



Dusk & Desire (Of Blood and Conquest)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: College was already hell and Linda thought her day couldn't get any worse. Then the world ended. The sky split open and alien ships descended in a fiery rain from above.

Amid the apocalypse, Linda is forced into a game of survival with the mysterious Noa – a sharp-tongued rebel with a reckless grin. Noa has the skills Linda lacks, but she also has a way of making her question everything she thought she knew about herself.

As the danger escalates, so does the tension between them. The two girls realize that surviving isn't enough. You need something to fight for.

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Linda

Yet another fucked up day at Torture State University.

Sighing, I angrily push the frizzy blonde tresses stuck to my sweaty forehead behind my ear.

I was sure I left mean girls behind in high school, but here I am, finishing up my undergrad, and I just had the modern version of getting pantsed.

Someone printed screenshots of my conversation with a long-distance friend and taped them to the whiteboard.

Best part? I didn't know that it was my conversation until Professor Matthews walked in and started reading it out loud.

My conversation about how scorching hot he is and the dirty things I want to do to him.

Ugh, kill me now, please.

I cover my face with my hands and attempt to beat back the urge to cry. I managed not to when everyone at the auditorium was laughing at me, and I don't want to start now. Taking a deep breath, I let my arms drop. I'm almost done with the class anyway. I'll survive this.

“Hey, pretty girl. You look like you could use a pick-me-up.”

I jump at hearing Noa's voice so close to my ear. I didn't even notice when she snuck up on me.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" I ask dejectedly, my shoulders slumping at the sight of her perky bubblegum blue fauxhawk. It's way too optimistic for how I'm feeling, gleaming in the sunshine like that.

"It's your name, is it not?" Noa blows a bubble, and unlike her hair, the gum she chews on is pink.

"Linda," she enunciates slowly. I should never have told her my name.

She's really playing up its literal meaning – pretty woman.

Tilting her head, she studies me with an intensity that makes my stomach flip.

Her lips curl at the edges, a slow, knowing smirk, like she's in on a joke I haven't figured out yet.

Noa and her brother, Axel – probably not his real name – hang around the campus and deal party favors to overworked or party-hungry students.

I've never bought from them before, so I have no idea why she comes up to me every time I pass them.

I should say something, but my tongue feels heavy, the words drying up in my throat.

I snap the elastic around my wrist, then feel stupid when the sound draws her gaze, so I bring my arms up to pull my unruly hair back into a high ponytail. "Do you have something that will help me forget this day ever happened?" I ask her with a mulish voice.

One gorgeously sculpted pierced eyebrow quirks at my tone and she pops another bubble. “That bad, huh?” she asks, bracing her hands on her hips. “Who do we need to fuck up?”

I can’t help but smile at her willingness to get violent for a virtual stranger. I have no idea why she’s so nice to me – I saw her be a total bitch to some of her actual customers.

Her brother whistles and she throws her backpack in his direction without turning or taking her eyes off me.

Impressive aim.

The sky darkens as a cloud covers the sun, but Noa’s silver eyes still flash at me. “Well?” she encourages, tapping her foot with obvious impatience.

I groan and cross my arms over my chest. I see her attention going to the front of my shirt and feel a blush spreading down my neck. I’ve always been what you might affectionately call curvy and should be used to the attention my tatas get by now.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask in a murmur, unable to meet her piercing gaze. Something about her eyes speaks of a maturity beyond her years – she can’t be much older than me.

Noa chuckles, the sound low and husky. “You’re my pretty girl. ”

I swallow convulsively. “I’m straight,” I tell her, my words coming out a bit shaky. I lift my eyes up to her nose. The little gem there seems dull in the darkening light of the day.

“So is spaghetti until it gets wet,” she replies with a smile.

I gape at her. Why do I feel tingly? Before I can think of some likely lame reply, a strange hum vibrates through the air, an unnatural sound that makes the hair on my arms stand up.

I'm looking at the goosebumps when a girl nearby shrieks.

Silence follows, then more screams join her.

It takes me a moment to realize they're looking at the sky.

I feel like someone pressed the slow-motion button on the remote as my eyes reluctantly follow whatever it is they're looking at.

I'm not sure I want to know, you know? Is a meteorite coming to wipe the county off the map of the Earth?

I mean, how many shitty things can happen today?

Eventually, I see what has them yelling, but it still takes a moment for my brain to catch up.

By the time I do, Noa's hands have gripped my shoulders, and she's pulling me back.

"Run!" she hisses. Her hand takes mine and she drags me toward Axel, who looks about as stunned as I feel.

She grabs him by his ratty band T-shirt with her free hand, tugging him along toward the dubious safety of the dorms.

I'm not sure what the point is. That's not a storm cloud or shooting stars.

It's dozens of UFOs. Unidentified freaking objects.

The sky above us ripples as if the atmosphere itself is groaning under their weight.

My breath saws in and out as Axel and I follow Noa's lead and duck into the building, other students pushing their way in with us.

"What the fuck is that?" I ask, panting. Damn the freshman fifteen. And then the sophomore ten and junior twenty. I don't often swear, but this situation definitely calls for an eff-bomb.

"What did it look like, genius?" Axel snarls. I bare my teeth right back at him.

"Don't talk to her like that," Noa warns him in a flat tone, then peeks out of the closest window.

The brother rolls his eyes and gives her an incredulous look.

"Next time there's an alien fucking invasion I'll be nicer to your flavor of the week, Sis," he grumbles and starts pacing, twitching with either nerves or as a side-effect of whatever pill he's taken.

I'm stuck on his words, though. Alien invasion .

He said them and now they can't be unspoken.

An explosion sounds, rocking the campus and sending a shockwave through the ground. As another and another explosion follow, my knees almost buckle.

"What's happening?" I ask Noa over the sound of fear-stricken screams all over campus.

I gather my courage to join her at the window just in time to see a ball of flame sail from the clouds.

My mouth drops open as I follow its trajectory toward the taller buildings in the distance. “Is that a plane?”

Noa shakes her head and lets the curtain drop back into place.

“Satellites,” she says, then spits her gum out into the trash can by the entrance.

It’s War of the Worlds and she’s avoiding littering.

But why is that kind of hot? “It’s what I would do,” she continues, thankfully oblivious to my inner monologue.

“Kill communication, kill defenses, win the battle.”

I blink at the tattooed girl who looks like she’d be at home in a rock band and get a grin in return.

“Just because I don’t go to college doesn’t mean I’m an idiot,” she says, not unkindly. Another explosion rocks the foundations of the old building we’re sheltering in, followed by more screaming from students.

“If you’re an idiot, I’m an amoeba,” I squeak, looking around in a panic, like I’ll find the answer in the multi-colored flyers on the walls. “We should... find a bomb shelter maybe?”

Axel shakes his head, his long black hair brushing over his broad shoulders. Why am I looking at his sister more than I am him when my taste usually runs toward penis. Why am I even thinking about this when we’re all about to die?

Fudge! My parents!

I pull out my phone to find a 'no service' notification. I lift my phone up like an idiot. Wave it around. Nothing. My breath comes quicker and a lump forms in my throat. I guess Noa was right about disabling communications. I should have called them earlier. I hope they're somewhere safe...

"We should get some gym bags or hiking backpacks and hoard some food or we're fucked," Axel says, speaking to Noa like I'm not panic-tapping the call button on my mobile in vain.

She bites her lip and nods before looking at me. "He's right. If everyone floods the shelters, they'll just starve together. I don't think this fight's gonna be over in a day."

Fight? These... things in the sky came to our planet without us noticing and they're already disabling us within minutes. "Do you think we have a chance?" I ask in a whisper, leaning against her when the floor trembles again. "Against aliens who can travel across the universe?"

She gives me a pitying look before she shakes her head in negation, her blue hair flopping with the motion. "I'm afraid the world as we know it is over, pretty girl."

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Linda

Once the satellites stop lighting the sky up in sparks of various sizes, and no spaceships are visible in the smoke-darkened sky, we gather our courage to leave the building.

The air is thick with smoke, acrid and cloying, and my breaths come in short, sharp gasps.

I think the reality of what's happening is finally sinking in, the numbness that helped me through the first moments receding.

I wish it didn't. I feel so useless between Noa's calm calculation and Axel's jaded machismo.

Students are running in every direction, some crying, but all of them looking as scared as I feel. "Did anyone catch anything on the TV?" I ask a passing group, but they mostly ignore me, only one boy bothering to shake his head.

"No signal," he says over his shoulder as he follows his friends to the other side of the parking lot.

We reach the first rows of cars and slow down. "Do you two have a car?" I ask, looking at the parked vehicles. Car doors are slamming all around us, followed by the squeal of tires. I wish I could floor it out of this reality.

Noa smirks at me as Axel approaches the driver's side of a black sedan. My mouth

falls open when he bends over to pick up a rock, then uses it to smash the window.

“W–what are you d–doing?” I stutter. “You can’t just steal someone’s car. What if they need it?” I protest weakly.

Noa rubs a soothing hand down my back and, despite everything, goosebumps dance to life under her touch.

“We need it now ,” she tells me before hopping into the front passenger seat.

“ Get in, beautiful,” she commands in a no-nonsense voice before slamming the door shut.

I look around me, at the students and professors peeling out of the campus grounds to return to their families.

I wonder where those who, like me, would need a plane to get home are going, then shake myself out of my stupor.

I won’t make it five minutes without Noa and Axel, of that I’m certain.

Gingerly, I crawl into the backseat, just as Axel pops up from under the steering wheel, the car roaring to life.

“You know how to hotwire a car?” I ask in a murmur.

“We know all kinds of things good girls like you don’t,” he retorts with a grin. How he can laugh at a time like this is beyond me.

As we drive closer to the city, the smoke thickens, blowing in through the shattered window. I cover my nose with the sleeve of my top, my eyes watering from both the

fumes and the sight of the buildings diminished into rubble where the satellites landed.

“That can’t be just from the satellites,” Noa ponders. “They had to have used some kind of weapons too.”

Axel nods grimly, his hands clenching on the steering wheel. “Oh, fuck,” he says, his voice low and barely audible over the screaming people and car alarms.

Straightening, I look out the window to see what he’s cursing at, immediately wishing I hadn’t. There are bodies on the pavement, dusty and battered from the debris. “Oh, no,” I whine, covering my mouth as tears blur my vision.

Noa’s hand sneaks back to grab hold of my other wrist and I’m grateful for the anchor. “We need to get out of here,” she tells Axel. “Now.”

He exhales sharply, looking at the chaos around us. “Where the fuck do we go when everywhere’s a damn warzone?”

“Out of the city, to the suburbs,” Noa says decisively. “The buildings there aren’t as tall, so there should be less debris. Plus, less competition for supplies.”

My stomach warms at her logical words, like they’re a breath of cold air over a burn. I turn my hand around to intertwine my fingers with hers. She looks back at me in surprise, but one side of her mouth quickly lifts into her signature smirk, and she squeezes my fingers.

Before we get more than a few blocks away from where we saw the first bodies, my ears pop. I gasp at the familiar sensation, dread twisting in my intestines. They’re back.

“F—fuck Axel, go faster!” I scream, then slam back against my seat when he immediately presses the pedal down.

The air hums and people scream louder before a strange metallic shrieking drowns both out.

A deep whoomph sounds, then a ball of fire hits a car not far enough away.

My breath catches in my throat when debris hits our windshield, cracking it.

Axel swerves, pulling off into a side street.

