within her, she hoisted Fleur up until their faces were inches apart. Their eyes locked, and in that moment, the world around them faded away. She captured Fleur's lips in a passionate, desperate kiss.

With a surge of energy, Lena shifted their positions, bringing Fleur higher and higher till her thighs were cradling Lena's face. She held Fleur's hips firmly, guiding her movements as they found a rhythm together, bodies intertwining. Lena relished the way Fleur felt against her, the softness of her skin igniting a fire within. Fleur leaned into Lena, pressing closer. They were lost in each other, the outside world forgotten.

As the kiss deepened, Fleur's body responded instinctively, pushing against Lena with a growing urgency. Lena's hands explored the contours of Fleur's back, pulling her in tighter. Lena liked the way Fleur tasted. She liked the feeling of Fleur riding

her face. Fleur couldn't control how much weight she was putting on Lena any longer. She was beginning to suffocate her, but Lena didn't want to stop until she felt Fleur's body shake. Lena's left hand shifted from Fleur's hips and her fingers traced and snaked their way down between Fleur's legs. She teased her, barely putting them inside her.

"I want you to beg for it," Lena said breathlessly.

"Please... I want you to fuck me. Fuck me so hard," Fleur said in between moans. There was a primal quality to Fleur's voice that sent shivers down Lena's spine, awakening a wild, instinctual desire within her. Each word dripped with an enticing allure. Their restraints had come undone.

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Lena thrust her fingers inside. While she drove her fingers in and out, she moved her right hand down her own body. She couldn't help it. She was wet from each sound and movement Fleur made.

"I'm... going to cum," Fleur uttered breathlessly.

With a final, fervent thrust, Lena felt Fleur's body tighten around her, the rush of pleasure crashing over them like a powerful, delicious, crisp wave.

They surrendered to the moment, lost in the ecstasy that enveloped them, their bodies trembling in perfect sync. As they reached ecstasy together, a blissful silence filled the air, the echoes of their shared release lingering like a sweet melody in the stillness.

They both looked up at the tent roof, dripping from condensation. Lena slowly unzipped the tent, shuffling her head out to look up at the sky. "Come join me," she said, making space for Fleur under her arm.

Each twinkling light felt like a whisper of reassurance, a reminder that beauty still existed, even in this broken world. As the exhaustion settled over them like a heavy blanket, they felt their bodies relax, surrendering to the pull of sleep.

6

FLEUR

Still feeling the thrill from the passionate night they'd just had, Fleur woke up a little early. The sun was just barely starting to rise and she decided to make them some

breakfast and do some stretches. The soreness of their hike was worse in the mornings. It took her time to loosen up for the day ahead.

She was used to having to walk or run from community to community, but this was the most walking she had done in quite a while and it was taking a toll on her body. She was hoping that this trip to Ohio wouldn't be for nothing. She didn't want to waste Lena's time or put her needlessly at risk.

While Fleur was lost in thought, Lena quietly snuck up on her and wrapped her arms around Fleur's waist from behind.

"Don't scare me like that!" Fleur huffed, though her fake anger was betrayed by the smile tugging at her lips.

Lena smirked, leaning in closer. "Oh? Should I stop wanting to touch you then? You didn't give me that impression last night," she teased, loosening her grip as if to let go.

Fleur quickly turned, wrapping her arms around Lena's neck, pulling her closer. "That depends," she whispered. "Come on, let's get going."

With a shared smile, they set about packing up their gear and breaking down the tent. Lena bent over the map, scanning the terrain ahead. "If we keep up a steady pace, we should reach Ohio by today. Do you have any idea where the lab might be?"

Fleur tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced toward the horizon. "From what I know, it's near Columbus."

"Columbus," Lena repeated thoughtfully, tracing a path with her finger. "Not far now. Maybe a day or two depending on how fast we move."

“Doesn’t sound too bad.” Fleur shrugged.

“Good, let’s get a move on.”

As they walked, Lena’s curiosity got the better of her. “So, now that we’re getting closer, can you tell me more about this cure information? If you’re okay talking about it.”

Fleur let out a long breath.

“You’ve never really explained what happened,” Lena continued. “Why was it so hard for you to find a proper lab to work in?”

Fleur hesitated. “It’s complicated, really. The research was... sensitive. When the outbreak hit, many labs were more concerned with profits than helping people. I had to make choices I’m not proud of.”

Lena leaned in closer. “What kind of choices?”

“Some of the labs I approached... they were doing unethical things. Testing on unwilling subjects, experimenting without consent. It was like a race for who could get the cure first, no matter the cost.” Fleur's voice trembled slightly.

Lena felt a knot tighten in her stomach. “And you were part of that?”

“I didn’t have a choice. I tried to minimize harm, but—” She shook her head, as if trying to dispel the memories. “I didn’t always succeed. That’s why I was so desperate to get away.”

Lena reached out, brushing her fingers against Fleur’s arm. “You’re not that person anymore. You’re here, trying to make it right.”

Fleur's gaze met hers. "But what if they find me? What if they want me to continue that work, or force me into it? I can't go back to that life."

Lena grabbed her hand. "They won't find you. We'll figure this out together."

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Fleur searched Lena's eyes, a flicker of hope mingling with her fear. "You really believe that? How can anyone be sure of anything?"

"Absolutely, I believe it," Lena replied, determination hardening in her voice. "But you need to be honest with me. I can't protect what I don't understand."

Fleur took a deep breath, the tension in her shoulders easing just slightly. "Okay. Some labs were preying on desperate survivors like us. They'd promise refuge, safety... but it was all a lie."

Lena frowned. "What do you mean?"

Fleur hesitated, then continued, "One lab would actually turn people into zombies just to conduct tests on them. Can you imagine? They'd take someone in, promising to help, and then..."

Lena's eyes widened in horror. "That's fucking awful."

"Exactly," Fleur said, her voice shaking slightly. "And another lab used survivors as bait to see if their cures would work. They'd put people in danger just to see what happened. It was like some gory horror film or fucked-up game."

Lena's heart was racing, but she still wanted to know more. "How could they do that? How could anyone ethically feel okay with that?"

"They were more focused on results than humanity," Fleur replied, anguish in her eyes. "It was a nightmare. They treated them like objects."

“I can’t believe you were forced into that. I can’t imagine.”

Fleur felt a wave of vulnerability as she absorbed Lena's empathy. “I find it hard to talk about. Maybe we can keep walking for a bit and just take in the surroundings.”

“Sure, but I think we have trouble ahead,” Lena whispered as she pointed to a trail on the ground leading to a dead animal which had been freshly killed and devoured by the dead. A tell-tale sign they were close.

Fleur slowly pulled her knife out of her waistband as Lena slid out the metal crowbar she carried in her backpack.

“Let’s hide over here,” Lena whispered, pointing to a stack of huge logs.

They waited as the rustling grew louder from the trees at the other side of the track. Two rotten zombies started to make their way back to the animal remains.

“Shall we take one each?” Fleur asked.

“Good thinking.” Lena nodded. “I’ll go left, you go right. And if you’re using that knife again, the temple spot is the quickest hit.”

“I have actually done this before,” Fleur huffed.

“Sure. Let’s wait for them to start feasting, then I’ll swing lefty while you get the other one.”

They sat and waited for a moment, as the slow, stinking rotters did exactly as predicted. They leant down, feasting on the bloody entrails.

Lena nodded at Fleur. They crept quietly behind them before Lena swung straight

into the head of the left one, who quickly fell to the ground. Fleur pressed the knife straight into the temple of the other, who gargled, groaned and collapsed on top of the animal. A deer, they guessed, from what was left to identify it.

“Good work,” Lena said as she wiped her crowbar on the nearby grass to clean off the sludgy zombie matter.

“It still makes my heart beat a million beats a minute. The adrenaline always gets me.” Fleur sighed.

“That means you're alive, it's a good thing. Staying sharp is imperative in this world. Let's get going in case others are nearby.”

Overall, the trip had been relatively smooth sailing. A lot of the masses of dead were in other parts of the country. They had heard a huge hoard had been led west into a mass pit to contain the outbreak. They wanted to believe it could be true.

“We haven't seen much of other people out here,” Fleur commented as she scouted the views from the path they were trekking.

“And that's a good thing. People don't come out here much. Just crazy people like us,” Lena laughed.

They took a break near a creek, the soothing sound of rushing water wrapping around them like a warm embrace. Fleur closed her eyes for a moment, letting the melody of nature wash over her. While she missed the chaos of the city she had once called home, she found peace in the wilderness. She slipped off one of her boots, wincing slightly as she massaged her foot, trying to ease the pressure of the blisters she had been hiding from Lena.

“Whoa. Are you okay?” Lena's voice cut through her thoughts, concern lacing her

tone as she spotted the dried blood on Fleur's socks.

“Yeah. It's just a little blister. I'm fine,” Fleur replied, attempting to sound nonchalant.

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“Let me see.” Lena moved closer, her brow tensing as she examined Fleur’s foot.

“Okay. It doesn’t look too bad, but we almost died trying to get those medical supplies you thought we needed. Why not use them?” Lena’s voice softened, a hint of frustration mixed with worry.

“I didn’t want you to feel like I was slowing you down.” Fleur glanced away, ashamed.

Lena frowned, her expression shifting to one of empathy. “I would rather you tell me about these things.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Let me grab a Band-Aid and some disinfectant. You don’t want an infection there.”

“Okay.”

Lena returned, gingerly holding up Fleur’s foot like it was something precious. The tenderness in her touch made Fleur’s heart skip a beat. She winced at the sharp sting of the disinfectant on her skin.

“Are you okay?” Lena asked, her voice low and concerned.

“Yes. It just stings a little,” Fleur admitted, trying to mask the discomfort.

Lena dabbed the wound with precision, placing a Band-Aid over the blister with a

gentle touch.

“Thank you,” Fleur said.

“Please don’t keep your pain to yourself. We’re a team now,” Lena said firmly, locking eyes with Fleur.

“You’re right.” Fleur smiled softly, reaching out to brush Lena’s hand. She wanted to say more, but she hesitated, retracting her hand slowly.

“What’s up? You were going to say something, weren’t you?”

“I’m just... fond of you. Very fond.” Fleur was avoiding eye contact, like a nervous schoolgirl admitting her first crush.

“Well, it sounds like you have a crush on me, but you’re only human,” Lena joked, grabbing Fleur’s hand to pull her closer.

“Oh quit being a big joker, I can tell you’re into me, too. Especially after last night...” Fleur bit her lip.

“You would be correct, but I’m not that good at feelings. I’m just good at doings.”

“That’s fair enough.” Fleur shrugged as she moved closer to Lena, and pressed a soft kiss upon her lips.

7

LENA

As the afternoon passed, Lena couldn’t help but feel close to Fleur. She couldn’t help

but think about the words she had said. A crush? A feeling? Was it all too much to feel for someone, when life could be taken away so quickly?

She buried her thoughts and focused on the journey ahead.

“I think we should try to look for a car again if the coast looks clear,” Lena insisted, her eyes scanning the horizon for any signs of danger.

“As long as we’re not jumping into a car while being chased by a horde of zombies, I’m okay with it,” Fleur replied, a teasing glint in her eyes that momentarily lightened the heavy atmosphere.

“Well, maybe try not to venture into any doctors’ offices this time,” Lena shot back with a playful grin.

“Deal.”