“They’re killing people,” I say, dumbly. It’s one thing to know it and a whole other thing to see it.

When I look at my lap, I notice Noa’s pale fingers clutched in my own. I cut her circulation right off and she hasn’t said a word. With great difficulty, I force my fingers to loosen around hers.

When the spaceship flies overhead, I instinctively duck, too scared to control my body’s adrenaline-fueled reactions. We need to get out of the city, now .

As Axel maneuvers around the debris and fleeing people, I anxiously pick at the rings adorning Noa’s slender fingers. I wish I could go back a couple of hours when being embarrassed over a mean hacker’s prank was the worst of my problems.

“Move faster, Pooh,” Axel hisses at me. He’s taken to calling me Winnie the Pooh. I’d like to believe it’s for my golden locks, but I’m afraid it’s more likely due to my round ass.

I fix the strap of my backpack, the cans inside tinkling as they knock against each other.

“Shh!”

Oh, screw him.

For two days, we’ve been looting grocery stores along with the rest of the mob.

Axel nearly peed himself laughing when he caught me trying to use the self-checkout the first time.

Noa just wrapped her arm around my shoulder and then helped me pack.

She looked at the tampons and disinfectant before smiling at me, the skin around her eyes crinkling.

When she told me that was smart thinking, I nearly forgot we were in the opening minutes of an apocalyptic movie.

Noa’s not here now, though, keeping an eye on our ‘base’ instead; a squat insurance office building, emptied in the initial panic.

Because who wants to return to their nine-to-five the day after aliens shoot all our satellites out of the sky and carpet bomb fleeing people?

But we haven’t seen any since and we have no idea where they went to.

In the movies, they always go for cities like New York or Washington.

Or maybe they learned we taste funny and left.

I snort at my thoughts and earn a stink-eye look from the brother.

How can someone as awesome as Noa be related to a jerk like him?

We reach the bottom of a non-functioning escalator and I groan on the inside.

My thighs have been killing me from all this walking around with heavy bags.

I woman up and resolve to stop thinking ungrateful thoughts.

If it wasn't for Noa and Axel, I'd be in some bomb shelter now, probably trying not to think about nibbling on someone else's thighs.

As we reach the exit and I breathe in the fresh night air, a scream shatters the silence. I spin around and freeze at what I see. Three men are ripping the clothes off the screaming woman, jeering at her as she tries to pull free.

"Hey, stop!" I yell. I take a step forward before Axel's hand pulls me back violently.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he growls.

"They're hurting her!" I snarl, trying to squirm out of his hold.

"Keep walking!" one of the men yells. Another flashes a knife in our direction.

My mouth falls open, the inherent violence of the object shocking me into motionlessness. Axel takes advantage of the softening of my muscles and starts walking me away from the struggling woman and the band of men about to violate her. Or worse.

"How can they just do that?" I ask Axel with a sob once I can speak again. The

woman's screams start fading in the distance.

Axel flashes me a look. At first, he glares with frustration. Then his brown eyes soften a bit. He clicks his tongue. "You're too fucking naïve for your own good, Winnie. As soon as the shackles of humanity are removed, we drop our masks. We fuck, we steal, we look out for number one."

He throws an arm in front of me, making me stop in my tracks. Once our eyes meet, he says slowly and clearly: "We don't get ourselves killed for something we can't stop."

I roll my lips together as the pre-invasion me wars with the me I need to become. Finally, I nod. We're almost at the office building we're hiding in when I speak again.

"We need weapons," I say. "Guns, if we can get them, or knives."

When Axel doesn't say anything, I look at him from the corner of my eye. He's smiling.

"Smartest thing you've said, Winnie."

We climb the last of the stairs to our temporary home and I let my backpack slide down with a groan.

"What did we miss?" Axel asks Noa. The assessing look she gives me makes my heart skip a beat.

I look away, busying myself with the supplies we brought to our temporary home.

I check my phone out of habit, but there are still zero signal bars.

The power comes and goes, though, giving me some hope that humanity is fighting... whatever this is.

“The radio worked for a while,” Noa says and I spin around to focus on her words.

Axel jury-rigged a receiver we found in the supply room and we’ve been trying to catch any news from outside of our bubble.

I can’t exactly take a plane home to see my family, but maybe word from California would help me sleep more than an hour or two at night.

“What did you hear?” I ask, rocking on the balls of my feet. The eccentric girl, still sitting cross-legged next to the radio, gives me an indulgent smile. How is she so calm and collected when the world’s quite literally going to hell ?

“Broken transmissions,” she says, shaking her head.

“There’s no contact with major cities – London, New York, Beijing.

The attacks seemed to be coordinated, disabling satellites, then targeting population centers.

” Noa stands up in one fluid motion, the movement so graceful it brings a blush to my cheeks and I don’t know why.

“There were some repeating recordings. Martial law. Stay indoors and do not engage with the hostiles.” She snorts.

“As if we can fight against giant spaceships.”

She saunters to my side to check what I’ve brought back.

As she presses against my side, the contact sending tingling sensations over my skin, I wonder why she's not checking Axel's loot.

Despite having sink baths for the last couple of days, her smell remains pleasant, and I subconsciously turn my face in her direction, like a sunflower positioning itself to catch the rays of sunshine.

As I inhale the contrasting yet appealing mix of bubblegum and spice, her head turns until our noses are inches apart.

I lick my lips and shudder when I feel her exhale against the damp flesh.

Just as she sinks her teeth into her lower lip, something crashes from the other side of the room. I jump in fright, worried the aliens have returned, but then see a can of soup rolling across the floor. Noa stops it with her foot as if it were a soccer ball.

"Oops," Axel says, shrugging with an 'aww, shucks' expression.

Noa rolls her gleaming silver eyes, then bends over to pick the can up. She holds it up for me to see. "Are you hungry, pretty girl?"

I gulp, my suddenly dry throat clicking. Yeah, I am.

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Linda

That night, I woke up several times feeling all hot and bothered.

I couldn't remember the dreams, but my body knew they were good.

I'm sleep-deprived now, though, and it probably wouldn't have happened if I had had any nookie this past year.

I've just been so busy with my studies, it wasn't really a priority.

Fantasizing about hot professors was the most I afforded myself.

Ugh, I wish I had my trusty bullet vibrator.

Though a part of me can't believe I'm thinking about orgasms when it's been days since I spoke with my parents amid a gosh darn alien apocalypse.

"Want some coffee?" Noa's voice pulls me out of my daydreams.

I sigh when the smell of caffeine invades my nostrils. "Yes, please," I say eagerly.

Our fingers brush as she passes me the mug, filled to the brim with the dark brown liquid of life, and I feel my cheeks igniting.

As the older girl's lips spread into a mischievous smirk, I look down and let my hair cover my burning face.

That only prompts her to sweep my tresses back and behind my shoulders.

“Don’t hide that beautiful face,” Noa murmurs. I raise my eyes to meet hers. “I have something for you,” she purrs with a smirk.

My eyebrows lift. “What is it?” I ask after a moment of hesitation.

She brings her other hand forward from behind her back in an exaggerated ‘ta-da’ movement. On the palm of her hand lies a purple rose sex toy. I gasp when I realize what it is and cover it with my own palm, frantically looking around to see if Axel saw the object. Thankfully, he’s nowhere in sight.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, scrabbling to wrap my fingers around the toy, then quickly pocket it.

Noa chuckles, the sound tugging on some neglected part inside me. “I grabbed a few toys from our last supply run.” She licks her plump lower lip. “Surprisingly, people aren’t thinking about sex toys while the world is ending.”

I snort despite being embarrassed as hell. While the shelves barely have any non-perishable food items left, most having been taken by the looting mobs during the first day, non-essential objects were left behind.

“Anyway, I thought you might like to have it,” Noa finishes with a wink. I gape at her. Wait, did she... hear anything last night? What am I supposed to say?

“T–thank you,” I stutter, feeling my blush crawl down my neck to my chest. Noa’s eyes follow, causing a different kind of heat on my skin.

“You’re welcome,” she quips. When she meets my eyes again, her lips stretch into a wide smile. “Don’t worry about being quiet with it.”

My jaw unhinges. Did she just... what?

Before I can embarrass myself further, the radio squawks, the white noise interrupted by high-pitched whistles. Axel enters the room, the lower half of his face covered in shaving cream, a razor in his hand. A voice breaks through the static.

“ All civilians are ordered to make their way to the nearest major military outpost. Secure locations have been established for food, medical aid, and protection. Travel is dangerous. Move carefully, avoid large groups, and stay off main roads when possible. If you encounter hostiles, do not engage unless you have no other choice .”

The three of us exchange looks. Is this for real?

“ Repeat. This is a standing order for all civilians. You are not alone. Help is still out there. ”

The message repeats two more times and then gets interrupted halfway through the third iteration, the signal cutting out.

“Do you think the military sent that?” I ask hopefully. “I mean, it could be some bad people wanting to ambush survivors on the roads, right?”

Noa nods thoughtfully and Axel actually smiles at me. “You’re starting to sound less like a clueless brat every day, Winnie.”

“Gee,” I say, giving him my best droll look. “Thanks so much.”

“Eglin is the closest,” Noa hums. She exchanges a look with her brother. “We could siphon the gas from the other cars in the garage, pack as much as we can.”

“It’ll be dangerous as fuck,” he says with a shake of his head. A dollop of shaving

cream plops onto the floor, dripping down from his chin. It's then that I register that he's not wearing a shirt. His chest is covered with tattoos and both of his nipples are pierced. Why is he so invisible to me?

"But it'll be just as dangerous staying here soon," Noa counters. "It's a miracle no one broke in here to rob us yet. Or worse."

I shudder at her implications. I was under this illusion of safety between the walls of this building.

We heard looters and fleeing people outside over the last three days, but no one was interested in coming in here.

That's going to change fast now that there are next to no supplies left on the shelves.

"We should try," I voice my opinion. "I can't imagine anywhere being as safe as an Air Force base."

Noa scans my face with a calculating expression. What is she thinking about? Finally, she nods, then spins around to find our backpacks.

"Axel, why don't you go get the car ready. Linda and I will pack up our shit."

I guess it's bye-bye sink baths and a roof over our heads. We're leaving.

Tallahassee is fading into the distance behind us, and with it, most traces that the invasion even happened; there's no rubble, no dead bodies, and we've hardly even passed any live ones either.

Some houses and storefronts have smashed windows, but if you can overlook that and the eerie lack of traffic, you could almost convince yourself it's just another day.

Well, it might be easier to pretend if I weren't surrounded by canned food, clinking together every time Axel takes a turn too fast.

"Slow down, dummy, poor Linda's like the candy in a pinata back there."

Of course, Axel just snorts at Noa's words and doesn't apologize.

But he maybe takes the next turn a smidge gentler.

I look out of the window, wishing I could enjoy the views of the Apalachicola and Lake Talquin forests, wishing this was just a road trip with friends, as unlikely as the friendship may be for me.

We decided to take the state highway rather than the interstate, shaving off a few miles of travel and avoiding what's likely to be every still-functioning car in the area.

We just don't know if we can trust other desperate people around our supplies.

When I hear rumbling in the skies, I immediately forget about Axel's driving skills or lack thereof.

I stop breathing, my chest locking up, ribs squeezing tight.

I'm completely paralyzed by the fear that more alien spaceships are about to appear, using us for target practice.

I clutch at my chest when fighter jets fly over our car, heading toward the city we just left.

Axel slams on the brakes and we all turn to look out the rear window.

“Where do you think they're going?” I ask after a moment of us gaping soundlessly.

Before either answers me, shockwaves from explosions rock the car. We share a wide-eyed look.

“What about the people?” I whisper breathlessly, thinking of the tens of thousands of inhabitants likely still sheltering in the city.

Axel grimaces. “If any are left there, they’re fucked.”

“Why would they be destroying our own infrastructure?” I chew on my lower lip, my mind racing.

Noa clears her throat. “Maybe the aliens overran the city?”

I shake my head and tug on the elastic at my wrist. “I still can’t believe they’d just kill people like that.

They barely gave us a chance to evacuate.

” If we were just a little bit slower... Just thinking about it is enough to make me want to snap the elastic right off.

I feel equally glad we left and terrible for the people who stayed.

“If we can rely on anything, beautiful, it’s that the military has a questionable definition of the greater good,” Noa says.

As we talk, plumes of smoke darken the sky above Tallahassee. Axel turns around

first, and the car starts moving again, taking us further away from the warzone.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

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Linda

We don't make it very far before we're forced to stop again.

"What's going on?" I ask Axel when he decelerates.

"The bridge across the Ochlockonee is blocked," he answers.

I lean forward and poke my face between their two seats.

Immediately, I see the cars piled up on the bridge.

"Did they crash or something?" I feel like all I'm doing is asking questions, like the kid in the backseat nagging the parents if they're there yet.

We passed a few abandoned cars in the short amount of time we've been driving, but this is the first time I've seen more of them together.

"What are the odds that half a dozen cars pile up at a bottleneck where no one can bypass?" Noa's cynical scenario raises the hair on my arms. Is this an ambush?

"Let's go around," I say decisively. "Take another bridge."

"Mmm," Noa purrs, smirking back at me. "I like it when you're bossy, pretty girl." I gasp at the look in her narrowed eyes, surprised at the warming sensations between my legs. What the heck is she doing to me? It's like a war of attrition, eroding my heterosexuality with each smirking comment.

“Not now, Noa,” Axel grumbles from the driver’s seat, shifting into reverse with a bit more force than necessary.

Since I’m the only one looking ahead, I’m the first to see the group of men jump out from behind the stalled vehicles. My jaw unhinges.

“Faster, Axel!” I screech, tapping his shoulder. Thankfully, he doesn’t question me and picks up speed, using the handbrake to spin the car around. Noa braces her hands on the dash in front of her, and I wrap my arms around her headrest.

I scream when glass shatters and rounded shards of it rain over me.

My heart does its best to escape my chest, beating so hard and fast I feel dizzy and nauseous.

When the car straightens, facing the way we came, Axel hits the pedal, and I slam back against the backrest, the glass rolling over the tin and plastic of our supplies and onto me, cutting my skin in places.

The men shout after us as we peel off, and I turn around to see them throwing more rocks at us, even though we’re too far away.

After five minutes, Axel eases off on the gas.

I shake my head and glass shards fall on my lap.

When I see the tiny cuts on my arms, I hiss, the pain registering.

Noa must hear me, because she turns around, scanning me.

I guess I look worse than I thought because she lets loose a string of expletives.

“Find a place to stop, I need the first aid kit for Linda,” she instructs her brother.

Axel clicks his tongue. “Are you nuts? You saw those assholes back there! Fuck knows how many like them are around, waiting for idiots to stop for a piss break.”

“I’m fine, Noa.” I try to sound unconcerned – I don’t want them to fight because of me, don’t want to be any trouble. What if they decide I’m too much hassle and leave me behind? I can’t survive without them.

“It’s not fine. You’re bleeding all over.” She waves a hand in my direction as if I’m not seeing what she’s seeing.

“We’ll be at the base in a couple of hours,” Axel grits out through clenched teeth.

“He’s right.”

Noa ignores me and glares at her brother instead. “What if we run into more roadblocks like that? We can’t be sure when we’ll get there. Pull into a forest road, no one’s going to see us.”

Axel does as she says, though with obvious reluctance. She always seems to get her way with him. I bet she’s the older sister.

I bounce in the backseat as we hit uneven ground and try not to show the blue-haired girl that it’s just hurting me more.

When we roll to a stop, she immediately hops out of the car and opens the trunk.

As she rummages through it to get to the first aid kit, I carefully exit and rid my hair and clothes of as much glass as I can.

“Move, Winnie,” Axel says gruffly, pushing me aside. I see that he put gloves on and has now started to clean the backseat. I blush at his thoughtfulness. I think it’s because he’s been so grumpy and dismissive this entire time that it stands out more now when he’s being nice.

Wait, isn’t that a type of Stockholm Syndrome?

Noa interrupts my thoughts by coming close and placing the open first aid kit on the car’s roof.

“Take your top off,” she says matter-of-factly.

I gape at her. “Excuse me?”

She sighs and pauses soaking a cotton ball with alcohol. “Your top is torn and bloody; there are cuts underneath. And I’m sure you don’t want to roll up to the military base looking like a zombie.”

I look at my disheveled clothing and a flush warms my cheeks.

Squirming, I tug on the hem of my top. I look at Axel, but he’s ignoring us, still cleaning the backseat.

Finally, I tug the top over my head. My heart pounds against my ribs again.

For a moment, I think about seeing a doctor for the issue, then remember that’s probably highly unlikely right now.

I feel gentle dabbing on the skin of my upper arms, then a burning sting from the disinfectant.

The astringent smell of alcohol invades my nostrils, overpowering Noa's much more pleasant one.

I keep my eyes on my feet, but I can see my chest trembling regardless.

I can't help myself and glance at Noa's face to see if she noticed.

Just then, she starts cleaning a cut above my left breast. She uses the pinky finger of her left hand to gently push the gold locket necklace my parents gave me to the side.

Goosebumps gallop in her wake and her lips twitch into a self-satisfied smirk.

She moves closer, like she wants to inspect the cut, and I feel her breath against my overheated skin.

If she moved a couple of inches, her mouth would be on my cleavage.

Why am I thinking about that ?

"If this was just an excuse to cop a feel, I'm leaving both of you on the side of the road."

I jump at Axel's voice, seeing as I forgot he was even there.

It's like I was in a bubble with Noa. His words register and I take a step back, my naked back pressing against the side of the car.

The older girl scoffs and rolls her eyes, pressing closer to clean my face.

I'm hypnotized by her silver gaze. I try to look at the tiny diamond piercing on her nose instead, finding it equally mesmerizing.

“Why does he hate me?” I ask in a murmur, feeling ashamed even though I didn’t do anything wrong. Maybe I’m feeling bad merely over my stray thoughts about his sister?

“He doesn’t hate you,” she answers with a grin. “He’s just fucking with you because you’re so skittish.”

I turn my face toward Axel and she clicks her tongue, firmly grabbing my chin to hold me still. Sparks spread from the point of contact and my breathing increases.

“I really don’t, Pooh,” Axel says from somewhere to the side. “You’re actually not so bad. Maybe it’s the whole apocalypse thing, but I’m starting to see what she sees in you.”

As he laughs, Noa takes her lower lip into her mouth, just inches from my own. The sides of her lips are curled up mischievously.

“You’re lying,” I grumble, trying to avert my gaze. Noa’s hand keeps me from doing so.

“Why do you think he’s lying, pretty girl?” she asks softly.

I can’t help the tears that gather in my eyes. Why did I even bring this up?

“It’s just…” I trail off.

“Just what?” she encourages.

“Just that I gained all this weight,” I admit, my throat closing up. “I don’t know how anyone would think I’m beautiful.”

Noa throws the cotton ball into the car, still refusing to litter. Once both hands are free, she takes my face into them, using her thumbs to wipe away the tears that spilled over. She comes impossibly closer.

“You’re perfect, my beautiful girl,” she murmurs, her eyes softened with apparent earnestness. A sob catches in my throat at how sincere she sounds. Her eyes lower to my mouth, then back to mine, an unspoken question in them. I don’t move. Instead, I look at her lips and run my tongue over my own.

A soft rumble vibrates in her chest as she leans in, ever so slowly, giving me every chance to turn my face away.

Her lips touch mine, so softly, light as a feather.

I part them instinctively and she takes advantage, taking my bottom lip between both of hers, kissing it, then moving up an infinitesimal amount.

I tilt my head, dizzy from the butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

As I gasp for air, her tongue touches mine, the ball piercing in it providing an interesting, unusual sensation.

One of her hands slides to the back of my head, the other drifting down to my waist. When she pulls me against her and our pelvises touch, a spark of lust snaps through me, making me pull back instinctively.

Holy heck, what just happened?

“Sorry,” I squeak, and I don’t know what I’m apologizing for. Letting her kiss me? Stopping the kiss?

She winks at me before busying herself with putting everything in the first aid kit back in its place. “It’s all good, precious. To be continued.”

A gagging noise to my other side draws my attention to Axel.

Shitty shit, I completely forgot he’s here again!

He’s leaning against the open car door, sticking out his tongue.

“So gross,” he says.

But no... I don’t think it was gross at all.

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Linda

The whole bridge situation caused a delay, just like Noa predicted.

Instead of being at the base in a couple of hours, we spent that time trying to find a feasible way over the river.

The first bridge we came up to was destroyed, I don't know how or why.

The second and third had blockades as well.

It's like every thug on this side of Florida had the same idea – create bottlenecks on the way to every traveler's destination.

Now Axel is cranky because we're running out of gas and the last few abandoned cars we passed had already been siphoned. "It's gonna take us weeks to walk there," he grouses, his fingers tapping against the steering wheel.

"Don't worry, Ax, we'd die in a matter of days, not weeks," Noa replies with a cynical tone. I gape at her dark humor. I'm just not used to people talking like this. It makes me wonder what kind of household they grew up in.

"Do you guys have any other siblings?" I ask.

Noa betrays her surprise at my question by slightly lifting an eyebrow, something I see because she's always facing me instead of the road. How she's not feeling nauseous is beyond me.

“Not sure,” she says with a shrug. “We’re half-siblings as it is.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Axel chimes in. “Same mommy, different daddies. And fuck knows where they are and how many other kids they have.”

That’s so sad. I can’t imagine not being able to call your dad when you’re in trouble as a kid .

“But you two grew up together?” I lean forward, bracing my arms on their backrests. I can see Noa’s smirk at my nearness from the corner of my eyes.

“Yeah, thanks to Noa,” Axel says with a warm smile I haven’t seen on his face before. It makes him look more like his mischievous sister. “She made sure we stayed together, taking care of me, even though she’s just a few years older.”

That confirms that theory.

“Yeah. I still can’t leave you on your own,” she sighs wistfully, making him punch her arm playfully.

“What about you, pretty girl? Got any pretty siblings?”

I squirm at Noa’s question, or rather the way she phrased it. Everything she says always comes out so... seductive.

“No,” I murmur. “Just me and my parents. They had me later in life.” Thinking of them hurts my heart. “They’re both retired now and living the good life... or I guess they were.” I lean back and rub the center of my chest where a sharp pain made itself known. I really need that cardiologist.

Noa turns back fully and levels a serious look at me. She's about to say something rational, isn't she? "Where are you from? Is it a city? Are there military bases nearby?"

Her line of questioning lifts the heaviness from my shoulders. I straighten and smile at her, hope unfurling its wings.

"Our house is actually really close to Fort Hunter Liggett," I say. "It's totally rural and they probably got there super fast!"