Eventually the path led to a road, and the road led to an old gas station. But it didn’t take long to see there were no signs of cars, fuel or much left at all.

“Well, I guess we’ll just be walking for a while longer,” Lena sighed, a hint of frustration creeping into her voice. She surveyed the barren lot, the remnants of a once-bustling place now eerily quiet. The sun beat down on them, and the weight of their situation felt heavier than ever.

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Fleur placed a reassuring hand on Lena's shoulder, grounding her. "We've come this far. We'll keep moving, just like we always do," she said, her voice steady. That's when Lena noticed something.

It was a human, a woman. She seemed normal. But something about her made Lena feel uneasy.

"Hey. Is that a person over there?" Fleur squinted into the distance, her voice tinged with suspicion.

"I think so. We should try to avoid her," Lena replied cautiously, scanning the treeline. "People can be just as harmful as the dead, if not worse."

"What if she can point us towards the lab?" Fleur's mind was already racing through possibilities.

"You want to trust a stranger? She might also be ready to ambush us and take us for all we have. Or kill us!" Lena shot her a skeptical glance.

"She's alone. And she doesn't seem to be turned." Fleur was insistent, her gut telling her something different.

Lena sighed. "If you insist, but I'd say avoid her and keep moving."

The woman was waving at them now, but something felt off. They walked toward her cautiously, only to hear the unmistakable sound of a gun loading behind them. They were surrounded.

“Fuck. I fucking knew it,” Lena muttered under her breath, eyes narrowing.

“Maybe they can be reasoned with,” Fleur offered, though her voice wavered.

“We better hope so.” Lena gritted her teeth, sizing up the situation.

There were two men flanking them, each wielding knives, while the one with the gun, clearly their leader, stood ahead. His presence was intimidating, but Lena’s trained eyes quickly assessed him. He hadn’t eaten well in a long time, and the same could be said for his companions. They looked like the type who’d been cast out of whatever community they once belonged to, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what would have gotten them exiled.

The leader sneered. “We haven’t seen any people around here in quite a while. Especially not two ladies. What brings you out here? It’s not that safe around here. Not for folk who don’t belong.”

Lena’s breath quickened as she waited to see if they recognized Fleur. But it seemed they didn’t, and she let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“We’re looking for her brother who lives in Ohio. We’re heading that way on and won’t be any trouble,” Fleur lied smoothly, her voice filled with feigned confidence.

The leader wasn’t convinced. “So three years after the outbreak, now you’re looking for your brother? Some sister you are. Sounds like bullshit to me,” he spat, his eyes narrowing in disdain. His accent was slightly southern, with a twang that was unfamiliar.

Lena had no patience for games. “What do you want from us?” she asked, her tone firm and irritated.

The leader's smirk widened as he sized them both up. "Well, we haven't had meat in quite some time," he said, his eyes dark and hungry. "Looks like we might just get lucky today. You look like you got a bit of meat on your bones," he laughed, showing off a gummy smile with blackened roots.

Lena had heard rumors about cannibals, groups who, in their desperation, turned to the unthinkable. But she didn't want to believe it was true. She tensed up, disgust coursing through her, but then felt Fleur's hand gently grip hers. Fleur looked up at her, silently telling her not to do anything rash.

Fleur, ever the diplomat, tried to reason with them. "Look, meat's been scarce for everyone. But we've got a couple of cans of tuna. That should be enough to let us go on our way, right?"

Lena was silently hoping they could avoid violence, but her thoughts kept circling back to the horror of it all. These people weren't zombies. They were human, people who had chosen to descend into madness. And somehow, that made them worse. At least zombies had no choice.

The leader's eyes flicked between them. "Tuna, huh? Doesn't sound like enough. How about this: you let me keep this one," he said, nodding toward Fleur, his smirk widening. "Then we'll call it even."

Lena's blood boiled. "I don't fucking thi—" she began, but Fleur cut her off with a quick, surprising retort.

"You want me? But she's so much bigger!" Fleur said, her voice incredulous, trying to buy them time.

The leader came closer, edging his way into her personal space. Fleur gave Lena the side eye. A quiet message to take them on.

“Now,” Fleur whispered.

Lena’s training kicked in. She swung her leg up, connecting with the leader’s arm, sending the gun flying out of his grip. It hit the ground with a deafening bang, a stray bullet grazing Lena’s arm. Ignoring the pain, she tackled him to the ground as Fleur lunged for the gun.

“Shoot them!” Lena yelled as she wrestled the leader.

The two knife-wielding men charged at Fleur, but without hesitation, BANG BANG BANG BANG! Fleur squeezed the trigger and the bullets whooshed through the air.

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Lena delivered a brutal headbutt to the leader, knocking him out cold. “Did you get them?” she called, breathless, as she tied the leader’s hands behind his back.

“Yeah, I think so,” Fleur replied, still holding the gun, her hands shaking slightly.

Lena checked the bodies. The men were dead. The woman who had been waving at them earlier was fleeing into the distance. Without a second thought, Lena grabbed the gun and took aim. She fired, the shot hitting the woman in the leg. The woman collapsed, screaming in agony. The noise was too much; the dead would be approaching any minute now. They had to move, fast.

“What should we do with him?” Fleur asked, her voice quiet but steady, her eyes fixed on the bound leader.

Lena glanced at him, her mind racing through their options.

“Leave him to the dead. He won’t last long out here,” Lena huffed as she grabbed her weapons and placed them in her rucksack.

“Come on,” Fleur said softly, taking Lena’s hand in hers. “Let’s get out of here before more show up.”

Lena squeezed her hand in response, and together they walked away, leaving the carnage behind them.

As they continued walking, the thick canopy of trees behind them slowly gave way to the jagged outlines of a city. Broken buildings loomed like skeletons, their windows

shattered, empty shells of a thriving hub. The air was filled with an eerie silence. There was no movement, no sound of life or death, just the occasional gust of wind.

They made their way cautiously into the ruined city, through the empty streets, their eyes scanning the surroundings, alert to any dead hiding in the shadows.

"Let's get higher up and see what we're dealing with. I'm sure we're close, but the city could be a dangerous zone," Lena suggested, nodding toward a tall building nearby. Fleur agreed, and they quietly made their way up the building's stairwell, the sound of their boots against the concrete the only noise in the cold, hollow space.

When they finally reached the rooftop, the city stretched out below them, a sea of crumbling ruins and forgotten streets. Certain areas were strewn with zombies roaming around looking for something to eat. Lena stood at the edge, looking down at the world below. It had been a while since she'd seen a big city like this, and the deterioration was quite unsettling. But, at the same time, nature had started to emerge, too. The city had been left to grow wild. The destruction by humans had come to a halt, and the dead had taken over in their wild habitat.

"It's strange," Lena said softly, her voice breaking the silence. "I used to look at cities like this and think of everything they had to offer, the people, stories, lives. Now, it's just..." She trailed off, the weight of the emptiness heavy in the air.

Fleur's eyes remained on the horizon. "We've survived this long. There's something to be said for that."

Lena looked at her and saw the sunset reflected in Fleur's eyes.

"I'm just... relieved we are here," Lena admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. She took a deep breath. She felt more than that, but letting her emotional guard down sometimes felt like too much of a risk.

Fleur's eyes softened as she looked at Lena. There was a vulnerability there, a silent understanding that she liked. Without a word, she stepped closer, her hand brushing lightly against Lena's arm. The touch was so simple, but the energy that transpired felt so intense.

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, everything else seemed to fade away. The chill in the air, the ruins of the city, the danger that surrounded them. It all disappeared.

A short moment passed and Fleur leaned in, kissing Lena softly. Pressing her body into her for a tight hug.

"Let's stay here a little longer. It's starting to get dark, so it's good we have a safe spot," Lena whispered, her voice barely audible against the wind.

Fleur nodded, her eyes still locked with Lena's. "Okay. I am exhausted, and we need to stay sharp."

Lena took her hand and led them inside the building, an old office block which seemed almost untouched. They found a quiet corner by a desk and set up an area with the blankets out of their bags.

"Come lay down with me, let's stay warm and close," Lena whispered.

Lena's hands rested on Fleur's hips, her fingers firm but gentle. For a moment, they both stilled, savoring the heat of their bodies close together.

Fleur kissed Lena and began to move her hands slowly over her body.

"I really like you," Fleur whispered.

"And I like you too. So much. It scares me though, feeling this way in this fucked-up

world.”

“It scares me too. But I can’t help how I feel,” Fleur replied quietly.

After a moment, Lena sighed, the weight of reality creeping in. “We should sleep,” she murmured. “We need our strength.”

Fleur nodded, offering one last gentle kiss before curling up beside her. The wind thrashed against the building, but somehow they drifted into the deepest sleep.

8

FLEUR

Fleur woke to the first light of dawn creeping in through the dusty office blinds, her body still curled against Lena's. For a moment, the warmth and stillness of their bodies lingered, but reality quickly set in.

Today's the day.

She carefully disentangled herself from Lena, her mind already racing. They would finally make it to the lab. After all the running, the close calls, and the uncertainty, the moment had arrived. This was her chance to finish what she'd started, to find the cure. Save humanity. Or whatever was left of it.

Fleur glanced at Lena, still asleep, and felt the weight of what lay ahead. She knew everything could change today. And she knew she still had to tell Lena the full story. She couldn't hide it from her anymore.

Fleur shifted carefully, trying not to wake Lena as she sat up. The world had fallen silent, but Fleur's thoughts were anything but.

Lena stirred beside her, her dark eyes fluttering open. She glanced at Fleur, a slight smile tugging at her lips, recalling the closeness they had shared just hours before. But that smile quickly faded as she sensed Fleur's tension.

"We need to get moving soon," Lena murmured, her voice still soft from sleep. "The

lab isn't far now. We've nearly made it."

Fleur nodded but couldn't meet Lena's eyes. Her heart pounded in her chest, and the words she had been holding back for so long were rising, too heavy to keep inside any longer. As Lena stretched and packed their belongings, Fleur's mind spun with the weight of what she had to say.

"You're right," Fleur finally said, breaking the silence as they prepared to leave. Her voice was tight, betraying her inner turmoil. "But before we get there, there's something else you need to know. And please just hear me out."

Lena froze mid-step, her gaze sharpening as she turned toward Fleur. "What is it? You'd better not be playing with me," she warned, the ease of their earlier moments quickly replaced by worry.

Fleur swallowed hard, her hands trembling slightly as she took a breath. "I haven't told you everything. The research I was doing... It's not just about finding a cure. It's more than that. I wanted to tell you before, but we got into trouble and one thing led to another."

Lena stepped closer, frowning. "What do you mean? Just tell me."

"The scientists I worked with... they didn't want to save everyone. They wanted to take complete control of the cure. Only those loyal to them, the people they saw as valuable, would have access to it. They were planning to use it as leverage, to decide who was worth saving and who wasn't. They want to create a new world where they have control, and the cure can only be given to those who bring them value. People with highly trained skills. People in power from the old world. The others...well... they are nothing to them. They want to destroy the small communities. They want to destroy everything and dictate the new world."

Lena stared at her in disbelief, her jaw tightening. “So they want to rebuild the world, but only for the powerful? The rest of us are just... collateral?”

“Exactly,” Fleur whispered, her voice laced with bitterness. “It’s all about control. If you didn’t play by their rules, you were left to die. It’s how they see survival—an opportunity to reshape the world in their image. A sick image.”