"See?" she whispers with a huge grin. "They're there, waiting to hear from you."

I laugh with relief. While the safety of my parents was a constant worry at the back of my mind, I didn't realize how much it influenced my mood until she dispelled it.

On a hormone-fueled impulse, I close the gap between us and kiss her on the lips.

Flushing, I lean back again, pushing my hair out of my face.

"Ugh," Axel says with a groan. I may have forgotten about him again.

Noa gives him a victorious smirk, then points to a diner just ahead. "Let's see if any of those cars have any gas left. "

"Sure thing, boss." I can almost hear the eye roll and can't help but laugh. Was it fate that I happened to be standing with this family when the aliens came? Where would I be now if Noa hadn't stopped me to chat?

We pull into the parking lot next to a few parked cars and pile out. They all have smashed windows. Did they not start? Or were the thieves after something else? I shudder when Axel slams a truck's door closed and the frame rattles.

“The fuel hatch was closed on this one, so chances are there’s still something there,” Axel says, unwinding the hose in his hands. Noa brings him our gas canister.

“Yeah, or the thieves kindly closed it after,” I mutter, wrapping my arms around myself. An odd wind picks up, tugging on my hair.

Axel chuckles at my joke and I blink in surprise. I guess I really am winning him over. I scoff and earn a questioning look from his sister. I shake my head and laugh inwardly at my stupid pun. Winnie’s winning him over.

As I look around the abandoned parking lot, I can hear the sounds of liquid hitting our empty canister and Noa’s quiet hoot.

It’s so eerie here. All that’s missing is a tumbleweed rolling down the road.

Bored, I peek into other cars around me.

Most are pretty trashed, the doors all open, including the trunk, their supplies already ransacked.

When I get to a black sedan at the end of a row of cars, I don’t have any hopes of finding something useful.

Just as I’m about to leave, something glints at me from the back footwell. What is that?

I crouch down. I hope it’s not a snake or something.

I’d hate to bring my stupid face in for target practice.

I nudge some scattered papers out of the way and grin at what I see.

Speaking of target practice. It's a small revolver!

The looters must have missed it. I carefully pick it up and push on the barrel.

My breath leaves me in awe when I see it's fully loaded.

My luck today is all over the place. Bet I'd find a winning lottery ticket and obviously have no way to cash it in.

The distinctive sound of a shotgun being cocked pulls me away from my musings like a splash of icy water.

"Don't move," I hear in the distance. "Drop the canister."

I freeze even though I realize they're not talking to me. I shuffle to the edge of the car and look around to where Noa and Axel are siphoning gas. A man is standing not far from them, aiming a shotgun at Noa, who has her hands up in the air.

"Where's the other girl?" the man asks.

"What other girl? It's just us," Noa replies, making the stranger growl in frustration.

"Do not lie to me, little girl, I'm not blind!"

"Just relax, man," Axel says calmly. "You want the gas? Take it. Want me to get a car going for you? No problem. Just stop pointing that gun at my sister."

The man laughs raggedly. He looks like a vagrant and his voice fits someone who smoked two boxes a day for forty years. "I'll take your car, boy, and I'll take your sister. And the other girl, too."

My gorge rises at the way he says that. I think I'd rather take my chances with the aliens.

"You try to take anything with a pulse, you and me are gonna have a problem," Axel growls and my palms grow sweaty. How is he planning to stop him?

The man turns his gun on Axel with a chuckle. "Like to see you stop me if you're dead, boy."

"No!" Noa screams, taking a step forward. The man swings his weapon back at her.

In an instant, something takes over me. An entity that cares little about what the old Linda thought was right and wrong.

I stand up straight and extend the arm with the gun in it.

Taking the briefest moment to aim, I pick my target area, wait for the man to start moving the shotgun back to Axel, and pull the trigger.

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Linda

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?”

Noa’s sitting in the backseat with me, one arm thrown over my shoulders, the other caressing my leg with soothing circles. It’s so dark outside. Power must be down. Bet I could see the stars so clearly now.

“Earth to Linda. Where are you, pretty girl?”

I turn my head and smile at Noa. “I was on the shooting team in high school. I’m not secretly a cop undercover at FSU.”

Her typical grin blooms on her face and I grow lightheaded when I realize just how close it is.

“I didn’t think you were an undercover cop, baby.

” I squirm in my seat at the nickname. Seeing as she’s pressed against me, it doesn’t go unnoticed.

With a self-satisfied gleam in her eyes, she closes the gap between us and presses her soft lips against mine.

I exhale at the gentle, yet electrifying touch, my mouth opening for hers, but she doesn’t take advantage this time.

“Are you alright, Linda?” she asks instead.

“I don’t know. Am I?”

The world is ending, I’m kissing a woman, and I killed a man who threatened her.

Axel speaks up from the front: “You were badass there, Winnie.”

His praise chases away some of the numbness I feel in the aftermath of violence. I’ve never seen that much blood before...

“Definitely saved our asses.” Noa nods with a smirk.

I bite my lip, still tingly from Noa’s kiss. “If this happened a few days ago, I’d have been arrested. ”

Noa shakes her head, her once-perky fauxhawk lying flatter, her bubble-gum blue hair looking darker in the gloomy lighting from the dash.

“We’d never let that happen,” she vows. I picture her swooping in and rescuing me from all my problems with that quiet confidence she exudes.

The scenario warms my insides and I get the overwhelming urge to hug her.

Not fighting my impulses for physical contact for once in my life, I turn and wrap my arms around her.

I breathe in her scent, dreading when time on the road and the end of civilization will make it fade away.

When she squeezes me back, it feels as if her hands are iron bands holding me

together like a rickety barrel.

The emotions of what I had done finally breach the shield of numbness, and tears start flowing from my eyes, wetting Noa's neck.

As I gasp for air, she gently shushes me and kisses the top of my head.

Minutes pass while I unload my pain onto her, feeling more and more comfortable in her arms by the second.

It's like we're two puzzle pieces that fit together and not a poorly positioned Tetris block. I could get used to cuddling with her.

It happens slowly, and at first, I don't notice it.

Probably like I didn't notice it earlier this week when I was distracted by Noa's flirting as I was leaving class.

God, that feels like it happened ages ago.

Air pressure bears down on us, making my ears ring.

When the hairs on my body stand at attention, my eyes pop back open, and I pull back from Noa's embrace.

We share a wide-eyed look as my breathing picks back up, this time not from sadness, but pure animal fear.

Vibrations start shaking the car, and Axel eases off on the gas pedal, the vehicle slowing down.

A metallic screech sounds and I cover my ears with both hands.

“Turn the lights off!” Noa yells at Axel in the aftermath. “And get into the forest!”

Swearing, Axel pulls onto a forest maintenance road, then plunges us into complete darkness, turning even the dash lights off.

As we bounce around, the car hitting what feels like every pothole and root, I pray that we don’t ram headfirst into an oak tree.

When the foliage around us starts cracking and snapping against the car, Axel brings us to a stop.

That’s when I realize I’m clinging to Noa again.

No one dares to speak as the noise and the eerie static presence accompanying it continue – I hardly dare to even breathe.

Even when it begins to fade, we stay still.

I’m lulled into a surreal sense of safety by Noa’s thumb brushing over my shoulder, and when Axel breaks the silence, I twitch so violently that I feel like I jump up a foot, narrowly missing headbutting his sister.

“I need to take a leak,” he says.

“Right now?” Noa asks in a hiss. My eyes ping-pong between the dark shapes of the siblings, numbly fascinated by the exchange.

“They’re gone. And if they’re not, the sight of my monster cock will chase them away.

” With that, Axel opens the door, gets out of the car, and shuts it behind him.

Meanwhile, Noa gags, much like her brother did when he caught us kissing.

I flush, remembering how the touch of Noa’s lips against mine made me forget everything around us.

My body, already flooded with adrenaline, gets a new dose of hormones, and the fluttering sensations in my stomach are just too much. I start giggling.

Noa looks at me like I fell out of the sky along with the satellites, her eyes wide at first, then narrowing when her lips stretch into a grin. “You doing alright there, pretty girl?” she asks with a purr.

“I think I’m losing what’s left of my mind,” I say through my laughter.

I realize how much my eyes have adjusted to the dark when I see Noa’s silver ones flash with mischief. Her hand comes up to grab my chin, and she brushes the pad of her thumb over my lower lip. My laughter dies in my throat as my entire body shudders from the sensation. These darned butterflies...

Noa inches closer until our breaths mingle. I open my mouth to say something, but I’m not sure what. Do I... want her to kiss me again?

“Noa,” I breathe and she moans in return.

That moan turns into a growl when the door on Noa’s side opens suddenly, scaring the bejesus out of me.

“We should sleep here, wait for daylight,” Axel says, either not knowing he interrupted something or not caring. “Go take care of nature’s calls, ladies, I don’t

want you waking me up in the middle of the night with doors slamming or by getting abducted.”

Yeah, he makes leaving the car sound so appealing. But Noa takes a deep breath, then disentangles herself from me, making me blush harder. I didn’t even realize I was clinging to her again. She leaves the car and I follow, shuffling behind it so I can pee in a facsimile of privacy.

I squirm, quietly moving against the blankets I have piled behind me against the car door. My knees are pulled up because Noa decided to sleep in the back with me rather than in the front with Axel. I don’t mind, though – her body heat is warming my cold toes.

“Can’t sleep?” she whispers now, startling me. I didn’t know she was awake. Axel’s snores assure me that at least he is sleeping.

“I’m scared. And worried,” I admit in the dark. A rustling of blankets precedes Noa’s scent becoming stronger.

“I think that’s pretty normal, under the circumstances,” she breathes.

I bite my lip and nod. “How about you?” I ask. “I’m not keeping you up, am I?”

I think I see her smirking in the dark. “I’m used to you keeping me up,” she says. When her meaning registers, I stop breathing. Desire punches me in the stomach, hard, and I squeeze my legs together.

Oh, darn it , I think when Noa starts crawling toward me. Of course, she saw that. She sees everything I do. Her tattooed arm extends to pull my blanket off, exposing the

sweatpants and T-shirt I've been sleeping in these last few days.

"What are you doing?" I ask on an inhale.

"I know of a way to relax you so you can sleep," she whispers.

My throat clicks when I swallow, and I gape at the beautiful woman, her face coming closer by the second. She leans her forehead against mine.

"Lift your butt, pretty girl," she instructs, speaking so quietly you could hear a pin drop.

"W-why?" I stutter.

"So I can reach your pretty pussy," she replies, making the car spin around me.

"H-how do you know it's pretty?" I ask inanely, not knowing why that's the first thought that popped into my mind.

Noa growls quietly, a sound that seems to squeeze my ovaries in a vice grip.

"I pictured it so many times," she confesses.

Her hand taps against my side, and I obey the command without thinking, lifting my bum off the seat.

Her lips move to my earlobe. "I fucked myself so often thinking about it," she continues.

I stop breathing and hang on to her every word as she pulls my sweatpants down, taking my pink cotton undies with them.

She takes the soft flesh of my earlobe between her lips and sucks on it. My eyes roll to the back of my head.

“You did?” I prompt, all but begging her to continue. I know she realizes that because I feel her lips spread into a grin. Her hand slides under the hem of my top, stopping just below my aching breasts.

“Yeah,” she whispers, moving her lips down from my ear to my neck.

I arch into the caress. “I’d edge for hours.

Then I’d come so fucking hard,” she growls quietly, biting down on my sensitive skin.

I moan involuntarily, squirming, begging for her hand to move to my breasts, my nipples.

“Shhh. You can’t wake up Axel, or this will stop,” she chastises.

I can hear the satisfaction in her tone.

Like a hussy, I move my own hand to my mouth, covering my lips with my palm.

Noa’s body shakes with her silent laughter.

Suddenly, she pulls back, but before I can do more than whine in protest, she pushes my top up over my heaving chest. My body is now completely exposed to her in the dark and I can feel a flush covering it – not a lot of people have seen me like this, and when they did, I always wondered if they saw the stretch marks on my hips, the love handles above my waist. But the way Noa stares before wiping a hand over her mouth makes me feel like I could float away. She thinks I’m desirable.

“Fuck, none of my fantasies have done you justice, beautiful,” she whispers.

“Keep that pretty mouth covered,” she commands with a low, husky voice, before descending.

The moment her lips close over my nipple, my hips shoot off.

The way she pushes them down with both hands to hold me still ignites the flames inside me to a fever pitch.

I want to hump the air but she won’t let me and it’s driving me insane.

The touch of the barbell on her tongue over my tightened nipple makes me shut my eyes hard.

Oh my God. I feel like I’m about to come just from having my breasts played with for half a minute.

When she lets go of my hips to spread my legs, I almost cry with relief. She rests one arm on my tummy, gently pulling the skin taut as the other spreads my pussy lips with a soft touch.

“Noa,” I moan against my hand, but it comes out muffled.

Still, she must understand because she lifts her head from my chest and says, “Fuck, I can’t wait to hear you scream my name.” Her finger presses against my throbbing clit. “Now, come for me, baby,” she says on an exhale. “Don’t worry if you need to take your time. I won’t get bored, trust me.”

Take my time? I’m about to explode on the spot!

When her fingers gently probe my opening, fucking it shallowly, I bite my hand to stop from screaming for her right now, with her brother sleeping a couple of feet away.

“Mmm,” she says when she finds me wet and I can’t find it in me to feel embarrassed.

The only thing I’m thinking about is coming over this woman’s fingers.

When her mouth returns to my breasts and her fingers to my clit, I lean back against the car door with a thud.

Uncaring, I shake as she draws tight circles over my throbbing nub, doing it better than I ever did to myself.

Noa picks up the pace, sucking on my breast so hard I think she’s going to leave bruises.

Tears leak from the sides of my eyes as I near the peak of a mountain so high, I’m scared to let go.

When she turns her hand to finally breach me with her fingers and presses the heel of her palm against my clit, I let go.

I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m coming. A girl made me come.

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Noa

“You don’t look like a winner today, Winnie,” Axel says, looking at Linda in the rearview mirror. I turn my head and grin to myself. I moved back to the front seat when we hit the road not long ago. I figured she’d need some space to come to terms with what happened.

“She just didn’t sleep a lot,” I tell him, speaking into my fist. “You know, things that go bump in the night.” I have to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

I’m giddy, ecstatic even. Finally! Finally, I had a taste of my pretty girl.

It was enough to let me know this one small taste will never be enough, but I’m celebrating the win.

I can’t take it anymore and turn back to see her reaction to our words.

She’s pale and wide-eyed. I’ve seen that look before on girls who claimed as ardently as she always has that they’re straight.

Girls whose parents raised them to believe there’s only one type of love: between a man and a woman.

That sex only involves a penis and a vagina.

I’m going to do my best to show my girl that it’s okay to make love to a woman. One woman, to be specific – me.

I never had a moment of doubt. Girls were always it for me, and I never needed to experiment, never had that phase of trying to convince myself I liked boys – it wasn't even a question. I always hated it when someone asked how I could be so sure. Like, how do you know you're straight? You just do.

I never used to go around trying to convince girls to give me and my queerness a shot – I was too proud to do that, valued myself too much. But, ah, then came Linda .

Axel and I were cruising the campus when the term started two and a half years ago.

We weren't supposed to linger there – it's risky.

But a day like that was too good to pass up; all that fresh meat, away from the confining safety of their parents for the first time, curious about trying ecstasy at parties or needing Adderall for studying.

Linda wasn't a mark. I knew that the instant I saw her, wrapped in her fuzzy pink sweater, eyes hiding behind a curtain of blonde hair.

But I honed in like a homing beacon anyway, my target permanently locked.

There was something about her that hooked its claws into me, never to let go.

Maybe it was the vulnerability she exuded like an expensive perfume.

Did I believe in soulmates? Not until that moment, no.

But ever since I first laid eyes on her, Axel and I have been on campus on a daily basis.

At first, I told him getting to know the kids would make them loyal customers, plus

we'd get info about their party scene.

Though bribing campus security into overlooking our presence and getting fake student IDs was costly.

Then I stopped giving excuses. I knew he saw me searching for Linda, my eyes following her wherever she went.

Sometimes he got a bit mad at me for putting my heart on the line for an innocent straight girl, but he soon saw it was pointless to try and change my mind. I was hopelessly in love – I still am.

Last night, when I was... relaxing her... I came with her just by squeezing my legs together while my fingers were inside her and my mouth was on her breast. My body ignited when I felt her trembling, when I saw how easily she trusted me with her pleasure.

When her pussy clenched around my fingers, it took everything in me not to reach between my legs with my other hand, give myself the same relief I was giving her.

But I instinctively clenched my thighs, and the next thing I knew, I was in heaven.

I don't think she noticed and I didn't want her to – last night was about taking care of her, not about me getting off.

She's not my sex toy; I never want her to think that. But, fuck, I'll be anything she wants.

"We'll be at the base soon," I murmur now, my voice coming out low and husky. The way her facial muscles relax warms my heart. She even gives me a tentative little smile, and I want to bite my fist again from all the emotions it evokes. She's so damn

precious.

“Do you think they communicate with other bases?” she asks quietly. “Would I be able to find out if my parents made it to safety?”

My heart clenches at the pain in her voice.

I’m half tempted to command my brother to turn toward California instead.

But seeing as traveling just one hundred and fifty miles is taking this long, I’m not sure if we’d ever make it across the continent.

I wonder what it’s like to be close to your parents.

They were mostly just gene donors for Axel and me.

“Sure,” I say, though I worry I’m just placating her. I turn forward again, not wanting to see the hope on her face. “Eventually.”

“We’re probably gonna have to share our food when we get there,” Axel rumbles. I hum and tap my fingers against my knees, thinking.

“How about if we bury it near the base? That way we can always go get some food if they don’t have enough,” I suggest.

My brother scoffs. “If they let us out, you mean.”

Linda leans forward between our seats, her scent of vanilla and raspberries invading my nose like an ancient curse made especially for me. My clit pulses at the memory of how strong the scent was under her large, soft breasts.

“We should share our food with the other survivors,” she says vehemently. “Not everyone was as lucky as we were to get some before the shelves were emptied.”

I scrunch up my nose at her innocent sensibilities. I bet Axel’s going to have something nice to say about that. Ah, yes, here we go.

“You’re more naïve than a fairytale princess trusting her stepmother, Pooh. These same people you want to share our hard-earned food with would raise their noses at you if you were starving on the street.”

He’s right, of course, and Linda must realize it too because she plops back into her seat and I can see her bounce against the backrest in the rearview mirror. Her shoulders slump and her hands fall onto her lap dejectedly.

I open my mouth to soothe the burn, but Axel slams the brakes just as I do, and I’m propelled forward. Good thing I always wear a seatbelt. Linda slams into my seat with a grunt. Before I can check that she’s alright, I see what had Axel braking like a maniac – another roadblock.

“Fuck!” I hiss. These bandits have guns, not rocks. “Go, go, go!” I yell at Axel, but he’s already turning the car around. My brother was never slow to react. We spent enough time on the streets to get the skills we needed to survive.

“Get down,” he growls and I obey instinctively. With my head under the dash, I look back at my girl. She’s frozen in fear and I can’t blame her. I extend my arm and she reaches for it. I yank her forward and down until our faces are inches apart.

“Stay low, they have guns.” I keep my eyes on her wide, green ones, and almost feel like praying we don’t get hurt. Not when I finally connected with her.

Gunfire sounds over the squealing of tires as we take off in the direction we came

from.

Bullets ricochet off the trunk with loud plinking sounds.

Fuck, if one penetrates the metal, there's only the backseat between it and the love of my life.

The car swerves as they hit one of our tires and Linda lets out a strangled yelp.

This is karma because we were going to bury our food and not share it like Linda suggested we do.

As the group wastes bullets even after we're out of range and the car rumbles down the road on at least one flat tire, I continue squeezing Linda's hand tightly. I'm never letting go.

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Linda

Axel kicks the car, sitting uselessly in the shrubbery. We have not one but two flat tires and we're lucky to have even made it to safety without one of us catching a bullet.

"How far away are we?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"I don't know, about fifty miles," Noa answers, chewing on her lower lip.

I've never seen her display any kind of coping mechanism like that before, and it stresses me out so much that I snap the elastic band on my wrist three times before her hand envelops it.

"We can do it in two or three days if we follow Choctawhatchee Bay," she soothes, pulling me against her body with an arm around my waist. For a moment, I'm too busy blushing and processing this new nearness to worry about the long and dangerous hike.

"How many bullets do you have left in that gun of yours, Winnie?" Axel asks darkly.

"Ah. Four." My neck gets itchy thinking about where the missing bullet went.

In all the excitement, I forgot that I'm now a murderer.

Noa must be reading my mind because her hand comes up to my back to run soothing circles over it.

The urge to melt into her touch is so strong.

Why is it so easy with this girl? Even with boys, whom I'm meant to like, it took me a few weeks of dating before I felt comfortable with casual intimacy.

"We're gonna need them," he growls, opening the trunk with more force than necessary.

"Shh," Noa hisses. "I know you're frustrated, but keep it down. We don't know who or what's in the shadows. "

Great. Just what I needed to hear. I reach for my elastic but encounter Noa's hand instead.

I peer up at her awkwardly and get a lopsided smirk in return.

I feel an echo of what she did to me last night, phantom fingers caressing my pussy.

When I clench my thighs together, I lose my balance and transfer most of my weight onto her.

As my face heats up, her grin widens, and she lowers her head to give me a peck on the lips.

Once she pulls back, she gazes into my eyes so deeply, I feel like they're hugging me.

"If you're done with the smoochy, smoochy shit, we have to pack our stuff." Axel's voice brings me back to this planet.

"Right," Noa purrs, patting my butt and then moving to the open trunk with an extra pep in her step.

Axel pulls out the lightest backpack and hands it to me.

I take it and gulp at its still-considerable weight.

How am I going to walk fifty miles, over perhaps uneven ground, with a heavy backpack?

But I don't say anything, of course; I'm far too grateful to the siblings to express my fears and maybe come off as a whiny little girl.

Even though I feel like dropping to the ground, smashing my fists against the soil, and bemoaning the situation our planet found itself in.

Instead, I shoulder the straps and hop a bit to distribute the weight.

Noa, her own taller backpack already on, approaches me again and starts tightening my straps.

"Did you pack the toy?" she murmurs near my ear.

It takes me a moment to catch the meaning, but when I remember the purple rose sex toy, I bug out my eyes at her. "W-why?" I ask with a trembling voice.

Noa winks at me sassily. "We're going to need it tonight."

I hesitate for a second. "I... did," I finally admit.