Lena paced a few steps away, running her hands through her hair as she tried to process everything. “But you worked with these people. You said you were trying to find the cure and do something good.”

“I was!” Fleur’s voice cracked as she interrupted. “At first, I didn’t realize what they were planning. We were all focused on stopping the virus. But as the world fell apart, their true intentions came out. They didn’t care about saving humanity. They cared about who would be left to rule. By the time I understood, I was in too deep. I was tangled in it all.”

Lena’s eyes narrowed, anger flashing in her expression. “And that’s why they’re hunting you? Because you walked away from their twisted plan?”

Fleur nodded, her throat tightening. “I took everything with me. The data, the formulas, everything they need to finish the cure. I couldn’t let them use it to control people. That’s why they’ll stop at nothing to find me. They don’t just want the cure. They want to make sure no one else can use it.”

Lena exhaled sharply, the weight of Fleur’s confession sinking in. She stepped closer, her voice softer but no less determined. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Fleur looked down, guilt shadowing her features. “Because once you knew, you’d be a target too. And I didn’t want to drag you any deeper into this than you already are. I didn’t want you to think I was one of them.”

Lena's gaze hardened, but there was a fierceness in her eyes now. "I'm already in this, Fleur. We're in this together. And if we're going to make it, you have to be honest. I said this before. I wish you had just told me."

Fleur nodded. "Then there's one more thing you should know. This lab we're going to... it's the last chance I have to complete the cure. If we don't succeed here, the people after us will win. And if they do... they'll use the cure to rebuild a world no one should live in. They will get to me, they will keep me tied up, and they will force it out of me."

Lena clenched her fists. "Then we have to stop them. No matter what it takes."

They both stood in silence for a moment, the enormity of the task ahead looming over them.

As they descended from the building and made their way through the empty streets, they remained silent. The closer they got to the lab, the more dangerous the path felt. Every corner, every alley, felt like a potential trap. The city's eerie silence was oppressive, making them hyper aware of their surroundings.

"Up ahead. We've got a gang of lurkers," Lena whispered.

"I swear you use a million different names for those guys. You could just say zombie, y'know?" Fleur replied with a sarcastic smile.

“And what’s the fun in that?”

“Fair enough. Shall we take cover in here and wait for them to pass?” Fleur pointed over to a broken shop window.

“It’s too risky. We need to create a distraction and sneak past. I think these buildings are likely full of them.” Lena started to look around the floor as she spoke. She picked up some old bottles and passed one to Fleur. “When I count to three, throw one of these over to the left. Let them investigate it and we’ll sneak past down the right track.”

“Okay. Ready when you are.”

Lena took aim with her bottle, gripping the neck firmly in her hand.

“One... two... three,” she whispered the numbers before launching the glass bottles over towards the dead, who immediately stumbled over.

“Now we have to run, as quietly as possible,” Lena ordered and pointed over to the right alleyway.

The pair sneaked past the threatening creatures, who were searching around the broken glass, unaware of the two women.

Until Fleur sneezed.

The group turned around and started to head in their direction.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” Fleur mumbled as she saw them heading their way.

“Just fucking run, NOW,” Lena replied.

They ran as quickly as possible down the narrow alley. Luckily, it was clear. The zombies seemed to trail off and had lost track of their scent and sound.

That’s when they spotted a man walking toward them from the far end of the street. His presence immediately raised alarm bells. His clothes were too clean, his posture too relaxed for someone living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Lena tensed immediately, her muscles coiling with readiness as her hand instinctively gripped her weapon. She had limited bullets, but this might be the time they were needed the most.

Every fiber of her being screamed that this could be another trap, another person with intentions far darker than they let on. “Fleur, stay close,” she muttered, her voice low and sharp. There was no room for complacency, not after what they had survived.

Fleur didn’t need to be told twice. She shifted slightly behind Lena, her own instincts flaring. Their near-death experience still haunted her, making her cautious of every potential threat. The man's calm demeanor and clean clothes screamed deception.

The man raised his hands in a gesture of peace as he approached. “I’m not here to cause trouble,” he called out, his voice calm and measured. “I’m from the lab.”

Both Fleur and Lena exchanged skeptical glances, but they didn’t lower their guard.

“I can prove it,” the man added, pulling out a laminated badge from his coat. The logo of the lab they were heading to was emblazoned on it, and his name, Dr. Ryan Walt, was printed beneath.

Lena scrutinized the badge, then the man. “Why are you out here?” she asked, her voice hard. “And how did you know we were coming?”

Dr. Walt smiled, an easy, almost rehearsed expression. “We’ve been monitoring the area. We knew someone with valuable research was on the way, and I’ve been sent to make sure you get to the lab safely. The path you’re on is dangerous. There are traps, the undead, and who knows what else. You wouldn’t make it without me.”

Fleur hesitated, feeling a strange mix of relief and suspicion. Lena, however, wasn’t convinced so easily. “And why should we trust you?”

Walt spread his arms, his demeanor confident but non-threatening. “Because I’m your only way in. The people after you... they’ve made it hard to get close to the lab. But I can navigate the traps, and I know the safe routes. Trust me, if you don’t come with me, you will die.”

Lena and Fleur exchanged glances, the weight of uncertainty hanging heavily between them. They stepped back slightly, keeping their weapons at the ready as they debated their next move.

“What if he’s lying?” Fleur whispered, her voice barely above a murmur. “What if he’s just a pawn for the lab, sent to lead us into a trap?”

Lena nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. “We can’t risk it. We’ve come too far to let someone put us in danger again. We could always knock him out and take his badge. That way, we’d have some leverage.”

Fleur considered this, her eyes narrowing as she weighed the option. “But what if he really is telling the truth? If we knock him out, we lose any chance of getting to the lab safely. And we need his knowledge.”

Lena sighed, frustration simmering beneath the surface. “I know. But how can we be sure? We can’t afford to make the wrong choice again.”

Fleur's gaze shifted to Dr. Walt, who was watching them patiently, though a hint of anxiety flickered across his face. “We should ask him more questions. See if he knows things only someone from the lab would know. If he slips up, we’ll know what to do.”

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Lena considered this and nodded slowly. “Alright, but let’s keep our guard up. We can’t let him think we’re completely buying into this. But I also do not want to get killed by crazy scientists who want to take over the world.”

They turned back to Dr. Walt, who seemed to sense the shift in their demeanor. Lena studied him for a long moment, trying to read the truth in his eyes. Finally, she gave a slow nod. “Alright. Lead the way.”

Dr. Walt’s expression brightened slightly, but Lena could still see the tension in his shoulders as he started to move. Fleur remained close to Lena, both women on high alert as they followed the man through the abandoned streets, ready to react at a moment’s notice.

“Come on, we need to head through here.” He pointed to the next street along.

“I thought there would be more dead here,” Lena said, as her eyes scanned everywhere around them.

“We set up deep pits a while ago, just outside the city. We still get a few wandering around, but most of them get lured away. They fall into the pits and then we set them on fire. It sounds awful, but it’s wiped out thousands, maybe even millions.”

As they followed Dr. Walt through the winding streets, he began to share more information about the lab, building more trust. He described the security measures in place, the researchers they would meet, and how critical Fleur’s data would be for the final steps of the cure.

Lena and Fleur exchanged skeptical glances, their weapons still at the ready. Before they could voice their thoughts, Dr. Walt spoke up, his tone friendly but tinged with fatigue. “Listen, I need to stop for a moment. I’m tired, and my leg is starting to hurt from all this walking.”

Lena raised an eyebrow but gestured for him to halt. They hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and Fleur felt a pang of hunger. “Fine, we’ll take a quick break. But let’s get somewhere safer than out in the open,” she said, lowering her weapon but remaining vigilant.

Dr. Walt pointed over to an apartment block with some stairs on the side alley. “Let’s head up there. There’s a few empty apartments that we’ve scouted through recently.”

“Sure, lead the way,” Lena replied.

After an easy climb up the side stairs, they entered a large apartment, which had all the comforts of the old world, just a little broken and moldy. A big old couch. A large television. Newspapers and takeout boxes. Empty bottles of Coca-Cola.

They sat down on the floor space around the couch. Fleur rummaged through her pack for the meager snacks they had. Dr. Walt reached into his bag and pulled out a small, carefully wrapped bundle. “I saved this just in case these are my last moments out here,” he said.

He unwrapped the bundle to reveal some dried fruits and jerky, and they passed it around, grateful for the small nourishment.

“I’ve been with the lab since the early days,” Dr. Walt said, his voice steady and sincere. “We’ve seen some terrible things, but we’re committed to making sure the cure is used for the right reasons. We know what’s been going on, Fleur. We know you can help us make the world a better place, not like those evil dictators back

where you came from.”

Fleur nodded, her heart tightening as she listened. “I hope so, I really do.”

Dr. Walt's gaze softened. “It’s brutal out here,” he replied quietly. “But it also drives me. I want to save the world, to make sure that those who have suffered don’t have to do so in vain. We need to ensure the cure reaches those who truly need it, not just the powerful.”

“I’m glad we’re all getting along, but I’m really eager to get going. Let’s finish up this food and go,” Lena commanded, still feeling too anxious to trust this new person.

Soon they were on the street heading out from the central city zone. The familiar landmarks they had expected to see near the lab didn’t appear, and Lena’s expression hardened again. “We should be there by now,” she said, her voice edged with suspicion. “Why does it feel like we’re going in circles?”

Walt’s smile didn’t waver, but his eyes flickered with something darker. “We’re almost there. Just a little further,” he reassured them. Fleur was determined to trust in this moment, to believe in their shared goal.

“It’s hard to believe we’re finally getting close,” Fleur said, glancing at Lena, who was walking beside her with a pensive expression.

“Yeah,” Lena replied, a flicker of determination in her eyes. “It’s just... after everything, I can’t shake the feeling that something’s off. I don’t trust it when things seem too good to be true. Not in this world.”

Fleur nodded, her mind racing. “I understand. But we’ve come this far. We can’t turn back now, not when we’re so close to finding the cure.”

Just as the weight of their conversation settled, a sudden, sharp cry of pain pierced the air. Fleur's heart dropped when she saw Lena stumble, a startled expression crossing her face. "Lena!" Fleur called out, rushing forward as Lena crumpled to the ground.

"Fleur..." Lena gasped, her eyes wide with confusion and alarm. "Something's wrong..."

Before Fleur could reach her, Lena's body went slack, and she collapsed, her eyes rolling back. Panic surged through Fleur as she knelt beside her, frantically checking for signs of consciousness. "Lena! Wake up! Please, stay with me!"

Her heart raced as she looked around, desperate for help. That's when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, heavy and deliberate. A chill ran down her spine as she instinctively positioned herself between Lena and the direction of the noise, ready to fight.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. She's not going anywhere," a voice taunted, laced with smug satisfaction.

Fleur's stomach dropped as a group of figures emerged from the shadows, their faces obscured by hoods. They rushed forward, swiftly binding her arms behind her back, their movements practiced and efficient. "Get off her!" Fleur screamed, struggling against her restraints. "What do you want?"

Dr. Walt stepped forward, a cold smile spreading across his face. "You're a clever girl, Fleur, but it seems you've underestimated me." He knelt beside Lena, examining her unconscious form with an unsettling calmness. "What a pity. It's always the ones with the potential to make a real difference who end up getting in the way."

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“Let her go!” Fleur shouted, her voice raw with fury. “She hasn’t done anything to you!”

Walt chuckled, shaking his head. “You really don’t get it, do you? You’re the one who has put us all at risk. Thanks to your little escapade, I know exactly what you’ve been working on. Gene was more than happy to share where you were heading to.”

Fleur's heart sank. “He betrayed us?”

“Betrayed? Or just made the smart choice? There’s a lot to lose when your community’s life is at stake,” Walt replied, leaning closer to Fleur, his eyes glinting with a twisted glee. “He thought he’d be rewarded, promised a position of power for revealing your movements. But in the end, they silenced him. Just another expendable piece in a game far larger than he could comprehend.” He straightened, his tone shifting to one of cruel satisfaction. “That’s how this world works. You either play your part or you’re out of the picture.”

Fleur felt the weight of despair settle in her chest. “You’re insane,” she hissed. “You think you can control everything?” She couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it before. She felt so stupid.

“Control? That’s what this is all about, my dear,” he said, straightening up, his demeanor shifting to one of triumph. “This world is full of chaos, and chaos breeds death. With the cure in our hands, we’ll finally have the power to reshape it. The scientists I worked with? They wanted to build a new world, a world ruled by those who know how to use power correctly. We will be the rulers of this new era.”

“Using people like pawns,” Fleur spat, her voice thick with disgust.

Walt shrugged, a smirk curling at the corners of his mouth. “You misunderstand. It’s not about cruelty; it’s about survival. And the unfortunate reality is that people like you, with your naive ideals, are simply not meant to thrive in this new world.”

Fleur felt her heart race with a mix of anger and desperation. “Lena didn’t deserve this! You think you can just take her life like this?”

Walt’s expression hardened as he glanced down at Lena. “Oh, but it’s already too late. Thanks to your failed attempts to keep the cure a secret, she’s about to become collateral damage. How poetic, wouldn’t you agree? The great scientist whose secrets ultimately cost her the life of the person she’s closest to. At least, that’s what it looks like.”

Fleur’s blood ran cold at his words, rage boiling within her. “I won’t let you do this! I will find a way to stop you.”

Walt laughed softly, the sound chilling in the still air. “You’re welcome to try, but remember, you’re outnumbered and outmatched. This is a war, Fleur, and we’re the ones holding the trump card.”

Just then, a faint groan escaped Lena’s lips as she began to stir. Fleur’s heart soared, but her joy quickly turned to dread when she saw the haze in Lena’s eyes. “No... no!” Fleur screamed, fighting against her bindings as if they were made of paper.

Dr. Walt crouched beside Lena, his voice low and sinister. “Rest easy, my dear. Your time is up.”

As Lena blinked, confusion etched across her face, Walt leaned in closer, whispering, “Your friend has made a grave mistake, and soon she will pay the price for it.”

Fleur's chest tightened.

The men tightened their grip on Lena, their rough hands forcing her into submission as they moved her farther away from Fleur's reach. She felt a rising tide of rage and helplessness swell within her, threatening to overwhelm her completely.

"Get off her!" Fleur cried out again, the pain of losing Lena clawing at her heart. She lunged forward, but the men holding her back were too strong, and she stumbled, falling to her knees.

Dr. Walt then injected fluid into her neck, and Fleur felt a burning sensation spread through her veins. She gasped, the world around her beginning to spin. The ground felt cold and unforgiving beneath her, a stark reminder of her powerlessness in that moment. Fleur felt the world close in around her, her heart racing as she was left alone, bound and helpless, watching the last flicker of hope disappear into the darkness.

9

LENA

Lena's consciousness flickered like a faulty lightbulb, gradually dragging her from the depths of darkness into the stark reality of her surroundings. As she blinked against the harshness of the light filtering through cracked windows, panic surged within her. She was bound, her wrists chafed and raw from the tight zip ties, and a bitter taste of blood filled her mouth.

Her heart raced as she tried to move, only to find the rough floor biting into her skin. Memories flooded back: Dr. Walt's taunting voice, the feeling of betrayal sharp as glass. She remembered the fight, the way Fleur had looked at her, and then darkness. The realization hit her like a punch to the gut: she was alone. And she had no idea if

Fleur was okay.

Lena strained as she moved her sore body, eyes scanning the room for any sign of Fleur or their belongings, but all she saw were shadows and debris. She forced herself to breathe steadily, keeping panic at bay. If she didn't stay calm, she wouldn't be able to think clearly. She twisted and turned, desperate to loosen the ties binding her wrists.

Suddenly, she caught sight of a stray nail protruding from a broken piece of wood nearby. With every ounce of willpower, Lena maneuvered her body to reach it. The pain shot through her side, but she pushed through, gritting her teeth. Inch by inch, she dragged herself toward the nail, desperation fueling her movements.

With a grunt, she managed to grasp the nail between her fingers and began to work it against the zip ties. Her heart thumped as she sawed through the plastic as fast as possible, the friction biting into her skin. But at last, the ties gave way, and she freed her wrists. Breathing heavily, she flexed her fingers, wincing at the sharp pain still radiating through her.

Her first instinct was to call out for Fleur, but she held back, instinctively knowing that it might attract attention. She pushed herself up to a sitting position, her body aching with every movement. The throbbing in her head intensified as she steadied herself, desperate for water, desperate to find Fleur.

Lena glanced around the room, her heart louder than the eerie silence. Dust motes floated in the air, and the faint sound of something scratching at the floor above caught her attention. She had to find a way out.

The building creaked ominously as she made her way to the doorway, the sound echoing through the hallways. She knew the risk; if there were others here, they could be anywhere. But she couldn't just sit back and wait for help that might never come.

She stood cautiously, testing her legs, the pain sharp and stabbing.

She stumbled into the hallway, her eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through broken windows. As she moved, the unsettling thought that she could be walking into a trap gnawed at her. She reached for an old rusty pipe lying discarded on the floor, its weight reassuring in her hands.

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Just as she took a step forward, a loud crash from below sent adrenaline surging through her veins. Her heart raced, and she steadied herself, gripping the pipe tightly. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong.

"Fleur," she whispered, the name barely escaping her lips. She wanted to scream, to call out, but she knew it could give away her position.

She pressed on, attempting to remain as calm as possible, even as the sweat of anxiety dripped down her skin. The oppressive silence felt like a predator stalking her every move. She had to find a way down, away from whoever had brought her here.

As she crept toward the stairs, the sense of anger and frustration grew heavier. The old wooden steps creaked under her weight, and she hesitated, listening for any sign of life. She heard scratching sounds, which sent chills down her spine. She gripped the pipe tighter, ready for anything. As she descended, Lena felt the building shift, the floorboards beneath her vibrating.

She reached the next floor, glancing around. The place was a maze of debris and shadows. Then, she spotted a group of men gathered in a dimly lit room at the end of the hall. Lena's breath caught in her throat as she crouched low behind a rusted filing cabinet, trying to catch snippets of their conversation.

"...have to decide soon," one of them said, his voice gruff and low. "If we don't feed her to the dead, they'll come for us next."

A chill coursed through Lena's veins as she realized they were talking about her. Surely it couldn't be Fleur. She was too valuable. She felt her stomach drop, a cold

wave of dread washing over her. They had no idea what she was capable of, what she was willing to fight for.

“Dr. Walt said she’s important. We can’t waste her,” another man interjected, his tone suggesting they were debating her fate as if she were nothing more than a piece on a chessboard.

Lena clenched her fists around the pipe, the anger and fear coiling within her like a tightly wound spring. She had to get out of here, had to find Fleur before it was too late.

Suddenly, one of the men turned and walked toward the doorway, and Lena froze, heart racing. She slipped back behind the cabinet, praying he wouldn’t notice her. The man paused, scanning the hallway with suspicion, then shrugged and continued onward, leaving her breathless and trembling in the shadows.

She waited, counting the seconds, hoping for the right moment. The men’s voices grew distant, and Lena took a deep breath, steeling herself. She had to move quickly.

She crept forward towards a door, keeping low, searching for a way to escape. Her leg throbbed painfully, but the adrenaline kept her moving forward.

As she neared the entrance, another crash from the floor above sent a wave through her body. Something was going on up there.

But just as she reached for the doorknob, the sound of footsteps echoed through the hall. Lena froze, as she turned to face the oncoming threat. The door swung open, revealing two men, their expressions twisted with malice.

“Look what we have here,” one of them sneered, stepping forward. “Caught you trying to escape, did we? You silly girl.”

Before she could react, the other man lunged at her, grabbing her arms and pinning her against the wall. Lena fought against their grip, swinging the pipe wildly, but they were too strong. Panic surged in her as she realized she was outnumbered.

“Bring her,” the first man ordered, and they began dragging her back into the room where the others were waiting.

“No! Let me go!” Lena shouted, but her cries fell on deaf ears.

They pulled her into the room where the other men were gathered, their expressions gleeful as they watched her struggle. Lena's mind raced as she fought against them, adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“Guess you won’t be needing this,” one of the men said mockingly, snatching the pipe from her grip and tossing it aside.

“Please, you don’t have to do this,” Lena pleaded, desperation rising within her. “I can help you!”

They only laughed, the sound chilling her to the bone. “Help? You’re just bait for the dead now,” one of them taunted. “We’ll feed you to them, and then we’ll be safe for a while. They need food, just like us.”

Panic clawed at her throat. Her mind raced, seeking a way out as they began to hold her by the arms. But then she felt a surge of anger. No! She wouldn’t give in. Not without a fight.

“You think you can do this to me?” Lena spat, her voice fierce. “I won’t let you!”

One of the men smirked, stepping closer. “You won’t have a choice.”

With every fiber of her being, Lena pushed against their grip, using every ounce of strength to try to break free. But the men were too strong, and their laughter echoed in her ears as they held on tight to restrain her.

And just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, the room fell silent. The men exchanged glances, their expressions shifting from amusement to something darker.

“Get ready,” one of them hissed. “The rotters will be here soon.”

Lena's heart raced as the realization crashed over her. This was her end. This was how the story finished.

Lena struggled against the men's grip, her heart racing as they dragged her across the dusty room.

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“Let me go!” Lena shouted, twisting and kicking, desperately trying to break free. The laughter of the men only fueled her anger. They underestimated her, and that would be their downfall.

With a sudden surge of adrenaline, she planted her foot on the nearest man’s knee and pushed off with all her strength. He stumbled back, losing his grip on her. Lena took her chance, spinning around and throwing a punch that caught another man square in the jaw.

Surprise lit up their faces, but they quickly recovered, charging at her as one. She ducked under a wild swing and grabbed the rusty pipe from earlier, wielding it like a weapon. Her years of fighting and leading came into action. This was the fight for her life.

“You shouldn’t have underestimated me,” Lena snarled, brandishing the pipe defiantly.

The men hesitated, eyeing the weapon warily. Lena took a step forward, adrenaline coursing through her. “I’m not going down without a fight.”

In a blur of motion, she lunged forward, striking the first man across the side of his head. He crumpled to the floor with a satisfying thud. The others shouted in shock, and Lena took advantage of their surprise, swinging the pipe again at the next man.

The third man lunged at her, attempting to grab her, but Lena sidestepped him, the pipe connecting with his ribs with a sickening crunch. He staggered back, winded, and she pressed her advantage, her heart pounding as she fought for her life.