She bites her lower lip and my clit tingles at the sight. "Good girl," she breathes.

I'm going to walk around wet, aren't I?

I swat away another mosquito. At this point, I think I fed an entire extended family of the buzzing insects. This is not the kind of bloodsucking I meant when I fantasized about having a vampire boyfriend back in high school.

“You hanging in there, Pooh?”

Axel’s voice is gentle enough that I double-check he’s talking to me. But, of course, I’m the only one he’d call by a fictional bear’s name.

“Do you want the truth?” I mutter, blinking the sweat out of my eyes. We’ve been walking for hours and have only taken a few breaks to eat and use the bushes’ outdoor bathroom facilities. Bushrooms?

Axel scoffs. “You don’t have to sugarcoat it. I’m itching down to my ballsack too.”

I wrinkle my nose at the imagery. I don’t want to think about Axel’s chafing balls.

“No one wants to think about your balls, doofus,” Noa voices my thoughts out loud, and I can’t help but giggle despite my exhaustion.

Something tickles my palm and I look down to see Noa’s fingers grazing against the skin.

It’s almost like she’s asking for permission to hold my hand.

An ember lights in my chest and it feels a lot like happiness.

How can I possibly feel happiness when the world around us is going down the drain?

I don't know, but I go with it. I splay my hand until our palms overlap and our fingers intertwine.

Feeling almost as shy as when she had that same hand between my legs, I look up at her from underneath my lashes.

One corner of her lips is up and her flashing silver eyes are on my face.

When she notices me peeking at her, she squeezes my hand once.

For a moment, I worry whether my palm feels as swampy as the greenery around us, but the doubts are quickly forgotten when she continues displaying that smug smirk.

Is she actually proud to be holding my hand?

A lump forms in my throat at the thought.

I don't think anyone's ever been proud of me, except for my parents and grandparents.

Axel looks back and rolls his eyes when he sees us holding hands. "You two are going to get eaten by an alligator together."

"I'm more worried about the cottonmouths," Noa mutters, and I freeze, tugging on her arm as inertia keeps her going forward.

"S-snakes?" I ask with a shaky voice.

Axel clicks his tongue. "Now you've done it, you broke Winnie."

I look around in a panic. Every dense patch of foliage looks like the ideal hiding

place for a nope-rope. Noa grabs my other hand and steps close, giving me no choice but to look at her.

“We’re sticking to cleared trails, sweetheart. And we’ll find somewhere elevated to sleep,” she says, the endearment momentarily distracting me from worrying about reptilians.

“Right, there’s a campground nearby,” Axel says with a forcefully cheerful voice.

Noa gives him the side-eye. “How do you know that?”

Axel scratches the back of his head, looking away with pursed lips. “Well, I used to bring Jenny here for some privacy.”

Noa sighs dramatically. “I knew you were banging that floozy,” she accuses her brother.

“Hey, throw no stones, Sis, you’re the one who pined over a straight girl for almost three years.” With that, he starts walking again.

I look at Noa and expect to see some chagrin. Instead, she winks at me and says, “Guilty.” I feel my face ignite with... satisfaction?

As we start following Axel, I war with asking her a question that’s been bugging me for a while. In the end, my curiosity wins. “You liked me for that long?”

Noa hums and gives my hand a squeeze. “Yup.”

“And, umm...”

“And, what?” she encourages.

“And... have you been with anyone else during this time?” I finally ask.

Surprisingly, her cheeks start glowing in the late evening light. “A few times. When I’d see you around with a boy.”

Why do I suddenly feel guilty? Until a couple of days ago, I didn’t even know I liked her. Still, I start defending myself. “Oh, well, that must not have happened often. I’ve been busy and the guys here... well, they never know what they want, always want to keep their options open. ”

Noa smirks again and flicks her tongue out to lick her lower lip. The glinting barbell draws my gaze. “Well, their loss is my win.” Her voice turns low and husky. “I know exactly what I want, beautiful.”

My heart skips a beat, the pulse instead going right to my clit. How many times did I fantasize about a boy telling me I’m it for them? That they’re sure about me and want no one else? That I felt safe in a relationship...

“And, just so you know.” Noa’s words jolt me out of my daze. She slows to a stop and, still connected with her by our hands, I follow. When my eyes catch hers, she gives me a languid smile. “I was thinking about you every single time.”

My jaw unhinges at her implication. “I...” I don’t know how to feel about that.

Sorry for the girls because her head was with me and not them?

A bit worried about the stalker vibes Noa’s been giving off here?

If I’m honest with myself, I’m still just feeling...

smug. “Thanks,” I whisper, making her smile turn beaming.

“Come oooon, ladies!” Axel calls from ahead. “We’re almost at the camp, gaze into each other’s eyes lovingly there.”

With a grin, Noa pulls me after her brother once again. True to Axel’s word, we reach the campground in under an hour, just as the evening light starts dimming.

“What’s that sound?” Noa asks quietly.

I strain my ears and catch murmuring sounds in several different cadences. I gasp. “Sounds like people!” Leaving Noa behind, I pick up the pace and head deeper into the campground.

“Linda, wait!” Axel hisses when I overtake him.

“They could be dangerous,” his sister adds.

I slow down and let them catch up. I already forgot about our most recent encounter with the human race. Heck, it seems like everything is out to get us since the invasion. The only people we’ve seen were corpses, other looters, or highway bandits.

“Let me go first and have that gun ready, kiddo,” Axel says lowly.

“I’m barely younger than you,” I mutter, my priorities misplaced.

When we turn a corner, we see a family of four packing up what looks like the remains of their dinner off the picnic table. They’re putting everything into a car. I gasp again and call out to them. They can’t be a threat to us with little kids, right?

“Hey!” I yell, waving my hands. “Wait up!”

They freeze for a moment and gape at us, then spring back into action, taking what they can carry to the car.

“Hey, we won’t hurt you!” Noa shouts. “We’re heading to the base!”

The family doesn’t stop to listen, though, all but throwing everything onto the seats and jumping in after it.

“Please, wait!” I whine, my tired legs giving me their last pathetic amount of strength to jog after the car.

“Don’t bother, Winnie,” Axel grumbles. “They’re too afraid. I can’t blame them.”

“I can,” I grumble, plopping my ass down on the bench at the picnic table and slumping forward until I’m half lying across it.

“Why did they stop this close to the base?” Noa wonders, letting her backpack slide off. Once her hands are free, she reaches for mine. Oh, right. I got so used to the weight, it became a part of my tortured body.

“Maybe they had the same idea as us,” Axel muses. “Finish off the food before they have to share.”

I whine into the weathered wood before straightening so Noa can relieve me of the extra weight.

“Hey, bro, is there a shower nearby?” Noa asks with an even voice. My ears perk up like a Labrador’s at that. It’s only been a week since I had one, but the concept feels like a cherished memory.

“Ah, sure,” he mutters. “They have solar cells too, so it should be warm.”

“Amazing,” I breathe to Noa’s great amusement.

She tugs on my ponytail. “Come on. Ladies first.”

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Noa

I feel my lips stretch into the widest smile as I watch Linda's round ass flounce ahead of me to the campground's showers.

I love seeing her happy. I don't know how many little joys I can offer her during a freaking alien apocalypse, but whatever I can find in whatever amount of time we have, I'll give to her.

I haven't said out loud that I don't think we'll survive as a race, at least not for very long.

Just look at the destruction the aliens wrought in only a few days.

I wonder what percentage of the human population is already gone.

I shake my head and disperse the negative thoughts with the motion. Focus on the here and now, Noa. And right now, you're about to see the object of your desires gloriously wet and naked. I bite my lip hard to stop myself from moaning out loud.

"What's that?" Linda asks over her shoulder.

"What? Nothing."

She gives me a strange look. Did I actually moan? Or are my thoughts that loud?

When we enter the building, we first look at every corner, like an alien would bother

to wait in ambush. Once we see the coast is clear, I drop our stuff and start stripping. “I think we should share a shower, just to be safe,” I say, avoiding her eyes.

“S—safe?” she stutters.

I bite my lip and try to stop my shoulders from shaking. “Yeah. And, you know, conserve water.”

“Uh-huh.” She sounds skeptical. Just as I’m about to turn around to prod her along, I hear the rustling of her clothes. My breathing turns choppy, and by the time I bend over to take my socks off, I’ve worked myself up into a quivering mess. Fuck, I need to come so bad.

I walk into the closest shower and turn the water on. After waiting just a few seconds, it turns sublimely warm. This time I do moan.

Linda clears her throat with a shy sound and I remember the love of my life is naked just a couple of feet away.

“Jump in,” I encourage, not looking in her direction.

I don’t want her to run off, but, fuck, it’s so hard not to check out the merchandise.

From what I saw in the darkness last night, her body is made for sin, all soft curves and dips.

I step under the flow and tilt my head up. The water feels so good, I could almost be convinced to believe that it’ll wash away this past week. I sense Linda’s presence by my side and move a bit, letting her partake. I can’t hold back anymore. I open my eyes and look at my pretty girl.

The water turned her hair the color of wet sand.

It sticks to her neck and shoulders, covering her round breasts.

I bite my tongue as I track the rivulets of water down her slightly rounded belly and wide hips to the golden curls between her thighs.

She has a cheeky landing strip, the hair there longer than at the sides, where the growth mirrors a week without shaving being a priority.

My ears are full with the roaring of my pulse and the spray of water, so it takes me a second to realize my girl's calling out for me.

"Noa?"

"Ye—" I clear my throat. "Yes?"

"Do you still think I'm beautiful?" she asks uncertainly, moving her arms to cover her belly. Her eyes flicker between my face and my pierced nipples.

"Stop," I whisper, grabbing her hands. I look around and spot a shower gel on the corner shelf.

It's men's, but I don't give a damn right now.

I place her hands at her sides and let go so I can grab and uncap the bottle.

"Let me show you how beautiful I think you are," I murmur, holding her tearful green gaze.

I lather up the shower gel, then place my hands on her neck .

“Your skin is gorgeous,” I tell her, moving my hands over her shoulders, pushing the hair back.

“These,” I say, swirling the bubbles over her breasts.

“These drive me wild,” I growl. I can’t resist pinching her puckered nipples.

When she gasps and clenches her thighs together, I groan savagely.

This girl is turning me into a Neanderthal.

I’m about to drag her to my cave by her hair.

But first, I want to conquer her cave. I stifle a snort.

After gently washing her stomach, I grab her hip with one hand and slide the other over those alluring curls.

“This,” I hiss, parting her with my middle finger.

I put my lips against her trembling ones.

“I can’t stop thinking about your pussy, Linda.

” I catch her exhale with my mouth as I press my finger gently inside her warmth.

My tongue invades and dominates her mouth with the same rhythm as my hand between her legs.

I use my body to push her against the shower wall.

“All I think about is tasting you,” I tell her.

I hold her gaze as I slowly lower myself down to my knees.

Her round eyes are going to feed my fantasies until the day I die, whether it’s soon or in half a century.

I run my nails through her curls, gently scratching her pubic bone.

When she squirms under my touch, I use the hand at her side to press her back more firmly.

“Be a good girl,” I purr. “Spread those gorgeous thighs for me.”

Linda gasps but does as I say, hesitantly widening her stance.

“Perfect,” I praise, then use my fingers to hold her open for my gaze.

When her pink clit comes out like it’s begging for my attention, I nearly come without any stimulation.

Fuck, this girl is going to be the end of me.

I extend my tongue, making sure she sees everything that’s about to happen, and flick it over her needy bean.

“Noa,” she gasps. One hand lands on my shoulder, the other slaps against the shower wall.

“Mmm,” I purr. “Nothing more delicious than my pretty girl.”

I swear even her pussy blushes. Either that or all the blood went south at my compliment.

Either way, I'm done going slow. I bury my face in her pussy, sucking on her like I want to eat her soul through her cunt.

Both of her hands are on my head now, and there's nothing shy about the way she pulls me in or the way she rubs herself against my face.

I dig my fingers into her soft flesh for balance and use the other hand to penetrate her with my middle finger. I'm a wild thing, licking and sucking at her core, while my finger impales her with rapid thrusts. I want to make her come all over my face.

"Noa, oh God, Noa, God, please," she whines, her pleas making me dizzy.

Anything, anything you want, take it.

When her fingers clench around the wet strands of my hair, I know I have her. Linda comes with a pretty keening sound, followed by small sobs, sounding in time with the pulsing of her channel around my finger.

When she slides down the wall, I let her, guiding her descent.

As soon as her face is level with mine, I kiss her.

I know she can taste herself on my lips because she pulls back and smacks her mouth with a curious expression.

I can't help but smile at her innocence, even though I'm one touch away from combusting.

When her heaving chest snags my attention, I have to close my eyes so I don't fall on her like a savage.

"Noa?" my girl asks shyly.

"Yes?"

"Can I... do something for you?"

My blood turns electric. Does she want to...

I clear my throat before meeting her gaze. "Like?"

Flushed from either nerves, her orgasm, or the heat of the shower, she moves her lips like she's about to start speaking a few times before finally using her voice. "I want to make you come too."

I can't help the moan that echoes off the shower tiles. "I came so many times thinking about you saying that to me," I admit.

Her lips curl into a pleased smile. I love the way her confidence is starting to emerge, bit by bit. "Tell me what to do."

"You can do whatever you want to me," I say, but move until my back is against the wall too. I bring my knees up. "Come here." I pat my lap .

With nervous movements, she positions herself above me, her eyes glued between my legs. "What if I hurt you?" she mumbles.

I grab her soft hips, pulling her down. "Bring that pussy here before I die."

We both moan as our skin makes contact, her hot cunt covering my pubic mound.

“Now what?” she squeaks.

I push her wet hair back until I can see her face. “Angle so your clitty rubs against me and ride me until you come.”

Linda’s mouth falls open. “But... this is about you, not me.”

I grin at her. “Trust me, baby, I’ll get there.”

After opening and closing her mouth a few times, a thoroughly scandalized look on her pretty face, she tentatively swings back and then forward again, moving over me slowly.

“Oh,” she gasps and I forget how to breathe. I’m too far gone to enjoy the way she’s expanding her horizons with me.

“Please, Linda,” I beg, gazing up at her breathlessly. “Fuck, I need to come so bad, you’re killing me.”

My girl gets that determined look on her face, before she wraps her arms around my shoulders, brings our foreheads together, and starts moving her hips in a circular motion designed to drive me crazy. Every time she rocks, our slick pussies grind together, setting my nerves on fire.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I breathe, my hands clenching and releasing, probably bruising her perfect skin. The thought of marking her like that drives me insane with possessiveness. Tears gather in my eyes, washed away by the water from the shower. I can’t believe my Linda is about to make me come.

I lean my head back so I can take her in, the look of concentration and pleasure twisting her gorgeous features into a sinful display of lust. My mouth falls open as my muscles start twitching. Fuck, I'm almost there.

Almost, almost...

Linda...

"I love you," I moan as my world slips free from its axis. My eyes squeeze shut as my body clenches so hard it's almost painful... then releases in bliss.

When she falls against me, shaking, I have just enough neurons still firing to wrap my arms around her and hold her against me.

Fuck.

There's no moving on from this, from her. I'd rather die.

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Linda

I can't believe she told me she loves me.

Noa gives me one last kiss before she turns to leave the shower and grab our towels.

I'm mesmerized by the colorful tattoos on display, glistening with water drops.

My gaze is drawn to her firm ass. I never thought I'd find the curve between a woman's ass and thighs so appealing.

I lick my lips, still tingling from her passionate kisses.

Wait...

"What is that?" I ask, and Noa freezes with her arm outstretched.

She turns her head back with wide eyes. "Is that... my name?" I squeak, staring at the familiar cursive script on the uppermost part of her thigh, just visible at the juncture of her legs.

"You have my name tattooed between your legs? And is that my handwriting?"

"I can explain," she says slowly in her deep, husky voice.

I throw my hands up. "How does one explain that?"

Her lips curl into a lascivious smirk. “You’re right, the explanation is just as unhinged.”

Now I’m curious. I leave the shower stall and pad closer, squinting at the tattoo. “Go on,” I encourage.

“Well,” she starts. “It was a really hot day last summer and you were in the park, jogging.”

I bug my eyes out. It must have been one of my many pathetic attempts to get fit.

“Actually, you didn’t jog very far, but it was enough for your top to get sweaty and stick to your skin.” Noa winks at me .

I flush with embarrassment. I must’ve been so yucky. “You were watching me?” I ask, chagrined.

“Oh, I recorded it,” she returns.

“Excuse you?” I gasp.

“Mhm.” She nods empathetically. “Then I went home and jilled off to it so many times I thought my pussy was gonna catch fire.”

I think my face is going to catch fire. I place a hand on my chest, over my tempestuous heartbeat. Noa grabs my shoulders, caressing my skin with her thumbs.

“I thought to myself how you destroyed my pussy without even knowing it.” Her eyes gleam with mischief. “The next day, I accidentally bumped into you as you were carrying your books, and stole a term paper when I was helping you pick them up.”

I remember that. I thought I had lost it in the confusion, and it was a windy day. I can't believe she orchestrated it.

"I went to my usual tattoo guy that same day and put your stamp of ownership over my sore cunt on my body." She bites her lip when I squirm. "I came twice from the sting and vibrations."

I gawk at her. I can't believe she just admitted to all of this. Recording me, masturbating to videos of me I didn't know she took, stealing my signature so she could tattoo it in a private area.

I've never been a skinny girl and the many school bullies took every opportunity to remind me of that fact.

When I got a bit older, there were a few boys who didn't mind that I didn't look like a swimsuit model, but none of them have ever made me feel as desired as Noa does.

While other girls were sending their boyfriends nudes, I wanted to have sex with my top on.

Some of the boyfriends didn't mind. I can't imagine Noa letting me hide any part of myself from her, though.

Her actions are like an intro to Criminal Minds, but... It's not fear I'm feeling.

I step from foot to foot, chewing on my bottom lip.

"Noa?"

Her hands slide down my arms. "Yes, pretty girl?"

I hesitate, looking up at her steady silver gaze. Heck it all . “God, please make me come again, I need to come,” I admit in a rush.

Her grin turns downright evil as she forces her thigh between mine and pulls me against her with a hand on my ass. “Ride me, baby,” she says in a low growl.

I throw my arms around her neck and pull her down for a wet kiss. Her tongue piercing hits my teeth, but I don’t care. My focus is narrowed on the slick area between my legs, pressed against the silky skin of her firm thigh.

“You’re so fucking hot, Linda,” she whispers against my lips before recapturing my mouth.

My head is spinning. The way she sees me, the way she wants me, is so intoxicating.

I rock, rubbing against her faster and faster as I picture her in her bed with her hand between her legs, the other holding her phone where videos of me are playing.

I imagine her coming, over and over, my name on her lips. Oh, God .

“I’m almost there,” I whine, clutching her body like I might die if she leaves. Which I might.

Her hand presses on me harder, intensifying the grind. “Yeah, sweetheart?” she whispers, her lips moving to my ear. “You’re gonna come for me? You’re gonna be my good girl and come on my thigh?” She trails kisses over my skin and bites down on my neck.

“Yes!” I moan, my movements losing all rhythm as my clit explodes again, spreading hot waves of heaven through my body.

“Oh, Linda, baby,” Noa keens, twitching and shuddering against me.

When I catch my breath, I pull back and look up at her. She has a goofy expression on her impish face. “Did you come too?” I ask shyly.

She nods and wiggles. It’s then I notice her pelvis is pressed against me. “It really doesn’t take me much when it comes to you,” she says with a chuckle.

I giggle and bury my face in her chest. I feel light as a feather. Is this what it feels like to be high?

“Hey, ladies!” Axel shouts from outside. “Leave some warm water for me, will ya?”

Noa sighs and pulls back. She tips up my chin with two fingers. “Let’s find somewhere safe to sleep and make out while Axel showers. ”

I feel my cheeks color even though we’ve already done so much more than just make out like teenagers. I smile at her, though, and nod. Because that sounds... really nice.

We reach Freeport early the following day and all my good mood dissipates.

“What the fuck?” Axel breathes as we pass the third pile of bodies. My eyes are watering from the smell and sight of the bloated corpses and buzzing insects. Not paying attention to where I’m walking, I trip over rubble and almost faceplant. Thankfully, Noa is there to catch me.

“Careful,” she murmurs, her voice carrying a note of sympathy.

“Did the aliens put them like this?” I mumble through my hand, covering my mouth

and nose.

“I don’t know, baby,” she answers. Her hand squeezes my shoulder as she steers me past the grotesque hill of bodies and body parts.

Something clatters in the distance and we freeze.

“What was that?” I hiss, my hand going to the gun in my waistband.

“Stay close,” Axel orders us, reaching a hand for his sister’s free one.

We walk past smashed storefronts and abandoned cars, the roads blocked by them like whoever was in them just left...

or got dragged out. I shudder and Noa squeezes me again in response.

I peer up at her face, her eyes narrowed and alert to our surroundings.

A sense of gratitude strikes me again. I’m so lucky to have her in my life.

As if sensing my gaze, her eyes meet mine, and the side of her mouth curls into a smirk.

She throws me a wink before returning her attention to the possible danger in our vicinity. Something I should be doing as well.

Shuffling footsteps sound over our quiet ones and we come to a halt again. Is it the aliens or more looters? We didn’t hear their spaceships last night, but maybe they use ground transportation too? My hand clenches over the grip of my gun, my finger inching toward the trigger.

“Easy,” Noa murmurs as if sensing my intentions. I never thought I’d be a shoot-first, ask-questions-later kind of girl, but this apocalypse is bringing out the vigilante in me.

A man turns the corner behind an undisturbed ice cream parlor.

His movements are jerky and unsynchronized, and I wonder for a moment if he took some kind of drug to avoid the harsh reality around us.

The man’s eyes land on us and dread pools in my stomach.

There’s something so very off about that lifeless gaze. He starts heading in our direction.

“Hey, man!” Axel shouts. “Stay the fuck back!”

Not hearing or not caring, the man’s pace increases. His eyes are locked on Noa and me, ignoring Axel completely. Like he’s not even here. I aim the muzzle of my weapon at the approaching junkie.

“Wait,” Axel says, bending down to grab a discarded baseball bat someone must have used as a weapon during those first couple of days of looting.

When the man reaches us, lifting his arms like he’s about to tackle us to the ground, Axel swings the bat.

Air whistles around the wooden object, then a sharp crack resounds as the man walks into the path of the swing.

I flinch and point the gun down, not wanting to waste a bullet in a blind panic.

The man hits the ground with a thud and lies unmoving, his blind eyes open at the morning sky.