But they were coming at her in numbers. The first man was back on his feet, and as she turned to face him, she felt a sharp pain in her side. A punch landed hard, knocking the wind out of her. Lena stumbled, struggling to stay upright, but she refused to let them see her falter.

With her whole mind and body's strength, she swung the pipe again, but the man ducked, and before she knew it, they were closing in on her. Panic clawed at her throat as she fought back, every swing and every strike fueled by desperation.

She dodged and weaved, a whirlwind of motion, her body screaming in protest. The adrenaline coursing through her veins pushed her forward, and she managed to knock another man to the ground. But just as she thought she had the upper hand, one of the men grabbed her from behind, pulling her arms back.

"Got you now, you little shit!" he shouted triumphantly.

With a final surge of strength, Lena kicked backward, catching him off guard. He stumbled, releasing her just long enough for her to turn and drive the pipe into his stomach. He doubled over, gasping for breath, and Lena seized the opportunity to break free.

She sprinted toward the door, heart racing, but just as she reached for the doorknob, another man blocked her path, eyes wild with rage.

"Not so fast!" he growled, charging at her.

Lena barely had time to react. She raised the pipe to defend herself, but he tackled her to the ground, sending them both crashing to the hard floor. Pain shot through her body as she hit the ground, and she fought to regain her footing.

In the chaos, Lena felt her leg buckle beneath her. She was aware of a sharp pain

radiating from her knee, and panic surged. She couldn't let them win.

With a desperate cry, Lena pushed herself off the floor as she spotted the nearest exit, a rickety staircase leading down.

"Stop her!" one of the men shouted, but Lena was already moving. She sprinted toward the stairs, her heart pounding in her chest.

Each step sent shockwaves of pain through her leg, but she couldn't stop. She could hear their shouts behind her, their footsteps echoing as they pursued her.

As she reached the top of the staircase, Lena glanced back, adrenaline masking the pain in her leg. She couldn't let them catch her. She raced down the steps, feeling the rough wooden planks beneath her feet.

But just as she reached the last step, she lost her footing. Time seemed to slow as she tumbled down, the world spinning around her. She landed hard, the impact jarring her entire body.

Pain shot through her leg, and she cried out as she felt something give way. She couldn't move; her leg throbbed with agonizing intensity. Dizziness washed over her, but she couldn't give up.

Gathering her strength, Lena pushed herself into a sitting position. She had to get up. She had to keep moving. Lena pulled herself to her feet, gritting her teeth against the pain radiating from her leg. She couldn't let them catch her; she had to escape.

As she limped through a nearby door, she caught sight of movement out of the corner of her eye. Panic surged through her. A group of the dead lurked nearby, their hollow eyes fixed on her with a predatory hunger.

Lena's heart raced as she grabbed a piece of broken wood from the ground, wielding it like a weapon. She couldn't let them get to her. Not now.

She faced the nearest zombie, whose rotting flesh was hanging loosely from its bones. It lunged at her, jaws snapping, but Lena sidestepped just in time. With a fierce swing of the wood, she struck the creature across the head, sending it staggering back.

But there were more, so many more. Lena's breath quickened as she realized she was surrounded. Moments later, the men who had chased her appeared through the door behind her, walking straight into the thick of it.

"Fuck, get back, there's a group out here!" one man screamed as the rotten figure took hold of him, sinking its yellowed teeth into his flesh.

It took some heat off Lena, but she was still in trouble.

One of them had its sights set on her. The smell of her blood had enticed it. Lena fought with everything she had, her heart pounding in her ears. She struck out again and again, battling with her last, desperate reserves of strength.

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She couldn't give up. She wouldn't give in. With a primal roar, Lena pushed herself forward, plunging the wood into the zombie that came too close. The creature crumpled, and Lena fought on, adrenaline driving her to keep going.

But just as she was about to deliver the final blow to its head, another one lunged at her. She tried to dodge, but it was too fast. Pain erupted in her arm as its teeth sank into her flesh. She pulled away as fast as she could to create space between them, but it had toppled over her, its lifeless eyes and snapping mouth only held back by her arms. This was it. This had to be the end.

"No! Not now!" she gasped, fighting against the encroaching darkness. She couldn't die here, not when Fleur was still out there.

In a last-ditch attempt to survive, she used all of her remaining energy to push the creature off her, and rolled onto her side to try and get away.

And there she saw it. Glass. A perfect shard of glass.

She grabbed it just in time as she rolled back around and sank it straight into the monster's temple. Its dead eyes blackened as it collapsed next to her.

She looked over to the doorway, where the group of dead were busy feasting on the men from the building. She wasn't sorry. Slowly she got herself up. The pain was like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

Breathing heavily, Lena looked around, her heart racing. She had done it. She had fought them off. But the victory felt hollow as she glanced down at her arm, the blood

seeping from the bite.

Lena staggered back, pain lancing through her body as she realized the severity of her injury. The world around her started to fade, her vision swimming in and out of focus. Each pulse of agony shot through her arm, where the zombie's teeth had sunk in.

"No... no... I'm changing, I'm turning into one of them," she whispered, panic rising in her chest. She had to find Fleur. She had to escape. The thought of losing her made the darkness that threatened to consume her feel even more suffocating.

The wound throbbed painfully, pulling her focus back to the present. She had to keep fighting. The darkness pulled at her like a tide, trying to drag her under. With each step she took, her legs felt heavier, like lead weights shackling her to the ground. She stumbled forward, the rough surface of the stairs pressing against her palm as she gritted her teeth against the pain.

The world around her blurred, and her thoughts began to spiral. She could see Fleur's face, clear as day. The way her eyes sparkled when she talked about her work, her passion igniting the air around them. It was these moments that Lena cherished that kept her going even now.

"I'm sorry, Fleur," she murmured, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I didn't protect you. I thought we'd get out of this together." The admission tasted bitter on her tongue. She could feel the darkness wrapping around her, whispering lies and despair, promising that this was the end.

"Please... just a little longer," she gasped, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

With every ounce of willpower, Lena pushed herself to her feet. She felt the blood seeping from her wound, warm and sticky against her skin. "I'm not done yet," she whispered fiercely, determination igniting within her. She needed to survive, not just

for herself, but for Fleur, too. For the mission. For humanity.

But the darkness, too powerful to fight, was closing in on her. “Please... not like this,” she breathed. The sounds of the world faded, and she collapsed, the last vestiges of hope slipping through her fingers.

As she succumbed to the shadows, a single thought flickered in her mind. Not that she’d lost the fight, but that she’d lost the one thing that had kept her fighting: Fleur.

10

FLEUR

Fleur slowly came to. Her wrists were tied tightly, her body aching from being dragged through the corridors of the building. She tried to steady her breathing, to quiet the fear rising in her chest as she was pushed into a room and forced to sit on a metal chair. The door slammed shut behind her, the sound echoing through the empty space. She swallowed hard, taking in her surroundings. A dim, windowless room, sterile and unwelcoming. A single hanging bulb casting harsh shadows across the concrete floor.

Dr. Walt stood across from her, a smug smile playing at the corners of his lips as he observed her. He was tall, his hair streaked with gray, and he exuded an air of superiority that made Fleur’s stomach turn. She kept her expression calm, neutral, though every fiber of her being wanted to scream, to lash out. But now wasn’t the time for rage. Now was the time to think.

“How many people are here?” Fleur asked, her voice steady despite her discomfort. She wanted to gauge what she was up against, how many eyes might be watching.

Dr. Walt raised an eyebrow, amused. “Why? Looking for an escape route?” He

chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re in no position to be worrying about that.”

Fleur forced a weak smile, shrugging her shoulders as much as her bonds would allow. “I’m just curious. Since you brought me here, I figure I should at least know what I’m dealing with.”

Dr. Walt eyed her for a moment, then leaned back, seemingly considering her question. He smirked. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to indulge you, would it? There are thirty-two men in this facility, trained guards. And all of them know exactly what to do if someone tries to escape.”

Fleur studied his face carefully. His eyes darted slightly as he spoke, and there was something almost too rehearsed about his answer. She kept her expression passive, but inside, she knew he was lying. Thirty-two men? No. The building had been too quiet, too empty. There was no sense of bustling activity, no sound of movement, which she would have expected if that many armed guards were present.

It was just her and Dr. Walt—if that was even his real name. Perhaps a handful of others at most. Fleur allowed herself a small, internal glimmer of hope. This lie was his weakness. He thought the illusion of overwhelming power would keep her compliant.

“Thirty-two, huh?” Fleur repeated, feigning nonchalance. “I guess I shouldn’t even bother trying, then. But why so many men for me?” She tried to soften her voice, leaning into her vulnerability, making herself seem small and harmless. “I’m not exactly a threat to all of you.”

Dr. Walt snorted, amused by her act. He took a step closer, clearly enjoying this display of power. “Well you’re tied up tight, dear. I don’t think a pretty little thing like you would bother me. And, Fleur, you are a very valuable asset. I caught wind of your journey to the Ohio Research Center and knew I had to stop you from getting

there, if you hadn't been killed on the way. There are a lot of people who would like to see what's inside your head or what you're capable of. I know you have some very important information in there." He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "It's not about you being a threat. It's about making sure you don't do something... regrettable."

Fleur swallowed, her mind racing. She needed more information, more details she could use. "Regrettable? Like not helping you finish this plan?" she asked, tilting her head, pretending to mull it over. "Maybe... maybe I was wrong before. Maybe I don't need to resist you. Maybe I could be a part of it."

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Dr. Walt's eyes flickered with surprise. He hadn't expected that. His smile grew wider. "Oh? You're beginning to see the bigger picture, are you? Or are you just fucking with me?" He took another step closer, his arrogance getting the better of him. He was buying her act, and she needed to keep it going.

Fleur nodded, forcing a shaky sigh. "I just... I want to understand what it is you're trying to accomplish. If it's really for the greater good, maybe I could help. The journey I've been on has been awful, and if I'm valuable, I want to be... alive."

She kept her eyes on him, trying to read his face. His ego was palpable. He truly believed he was the hero in all this, that he was on the brink of saving the world. And she wanted to make him believe she was going to join him.

Dr. Walt began to pace, clearly enjoying the opportunity to share his grand vision. "We are at the cusp of a new era, Fleur. One where we take control of this virus, harness it to build a stronger future. It's all about power. Ensuring that the right people are left standing, the right people thrive." He gestured grandly as he spoke, his voice growing more animated. "And you, with your expertise, could be a part of that future. We could do great things together. I know the lab you've come from, I know they had similar plans, but my plans are... better."

Fleur listened intently, nodding in all the right places, keeping her face neutral. Inside, she felt sickened by his words, the way he spoke of using the virus as a weapon. But she kept that disgust hidden, focused instead on the ropes around her wrists, the way they dug into her skin. She shifted slightly, testing their give. The knots were tight, but not impossible. She just needed a distraction, needed him to keep talking.

“What exactly is your plan, then?” she asked, her voice as smooth as she could make it. “How do you plan to make all of this work?”

Dr. Walt grinned, clearly pleased with her interest. He stepped closer, oblivious to her subtle movements, her fingers working at the knot behind her back. “The plan is already in motion,” he said, his voice low, conspiratorial. “We’ve secured the data, and soon we’ll have everything we need to finish the cure, one that we control. With it, we can rebuild society from the ashes, but only with those who deserve it.”

Fleur kept her eyes locked on his, her mind racing. She could feel the ropes loosening, her fingers trembling slightly as they worked. She needed to buy just a little more time. “And what happens to those who don’t deserve it?” she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

Dr. Walt sneered, his eyes narrowing. “They’ll become part of the past. Collateral damage. It’s the only way forward. You know the deal.”

Fleur’s heart pounded as she finally felt the ropes slip free, her wrists aching but now untethered. She kept her posture still, not letting him see her triumph, instead leaning forward as if genuinely interested. “I see,” she murmured. “And you really think you can make this work?”

Dr. Walt nodded, his confidence radiating off him. “I know I can,” he said, his chest puffing with pride. He stepped closer, within arm's reach now, oblivious to the danger. “With someone like you by my side, it’s inevitable. I have more information that I need you to help me with. And you either help me by your own choice, or I make you help me. It’s as simple as that.”

Fleur forced a smile, her hands moving behind her back, flexing as she prepared herself. “Well, Dr. Walt, I’m afraid there’s one thing you didn’t consider,” she said, her voice dropping to a cold, calm tone.

Dr. Walt frowned, his eyes narrowing in confusion. “What’s that?”

Fleur didn’t hesitate. In one swift motion, she lunged forward, her hands shooting out, grabbing him by the collar. His eyes widened in shock, but he didn’t have time to react. He didn’t grab his weapon. She twisted, using her momentum to slam him against the wall. The impact stunned him, and she didn’t let up, her body moving on instinct, fueled by fear and adrenaline. She grabbed a piece of broken glass from the floor. Something she had noticed earlier, something that now served her purpose.

Dr. Walt tried to fight back, but he was unprepared, his arrogance having blinded him to the threat she posed. Fleur brought the shard down with a force that surprised even her, driving it into his side. His eyes went wide, his mouth opening in a silent scream. She twisted the shard. She didn’t stop until he slumped against her, his weight heavy, lifeless.

She stepped back, breathing heavily, her hands trembling as she looked at what she had done. Dr. Walt lay on the ground, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Fleur felt a pang of something—guilt? Fear? She wasn’t sure. But she pushed it aside. There was no time for hesitation, no time for regret. She didn’t even want to check if he was really gone. She didn’t need to.

She turned, moving quickly to the door, her heart racing as she listened for any sign of movement outside. The building was eerily quiet, the echo of her own breathing the only sound. She knew she had to find Lena, had to get them out of here before anyone realized what had happened. She opened the door slowly, peering out into the hallway. Empty. She slipped out, her bare feet barely making a sound as she moved.

Fleur’s chest tightened as she hurried through the dirty hallways, her bare feet silent on the cold concrete. She had to get to Lena before it was too late. She moved faster, her body aching but her determination pushing her forward. She wouldn’t let them win. Not now, not after everything they had been through.

A green exit sign was flashing on top of the stairwell entrance.

“She’s strong—maybe she got out. But she would’ve looked for me,” Fleur thought out loud.

She took a deep breath and made her way down the stairs. And when she reached the bottom, that's where she saw her.

Lena lay slumped against the wall, her eyes closed, her face pale and streaked with dirt and blood. She’d managed to drag herself inside and close the door behind her. Fleur’s heart dropped, and she rushed over, falling to her knees beside her. She reached out, her fingers trembling as she touched Lena’s shoulder, giving her a gentle shake. “Lena?” she whispered, her voice cracking. “Lena, wake up.”

Lena’s eyes fluttered open, but there was something wrong. Something was off about her gaze. They weren’t the sharp, focused eyes Fleur had come to know. They were duller, clouded, with a hint of something dark swimming within them. Fleur’s stomach twisted in fear as she noticed the wound on Lena’s arm, a jagged bite mark that was already beginning to darken, the skin around it a sickly gray.

“No,” Fleur breathed, her eyes widening in horror. “No, no, no.” She cupped Lena’s face with her hands, her fingers brushing against her cheek as if her touch alone could bring her back to herself. Lena’s breathing was shallow, her skin clammy beneath Fleur’s touch.

Fleur shook her head, her heart pounding in her chest. “Stay with me, Lena. Please, stay with me,” she pleaded. She couldn’t let Lena go, not like this, not after everything they had been through together. Fleur’s eyes darted around the room, searching for anything that could help, anything she could use to fight this. She knew what the bite meant, knew that time was slipping away far too quickly.

A backpack. It must be from one of Dr. Walt's men, she thought. She rummaged inside frantically.

A miracle. She found supplies.

Gauze, bandages, disinfectant. Nothing that would be enough. Then her eyes landed on a packet with a vial and syringe. It was unlabeled and it could be a risk, but what was there to lose now?

"Could this be what Walt and his men have been working on?" she mumbled, a tear running down her face.

It surely wasn't a cure, but it might be something enough to slow the infection, to give Lena more time. Fleur rushed back to her, dropping to her knees again, her hands already working to prepare the injection. She looked at Lena, her heart aching at how weak she looked, how unlike herself.

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“This is going to hurt,” Fleur whispered, her voice cracking as she looked into Lena’s eyes. “But I need you to stay with me, okay? I need you to fight. Don’t go anywhere.”

Lena’s gaze met hers, and for a moment, there was a flicker of recognition, a spark of the woman Fleur knew.

Fleur swallowed hard, her vision blurring with tears as she injected the serum into Lena’s arm, right above the bite. Lena winced, her body tensing, and Fleur held her, her arms wrapping around her as if she could shield her from the pain. “It’s okay,” she whispered, her lips brushing against Lena’s temple. “You’re going to be okay. I’m right here. I’m going to save you.”

Lena’s breathing slowed, her eyes squeezing shut as the serum worked its way through her system. Fleur could feel her trembling, her muscles twitching beneath her touch. It was agonizing to watch, to see Lena in pain and know there was so little she could do. But she had to believe this would work, that it would buy them the time they needed.

Minutes felt like hours, and Fleur held Lena through it all, whispering words of comfort, her fingers stroking her hair. Slowly, the trembling began to subside, Lena’s breathing evened out, and the tension in her body eased. Fleur pulled back slightly, her eyes scanning Lena’s face, searching for any sign of change. The serum must’ve been useful for something, otherwise why would they keep it in their supplies?

Lena opened her eyes, and Fleur’s breath caught in her throat. The cloudiness was still there, but it seemed less pronounced, the darkness held at bay for now. Lena

blinked, her gaze focusing on Fleur, her lips curving into a weak smile. “You did it,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Fleur let out a shaky breath, a sob of relief escaping her lips as she nodded. “We’re not out of this yet,” she said, her voice trembling. “But we’ve bought some time. Just stay with me, okay?”

Lena nodded, her eyes closing for a moment, her body leaning into Fleur’s. They weren’t safe yet, and the infection was still there, lurking beneath the surface. But for now, Lena was here, she was alive. And Fleur would do whatever it took to keep her that way.

Fleur glanced around the room, her mind already working on their next move. They couldn’t stay here, not with the risk of more men coming, or worse, more of the dead. They needed to get out, to find somewhere safe where Fleur could continue to help Lena. She looked down at Lena, her heart swelling.

“Can you stand?” Fleur asked, her voice soft as she brushed a strand of hair away from Lena’s face. Lena opened her eyes, nodding slowly. Fleur helped her to her feet, her arm wrapped tightly around her waist to support her. Lena swayed for a moment, her legs unsteady, but she leaned into Fleur, her eyes meeting hers.

“My leg, it’s... bad, but I can try,” Lena whispered, her voice filled with a quiet strength. Despite everything, Lena was still fighting, still holding on. Fleur nodded, relief spreading across her face.

“I’ll take a closer look when we’re someplace safer,” Fleur said, her voice steady. “We’ve got this.”

With Lena leaning against her, Fleur led them toward the exit door. The building seemed ghostly quiet.

She reached for the door and pushed it open, the cool evening air washing over them, a stark contrast to the stifling atmosphere inside. She took a deep breath, her eyes scanning the darkness. There were no immediate signs of danger, and Fleur felt a flicker of hope. They still had a chance. A chance to escape, to survive. She noticed another one of Dr. Walt's men slumped on the floor, half eaten.

"The dead got him. Just like they got me," Lena said quietly as she pointed to another backpack left at the side of his body in the struggle.

"I'll take a look." Fleur moved slowly toward the bag, opening it up to examine the contents.

There was a small notebook with a scribbled map inside. She scanned the map for clues in the location names.

HQ Walt

Camp Zone A

Lurker Pit B

Ohio Research Main

Fleur gasped as she traced her fingers over the words. There it was! The lab she had been searching for.

Lena grunted and nodded as she leaned against the wall, unable to take her own weight.

"Hang in there, Lena," Fleur whispered, casting a glance back at her.

She rustled through the bag more and felt something cold, metallic.

Keys.

Car keys.

“Fuck, yes! You motherfuckers are good for something at least.” She grabbed the keys and started looking around as she pressed the unlock button.

Eventually she saw a flash from a car on the other side of the street. She looked at Lena, who managed a thumbs-up sign, and put her arm around her to help her to the car.

The journey through the deserted streets was difficult. The dead were lurking around, but they kept to the safety of the vehicle. Fleur grabbed the map drawing and followed it as best as she could in the dimly lit evening.

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“Don’t you give up on me, Lena,” Fleur said, her voice cracking. She could feel tears welling up, but she blinked them away. She needed to stay focused, needed to get them there in time.

Finally, the research center came into view. A nondescript building that blended into its surroundings, easily overlooked by anyone who didn’t know what they were looking for. Fleur pulled up to the entrance, slamming the car into park and rushing to get Lena out. She supported Lena as they made their way to the door.

“Open up! Please, we need help!” Fleur shouted, pounding on the door with her fist, the sound echoing through the empty night.

A moment later, the door swung open, and a man in a white lab coat appeared, his eyes widening at the sight of Lena. He stepped aside, letting Fleur lead her inside. “She’s been bitten,” Fleur said, her voice trembling. “But I slowed it down. Please, you have to help her.”

The man nodded, motioning for two other lab workers to come forward. They took Lena from Fleur, placing her on a stretcher and wheeling her away. Fleur stood there, her heart racing, watching as they disappeared down the hallway.

“She’s in good hands,” the man said, his voice softer now. He looked at Fleur, his expression one of concern. “You did well getting her here, Dr. Fleur.”

Fleur swallowed hard, her chest tight. “She’s strong,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “She’s a fighter.”

The man nodded, a reassuring smile on his face. “We’ll do everything we can.”

Fleur watched as the door closed behind them, her knees suddenly weak. She had no time to ask questions or tell them about Walt. She sank into a chair, her hands trembling as she covered her face. She had done everything she could; now it was up to them. The fight wasn’t over, but for the first time since Lena had been bitten, Fleur allowed herself to hope.

11

LENA

Lena woke slowly, consciousness creeping back like the first light of dawn after a long, dark night. She felt groggy, her limbs as heavy as if they were made of lead. The ceiling above her was white and unfamiliar, and the smell of antiseptic filled the air. Her head throbbed slightly, and it took her a few moments to gather her bearings. The sterile room, the steady beep of machines, the sense of exhaustion. It was clear she was in some sort of medical facility. Or some kind of heaven.

She blinked, her vision slowly adjusting to the harsh light. Her heart pounded as memories began to rush back: Dr. Walt, the struggle. Panic gripped her chest. Where was she now? Was she still in danger? And then one thought broke through the haze: Fleur.

Lena forced herself to sit up, though her muscles protested the effort. She looked around the small room, taking in the rows of beds and equipment. There was a nurse at the far side of the room, her back turned as she worked on something at a counter. It seemed so clean... so sterile.

“Fleur?” Lena croaked, her voice barely above a whisper. She swallowed, her throat dry, and tried again, a little louder this time. “Fleur?”

The nurse turned at the sound of Lena's voice, her expression softening when she saw Lena awake. She quickly walked over, her shoes clicking on the tile floor. "You're awake," the nurse said gently, her voice kind. "How are you feeling?"

Lena blinked at her. "Where's Fleur?" she asked, her voice still raspy. She couldn't focus on anything else, not until she knew that Fleur was okay.

The nurse nodded, her eyes understanding. "She's here," she said. "She's been waiting for you to wake up. Let me go get her. She's absolutely fine."

Lena exhaled shakily, a wave of relief washing over her.

The minutes that passed felt like an eternity. Lena's mind raced, flashes of her last memories playing over and over. Dr. Walt's face twisted in malice, the feeling of her body betraying her, the darkness that had swallowed her whole. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to push it all away. She was alive. Somehow, she had made it through. And Fleur was here.

The door creaked, and Lena's eyes snapped open. Fleur entered, her steps quick, her expression a mixture of exhaustion and overwhelming relief. Lena's heart swelled at the sight of her. Fleur looked different. Her hair was damp, pulled back from her face, and she was wearing fresh clothes, a simple t-shirt and jeans. She looked like she had finally been able to rest, though the worry was still evident in her eyes.

"Lena," Fleur breathed, her voice breaking as she rushed to her side. She knelt down beside the bed, her eyes scanning Lena's face as if to make sure she was really awake. "Oh, thank God," she whispered, her hand reaching up to cup Lena's cheek. Her touch was warm, grounding Lena in that moment.

"Fleur..." Lena whispered, her eyes filling with tears. She swallowed hard, trying to find her voice. "What... what happened? The last thing I remember, I was..."

Fleur took a shaky breath, her thumb brushing against Lena's cheek. "It's okay," she said softly. "You don't have to talk about it right now. Just know that you're safe. They have what you need here. We made it. We made it together."

Lena shook her head, her eyes searching Fleur's. "I need to know," she said, her voice trembling. "What happened after... with Dr. Walt?"

Fleur's eyes softened, and she nodded, her hand moving to take Lena's. She sat down on the edge of the bed, her eyes never leaving Lena's. "It's a lot," she admitted, her voice quiet. "But I'll tell you everything. He's an awful man. I should never have trusted him."

Lena watched her face. She could see the exhaustion in Fleur's eyes, the weight of whatever had happened since they had been separated. Fleur took a deep breath, her gaze steady.

"After Dr. Walt took you, I... I managed to get away," Fleur began, her voice steady despite the emotion in her eyes. "He underestimated me. He thought he could control me, but he was wrong." Her jaw tightened, a flicker of anger crossing her face. "I fought back. I found a way to get loose, and I... I killed him, Lena."

Lena's breath caught in her throat, her eyes widening. She stared at Fleur, a mix of emotions swirling in her chest: relief, disbelief, a strange sense of pride. "You killed him?" she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Fleur nodded, her eyes darkening. "I had to, I had no choice," she said sharply. "He wasn't going to stop. He was going to kill you, and he would have killed me, too. Or tortured me. I couldn't let that happen."

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Lena swallowed, her eyes stinging with tears. She reached up, her hand trembling as she touched Fleur's cheek. "You saved me," she whispered, her voice breaking. "You... you saved my life."

Fleur closed her eyes, leaning into Lena's touch. "I couldn't lose you," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I wouldn't."

Lena's heart ached at the pain in Fleur's voice. She could see it now: the fear, the desperation. She could only imagine what Fleur had gone through, and the thought of it made her chest tighten.

"I knew if I just got you here, you'd make it. I knew we could help you get through this. I bought us time after the attack and you perked up a little, but I was so scared of watching you... turn."

"I was... bitten? How am I okay?" Lena gasped as she looked at her bandaged wound.

Fleur nodded, her jaw tight. "Yes. You were bitten. Luckily the bite wasn't too deep. It was more of a drag mark from the teeth. It didn't sink in too deep. But the infection was spreading, and I knew I didn't have much time. I brought you here, to the lab. The people here... they helped me. They stabilized you before it could spread too far."

Lena stared at her, her mind struggling to process what she was hearing. She remembered the bite, the feeling of her body betraying her, the fear that had consumed her. She looked at Fleur, her eyes wide.

“I should be... I should be dead, I should’ve turned by now,” Lena whispered, her voice trembling.

Fleur shook her head, her eyes shining with tears. “No.” she said, her voice fierce. “You’re not dead. Lena. You’re here. You’re alive.”

Lena swallowed hard, her throat tight with emotion. She could see the determination in Fleur’s eyes, the love that had driven her to do the impossible.

She reached up, her hand covering Fleur’s. “How?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper. “How am I still alive? I don’t understand. Just tell me.”

Fleur took a deep breath, her gaze softening. “I found a vial of medicine in a bag from one of those men back there, and gave it to you as soon as I could. When we arrived, I got them to test the remains of it here. They think it was a prototype drug created by Dr Walt. It helps trigger an immune response in certain people, and it worked for you. Apparently it’s almost unheard of.”

Lena stared at her, her mind reeling. “Immunity?” she repeated, her voice barely audible. The word seemed almost impossible, like something out of a dream. “I’m... immune?”

Fleur nodded, her eyes shining with a mix of relief and awe. “Yes,” she said softly. “You’re immune. You survived. With that medicine and the drugs they have here, it completely healed you.”

A smile broke across Lena’s face.

“Fleur! We need you back in the lab now!”

Fleur hesitated, her gaze flickering between Lena and the doorway, a mix of duty and

concern to balance. “I have to go,” she said, her voice tinged with regret.

Lena stared at the ceiling of the infirmary, her thoughts spinning. The air was cool, the sterile scent of disinfectant lingering, but it felt like a blanket of tension had settled over her chest. Fleur had been with her moments ago and Lena was left alone with her thoughts.

She had done what she was supposed to do, brought Fleur to the lab. That had been her mission from the beginning: to protect Fleur, to get her to safety so she could finish what she’d started. The urgency of survival and the weight of that responsibility had kept Lena moving, focused, driven by one singular goal. But now that she had accomplished that mission, she was left with a profound emptiness, a hollow ache that she didn’t know how to fill. What would happen next?

Lena had always been clear about what she was meant to do, what her role was. Protect. Lead. Fight. There had always been a purpose, a direction that guided her. But now, without the urgency of a mission, all she could feel was the uncertainty of what lay ahead. And the fear of being without Fleur.

Lena tried to take a deep breath, to push away the rising panic, but it only seemed to grow. Her thoughts were relentless, circling back to the questions she didn’t have answers to. What was going to happen next? And where did that leave her and Fleur?

She knew, rationally, that she had a responsibility to her old community—or whatever was left of it. There were people depending on her. They needed her strength, her leadership. She had been their captain, their protector.

But at the same time, the thought of leaving Fleur tore at her heart. She couldn’t imagine going back to that life now, not without Fleur by her side. Fleur had become her partner, her confidante, someone she could lean on when everything else seemed to be falling apart. She had been her savior.

But did Fleur even feel the same? Was she using Lena to get what she needed? That uncertainty gnawed at Lena, twisting her insides with doubt. She didn't want to feel so much for a person in this world. She didn't want to fall in love.

But was it too late?

And was she going to get her heart ripped apart again?

After a few moments of contemplation, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, her body a little shaky but determined. She remembered she'd been injured in the fight, but wasn't sure how bad it really was as the bandage covered most of the area.

Lena couldn't remain in that room a second longer. She was lost in her thoughts while Fleur was out there, probably overwhelmed with the enormity of what lay ahead. She needed to talk to her, to see if they were on the same page. Time was precious, and she couldn't waste any more.

Navigating the facility's hallways, Lena felt the pulse of urgency in her veins. She finally spotted Fleur in a room at the end of the corridor, surrounded by a few other researchers, discussing something animatedly. The sight of Fleur, her hair slightly disheveled but her eyes sparkling with determination, sent a rush of warmth through her.

"Fleur!" Lena called out, her voice breaking through the conversation.

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Excusing herself from the group, Fleur stepped away and approached Lena. “Hey, are you okay?”

Lena nodded, though she was still battling a storm of emotions inside her. “I wanted to talk to you. About everything.”

“Right now?” Fleur said, her tone growing serious. “What’s on your mind?”

Lena took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts as they moved to a quieter corner of the corridor. “I know we’ve made it here, and I fought to get you to this place... But what becomes of us now?”

“I want us to work, too,” Fleur said. “But I’m committed to making this cure for everyone. It’s not just about saving lives; it’s about understanding the virus, what it does, and how we can stop mutations, too. And being committed to this cure is dangerous. There are so many threats out there, and as long as I stay with you, we’ll both be in constant danger.”

Lena felt a pang in her chest at the thought of Fleur putting herself in harm’s way. She wanted to scream, to shake her, to say that it didn’t have to be this way, but she knew that wouldn’t help. Instead she steadied herself, determined not to let Fleur slip away without a fight. “You’re not going to push me away that easily,” Lena said, her tone steady but tinged with urgency.

Fleur’s brow hardened, concern crossing her face. “Lena, you don’t understand. This is bigger than us. If I can make a breakthrough, if I can help?—”

“No, Fleur. You’re right. It is bigger than us,” Lena interrupted, stepping closer, her heart racing. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t face it together. I’m strong enough to protect you, and I won’t let anything happen to us.”

Fleur hesitated, her gaze wavering as she searched Lena’s eyes for some sign of uncertainty. “But what if something does happen? I can’t let you put yourself at risk because of me. There are still others out there who will want to get in on this, at any cost. I can’t bear the thought of them harming you more than they have.”

Lena took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her emotions push against her. “I’d rather face danger with you than live a life without you. I can’t lose you now.”

A flicker of vulnerability crossed Fleur’s face, and Lena seized the moment, reaching out to touch her. “Please, Fleur. I want to be here with you.”

Fleur’s eyes softened as she leaned into Lena’s touch, her walls beginning to crack. “Lena... I don’t want to drag you into this. And what about the others? They might have been in danger because of Dr. Walt.”

“I’m already in it,” Lena replied, her voice steady. “I’m in this with you, whether you like it or not. You know that. I will make contact with the community, but you’re my priority.”

Fleur’s hard expression wavered, the tension between them growing as she contemplated Lena’s words. Lena could see the conflict within her, the weight of responsibility battling with the desire for connection. “But the lab... the people here?—”

“Who says we can’t make it work?” Lena interjected, her heart pounding. “We’ll find a way. You can work here, and I’ll protect you. It’s that simple. I’ll find out about my community and get things in place there. We need each other.”

“But the risks...” Fleur started, her voice trailing off as she met Lena’s unwavering gaze.

“The risks will always be there,” Lena said fiercely. “But what about us? What about what we have? Isn’t that worth fighting for? I can’t go back to my life without you, and I don’t want to. I’ve made my choice. Everything we’ve been through. And... and I don’t open up to anybody. And now I’ve opened up to you.”

Fleur’s expression softened further, and Lena felt a rush of hope.

“Lena, what about the people who are after me? What if they kill us all?”

“Let them come,” Lena declared, her heart pounding in her chest. “As long as I’m with you, I can face anything. We can be a team, Fleur. I won’t let anyone take you from me. I’m highly trained and I can get my folk here to help build a defense.”

Tears glistened in Fleur’s eyes, and she looked away, trying to mask her emotions. “You have no idea what you’re asking for.”

“Actually, I do. I know exactly what I’m asking for,” Lena replied softly, brushing a strand of hair behind Fleur’s ear. “I want you to trust me. I want you to let me be there for you. Because I love you, and that’s not something I can just walk away from.”

Fleur inhaled sharply, the confession hanging in the air between them. “You really mean that?” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Lena nodded, her heart open and raw. “Yes, I do. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Fleur took a step back, breaking their connection as she processed Lena’s words. “I...

I don't know if I can let you in like that.”

“This world is awful. Life is precious and love is almost non-existent. So I'll say it again. I love you, Fleur. No matter what. And I want to be with you through all of this. I wanted to hold my feelings back the whole time we've been together, but instead they've just grown. We can make it work. I promise.”

Fleur moved closer, gripping onto Lena's hand. “If I'm being honest, I love you, too. And that's why I'm so scared of hurting you again. When I found you slumped on that wall, I thought you were gone. My heart felt... broken.”

“So, please just try? Please let me in, and let me help you?” Lena smiled.

“Okay, I'm willing to try,” Fleur whispered, leaning her head against Lena's chest.

FLEUR

The research lab had become their sanctuary, a place where they could finally feel safe. But how long for? Nobody knew. Either way, it was still so much safer than the journey they'd been on.

Fleur could see it in Lena's eyes whenever they walked through the base, the tension easing from her tightened shoulders as they moved between the reinforced walls, the labs, and the common spaces. The base wasn't just a collection of scientists and security. It was a community.

The lab itself was a marvel. This was exactly the kind of place Fleur had yearned to be. But now, more than ever, it felt like she had a purpose beyond just the science. The people here relied on her and looked to her for answers, and she was determined to deliver them. It was about more than just finding a cure; it was about giving people a reason to believe in the future.

The head of security, Mara, had taken Lena under her wing. Fleur watched as Lena threw herself into the work. She had always known Lena was strong, fierce even, but seeing her in this new environment, adapting so quickly, Fleur realized just how much Lena had given up to get her here. The sacrifices she had made, the people she had left behind. She wondered if they were all okay. If they were all still alive.

Fleur found Lena standing by the watchtower, staring out beyond the perimeter fences. The landscape was scarred, a mix of nature reclaiming what was left and the remnants of destruction that had torn everything apart. It was quiet, almost serene, but Fleur knew better than to trust the calm.

“Hey,” Fleur called softly as she approached, her voice barely louder than a whisper. Lena turned, her eyes meeting Fleur’s, and for a moment, Fleur saw something there, something she couldn’t quite place. She stepped closer, reaching out to touch Lena’s arm gently. “You’ve been out here a while. Everything okay?”

Lena forced a smile, nodding. “Yeah, just... thinking.”

Fleur raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing at her lips. “Dangerous pastime.”

A chuckle escaped Lena's lips, but it was strained. She shook her head, her gaze drifting back out beyond the fence. “I guess so.” She paused, and Fleur could see the hesitation in her, the way she was holding back. Fleur waited, knowing that whatever was on Lena’s mind, it was something important.

“I’ve been thinking about the old community,” Lena finally said, her voice quiet, almost lost in the wind. “The people I left behind. I just... I can’t stop wondering if they’re okay. If they even knew why I left. If they are safe.”

Fleur’s heart tightened at the words. She knew how much Lena’s old community meant to her, how deeply she cared for them. Fleur stepped closer, her hand moving down to take Lena's. She could feel the tension in Lena’s grip, the conflict she was struggling with.

“You want to go back, don’t you?” Fleur asked, her voice soft, understanding.

Lena swallowed, her jaw clenched. “I don’t know. Part of me does. Part of me wants to bring them here, to give them a real chance. It’s just... I don’t know if it’s possible. I don’t know if it’s even the right thing to do. I know Gene sold us out to Walt, but I can see why. He would’ve been terrified.”

Fleur squeezed Lena’s hand, her eyes never leaving her face. She wished she could

take that burden away from her and somehow make everything right. But she knew it wasn't that simple. The world they lived in didn't offer easy answers, and every choice came with its own consequences.

"You've always done what you think is right, Lena," Fleur said, her voice filled with as much conviction as she could muster. "That's one of the things I love about you. Whatever you decide, I'm with you. We'll figure it out together."

Lena looked at her then, her eyes searching Fleur's face as if trying to find something there. Fleur held her gaze, her heart aching for the woman in front of her. She could see the exhaustion in Lena, the weight of everything she had carried for so long. And in that moment, Fleur knew she had to be strong, not just for herself, but for Lena too. They had been through too much together to let anything tear them apart now.

Lena pulled her into a hug, holding her tightly, and Fleur wrapped her arms around her, feeling the warmth of her body against hers. She rested her head on Lena's shoulder, closing her eyes, letting herself just be in the moment. She could hear Lena's heartbeat, steady and strong, and it filled her with a sense of calm.

"Thank you," Lena whispered, her voice barely audible.

Fleur tightened her hold, her lips brushing against Lena's neck. She wanted to say so much: that she was proud of her, that she loved her, that she would always be there no matter what. But the words caught in her throat, too heavy to speak. So instead, she just held her, hoping that somehow Lena could feel everything she couldn't say.

When they finally pulled apart, Fleur looked at her, her hand coming up to cup Lena's cheek. She smiled, a small, soft smile that she hoped conveyed everything she felt. "We'll figure it out," she repeated, her voice a whisper.

"And for now, it's me and you against everything else, and we have this community,

too. I heard Ronnie had made some improvement with the radio transmitter. Maybe we can try to reach out to them again?”

Lena shrugged. “Yeah, we’ll try. And If I don't hear back, I think we could set up a vehicle and go and see what’s out there.”

“It’s so hard to go back out there, but you know I have your back. We’ve done it once. And we can get a team of us and head there together. Strength in numbers.” Fleur smiled softly as she grabbed Lena’s hands and held them tight.

“I can’t imagine my life without you now. You mean everything to me,” Lena whispered as she held Fleur’s hands tighter.

“I love you, so much,” Fleur whispered.

“I love you too,” Lena replied as she slowly moved towards Fleur, and planted a soft kiss against her lips, relishing the moment as the cool breeze filled the still air around them.

In that moment, everything felt safe, everything felt warm, and they found hope in each other's love, which they knew would last forever.

EPILOGUE

Lena leaned back against the porch railing, breathing in the crisp air of the early morning. A small garden stretched out before her, vibrant and alive, and the smell of brewing coffee drifted from inside the house. She turned at the sound of footsteps. Fleur appeared in the doorway, her smile soft, her eyes holding the warmth of the life they had built together.

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The years had passed. They hadn't always been easy, but they hadn't been too bad, either; the change was almost astonishing. There had been immense progress since the early, frantic days at the lab, where each moment felt borrowed, and survival was uncertain. Now the lab had expanded into a bigger community, with social areas, agriculture, and education. It had become a secure hub of growth and connection.

Fleur looked around at the bustling hub of activity. The expansion of the lab had been nothing short of miraculous, and she often caught herself marveling at the transformation. Where once they were fighting just to have enough supplies to get through the day, they now had stores of food, tools, and technology, all made possible by the hard work of the people who had joined them along the way. They had taken in plenty of strays, some good, some bad, but Lena was usually pretty good at judging them during the initiation process.

Lena had managed to make contact with her old community, who had gladly joined her new venture. It hadn't been an easy process; convincing them, coordinating the move, and ensuring their safety had been challenging, with no guarantees of success. But Lena had been determined, and her passion was contagious. She couldn't bear to leave those people behind, knowing there was a chance for something better. So, she'd taken the risk.

Yet, even in their newfound peace, the stress of the world outside remained a looming presence. There were still whispers of danger, rumors of groups who wanted to take what they had built or destroy the progress they were making. Security was always a priority, and Lena took her role in safeguarding the community seriously. She trained tirelessly with her team, learning new tactics and strategies to defend their home. She wanted to ensure that Fleur and the rest of the community were protected, even if it

meant sacrificing her own peace of mind.

One evening, after a particularly grueling day, they sat together in their shared space. Lena leaned against the wall, her gaze fixed on the floor as she rubbed her temples. Fleur watched her, feeling a rush of affection mixed with concern. “You know, it’s okay to take a break,” Fleur said softly, her voice breaking the comfortable silence. “We’re doing well. We’re safe here. You don’t have to push yourself so hard.”

Lena glanced up, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “I know, but I can’t help it. There are still so many unknowns out there. I can’t let my guard down. Not yet. It feels never ending.”

Fleur moved closer, taking Lena’s hand in hers. “I understand. But don’t forget to take care of yourself in the process. You’re not just a protector; you’re my world. And I need you to be well.”

Their eyes locked, and in that moment, Fleur felt a flicker of understanding pass between them. Lena nodded, her expression softening. “You’re right. I just, sometimes I feel like I’m carrying everything, and I don’t want to let anyone down.”

“You won’t,” Fleur reassured her, squeezing Lena’s hand gently. “We’re building something incredible here. Together. And we’re doing it for each other, for everyone we’ve brought into this community. Remember, we’re all in this together.”

“When did you get so optimistic?” Lena laughed as she jabbed at Fleur’s arm.

“Well, I have good news to share with you, really big news actually.”

“Oh yeah? Don’t keep me hanging!” Lena stood up straight, tugging at Fleur’s hand.

“So, you know how the research and lab work has been... difficult at times? And how we almost got the cure, but then it wouldn’t work on certain people?” Fleur sighed.

“Just spit it out already!”

“Well, I think we’ve finally done it. As in, really done it. This new drug seems to not only reverse the infection, but stop it from mutating and prevent it from being caught. It’s working so well on all of our testing cells. This could save everything.” Fleur smiled.

“Are you serious? That’s incredible!” Lena stood with her eyebrows raised, taking in the news that could really save the world, or what was left of it.

“I’m serious. We need to arrange a community meeting in the hall and tell everyone, but first we are going to make a plan for how to move forward. We were thinking we continue to grow this place, and create a city, a new life for more people. Vaccinate everyone who comes through the gates so they don’t pass on the virus.” Fleur paced as she spoke.

“I am so fucking proud of you. When I first met you, I didn’t know what to believe. And then our journey together, what a nightmare that was. But now, look at us. Look at everything around us. Whatever you want to do, I am right by your side.” Lena held Fleur’s hand, slowing down her pace, pulling her closer.

“And because you’ve always been by my side, I’ve managed to achieve this. It’s down to you as well. I love you so much, and it got me thinking. I want us to get married.”

“Oh, wow, um, I did not see that coming. Are you trying to give me a heart attack with all these shock statements?” Lena laughed, her expression surprised.

“No, Lena. I want to love you, forever. Marry me? I don’t have a ring yet, but I’ll get one. I know this isn’t a big romantic gesture, but I did just tell you I’m going to save the world with the vaccine, isn’t that kinda romantic?”

“Oh, shut up and kiss me. It’s a million percent yes from me,” Lena replied hastily as she pulled Fleur in and pressed her body into hers.

Their lips locked as their bodies became one, and everything finally fell into place.