I quickly look away from the head wound before I empty my stomach on the sidewalk.

Noa tugs on my hand. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“She’s right,” Axel adds. “That was loud as fuck. Who knows what heard it.”

I resist the urge to whimper. Why did he have to say ‘what’ and not ‘who’? Who is bad enough, obviously!

As we sidestep the man, I briefly wonder if he’ll end up on the piles with the rest of the corpses. I’m starting to miss snakes being my most pressing worry.

We slink quietly through the city, avoiding the dead and the living. Though the few that we do see seem to be more concerned with hiding from us rather than attacking like the man did. It takes another hour of walking on pins and needles before we finally reach the outskirts.

“It always seemed like such a small city from the car,” Axel grumbles, wiping the sweat off his brow. It feels a lot hotter with all the cement around us than it did around the waterways.

Noa snorts at her brother’s words. “Shows us just how reliant we’ve gotten on modern amenities.”

“I’m sure going to miss having a hairdryer in the winter,” I mumble. “You know, if we live that long.”

“Uh-uh,” Noa tuts. “Don’t talk like that. You’re going to die at ninety-nine, with my head between your juicy thighs.”

“Gross,” Axel mutters as I choke on my spit.

Does Noa think we’re going to stay together forever?

Does she want to? I mean, she probably does; she tattooed my name between her legs after all.

I warm up for an entirely different reason, thinking of that tattoo and what’s near it.

I shake my head, backtracking from the tangent.

Do I want to stay with her forever? Am I going to get to that base and fall for some uniformed airman?

As we stop for Axel to check out yet another car, I look at Noa from the corner of my eye.

Her neck is damp from perspiration, making the rose tattoo on the side of it gleam in the late-morning sun.

The tank top she’s wearing exposes her long, lean arms and the many tattoos there.

When she takes a deep breath, her breasts stretch the top’s material, allowing for sunlight to glint off the piercings there.

My mouth waters at the thought of the naughty bars.

Darn it . I don’t think I’m going to want anyone other than her for a long time.

“Yes!” Axel exclaims when the orange hatchback’s engine turns over. “Get in, losers.”

Noa

The car barely had enough gas to get us to Choctaw Beach, but the fifteen-minute ride saved us probably close to five hours of walking. Looking at how gingerly Linda places one foot in front of the other, just two hours later, really makes me appreciate the little luck we had with it.

I nudge my brother with an elbow. “Let’s call it a day,” I tell him.

His eyebrows shoot up, and I tilt my chin at my girlfriend. Then I have to resist doing a happy dance at catching myself referring to her as my girlfriend. That would be totally undignified, not to mention my feet hurt too.

Axel rolls his eyes (probably because of my mothering Linda and not from reading my thoughts), but doesn’t complain that it’s only mid-afternoon and that there’s still plenty of daylight.

“I guess that’s fine,” he says. “We’re probably better off sleeping around the Bayou and not in Niceville anyway. ”

Looking around, I see a state park on one side and assisted living accommodations on the other. “Gators or the elderly?” I ask, making Axel laugh.

Linda stops daydreaming and blinks up at us sleepily. “Are we taking a break?” she asks, a hopeful note in her sweet voice.

I tug on her drooping ponytail. “Wanna see if any of the showers in these buildings

work?”

A flush spreads from her cheeks, looking a bit sharper than a week ago, and down to her breasts. Hmm. I’m going to need to make sure she gets enough food. I don’t want any of her curves to be a casualty of the apocalypse.

“By the way,” I begin, running the palm of my hand over her back. “Since you’re my girlfriend now, it’s only natural that we share a bed from now on.”

Linda was in the process of adorably looking each way before crossing the road, like it’s rush-hour traffic. When my words sink in, she whips her head to me, her eyes bugged out.

“G–girlfriend?” she stammers.

“Mmm,” I hum, nodding. “Got a problem with that, beautiful?”

“I... You want me to be your girlfriend?”

Her voice sounds so small, and my hand on her lower back clenches in anger, bunching up the fabric of her top. I want the names of every person who’s made her feel less than perfect, so I can put a hex on them.

I unclench my jaw, worried she’ll think I’m angry at her. “There’s nothing I want more than for you to be my girlfriend, Linda. Except for maybe my wife,” I whisper.

My brother makes gagging sounds, which I ignore, because Linda’s blinking at me with what could almost be heart-eyes.

For a moment, I’m worried she’s only going along with me because I’m the first person who’s been decent to her in a relationship, but I quickly shoo the thoughts

away. I will make her fall in love with me.

Letting the subject drop and giving her the chance to come to terms with it, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and guide her the rest of the way across the road in silence.

There are a few cars still in the parking lot of the closest building, though they all have their fuel hatches open.

Glass crunches under our feet as we walk up to the entrance.

While the building itself is untouched, it looks like windows have shattered from either nearby explosions or the vibrations coming off the alien ships.

“Think the residents made it out?” Linda asks, clearly worried about the retired people who moved here to enjoy the warm climate.

“I don’t see any corpses yet,” Axel replies. “We’ll see how many we find inside.” Linda looks at him in dismay and I sigh. My brother has zero tact. Not seeing any issues with what he said, he enters the building through a smashed glass panel.

“Come on, sweetie,” I encourage my girl with a hand on her back.

I want to cover her behind just in case any looters are still here or have made this their base.

She carefully squeezes through the opening and I follow after.

While entering the building proved easy, the apartments themselves are a different story.

“Who locks their place when they’re running for their lives?” Axel grumbles when

we hit the tenth sturdy locked door.

I look at the electronic lock. “It’s probably automatic. And maybe they thought they’d be back soon. Or hoped.”

“Can’t you just break in?” Linda asks, curiosity on her face.

I exchange a look with my brother. “It’ll make a lot of noise,” I say.

“Worth the risk?” he asks, slapping the baseball bat he kept against the palm of his hand.

I look out the window, miraculously unbroken, at the door, and finally at an exhausted-looking Linda. “Go for it,” I decide.

There’s a click behind us. “Don’t!” a male voice says immediately after.

I turn around to be greeted by a shotgun.

I’m getting mighty tired of having those aimed at me.

Moreover, I’m really fucking not feeling having one aimed at my girl.

This time, the gun is in the hands of a wide-eyed older man.

A woman, probably his wife, cowers behind him, peeking over his shaking shoulder.

We raise our hands in unison and I see Linda’s gun isn’t in hers.

“We don’t want any trouble,” I tell the couple. “We were just looking for somewhere to rest before heading to Eglin like the radio said.”

The man and woman exchange glances. The woman's lower lip trembles before she opens her mouth to speak. "Do you have any food?"

"Harriet!" the man admonishes. "They could be hooligans. Look at all the tattoos on those two. Some are probably gang signs."

Axel scoffs. "We're not in a gang." He tilts his head at Linda. "Does she look like a killer?"

I start coughing, drawing the couple's gaze. "Sorry," I say. "We've been walking in the sun, my throat's dry."

"Oh, put the gun down, Jack," Harriet says. "They're nice young people, I can tell."

Her husband glares at her. "A few minutes ago, you were saying they could be here to sacrifice us to the aliens."

A blush shows easily through Harriet's thinning skin. "Well, that was before."

"Yeah, before you wanted their food," Jack grumbles, but puts the shotgun down nonetheless.

I breathe a sigh of relief and lower my hands.

"Well, come inside before those zombies show up," Jack says, then turns his back on us like we're no threat at all.

"Wait, did you say zombies?" Linda squeaks.

Harriet blinks at us. "You don't know?"

“Know what?” Axel growls.

The couple exchanges another look, communicating without words.

“You really ought to come inside, dears,” Harriet says.

Harriet and Jack stayed behind when everyone else went to the Air Force base because ‘they came here to die in peace and they will doggone die in peace’.

They’ve been rationing their food and going through the other apartments when the power was on – their neighbors entrusted them with the keys before they left – and when they weren’t afraid of fucking zombies .

Turns out the guy who attacked us in Freeport wasn’t a tweaker. The aliens are somehow making humans lose all their common sense, attacking the same sex and aggressively trying to procreate with the opposite one. As if penises didn’t skeeve me out already, they’re now weaponized by aliens.

“Do you know why our people are bombing cities?” Linda asks, her voice hushed. Jack steeples his fingers, his elbows resting atop their dining table .

“My guess is because they’re being overrun by these... things.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know if zombies is the right word or how they’re infected, or even if it’s an infection or something else. All I know is that it’s happening and it spreads.”

“I can’t believe we could have been bitten by fucking zombies,” Axel says, scratching at the beard growth on his chin.

“Language, young man,” Harriet complains.

“Sorry, ma’am.” Axel sounds chagrined and I can’t help but smile. We never had a grandmother figure in our lives and a part of me wishes we had met Harriet when Axel was still a teen.

As if reading my mind, Harriet speaks up again, timidly. “You know, there’s plenty of room in this building. We could give you a key. You could bring us food.”

Her husband snorts and pats her delicate hand. “And when the aliens come, they’ll die here with us,” he chastises. “They ought to be in the base where they can do some good for this world.”

Harriet shrugs her shoulder in an it-was-worth-the-try way and I smile at the sly cat. She’d make a great grifter.

“We’ll come back and check on you after I try to reach my parents in California,” Linda says, surprising me. I figured she’d never want to leave the safety of the base’s walls once we got there.

The couple gives her that smile that people give the best-behaved children and I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. I wonder what they’d think if they knew I plan on teaching the sweet blonde how to suck on my clit under this very roof tonight?

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my grin. I have almost three years’ worth of fantasies to make a reality and I’m not wasting any opportunities.

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Linda

Noa managed to convince Axel to let us stay in separate – but adjoining – apartments.

When she justified it by saying he won't want to hear the sounds we'll be making, I thought I was going to have a panic attack.

Harriet and Jack both looked flabbergasted!

The world is ending, yet I don't think I'm ever going to recover from an elderly couple knowing the two girls they just met planned on having sex a few doors down.

"Did you have to say it in front of them?" I ask for the tenth time, wringing my hands out.

Noa snoops around the apartment the couple let us into, smirking at me. "You need to relax. You're going to give yourself premature gray hair." She stops and gives me a calculating look. "You know what you need? A nice soak in a bath."

As her words penetrate, I stop walking in circles to blink at her in confusion. "A bath?"

She hums and opens the bathroom door, then indicates the tub like a showroom hostess. "Ta-da."

I pad closer like the porcelain is a mirage. "I can't believe this place has a bathtub. Is the water hot?"

Noa turns the taps and runs her hand under the stream. She cringes. “Lukewarm at best. But you get ready, I’m going to use the stove to boil some water in the kitchen.” With that, she leaves me alone in the bathroom.

First, I clean the bathtub with the cleaning supplies I find under the sink. I don’t care if it’s the end of the world, as long as there’s Clorox, I’m gonna use it. I plug the tub and open the taps again.

Then, I awkwardly undress. I look at myself in the mirror, the dimples in my thighs accentuated by the harsh artificial lighting, the stretch marks on my stomach standing out as well.

I definitely lost some weight this last week, but I’m never going to have Noa’s supermodel physique, even if I walk hours every day and eat sparingly.

“Why are you crying?” I jump at Noa’s harsh tone, turning my back on the mirror to face her. She’s wearing a frown that spells out doom for whoever or whatever hurt me.

“I’m just...” I sigh. “The mirror. I see I lost weight, but I don’t look better. I look tired and unhealthy.” I hang my head because I can’t hold her direct gaze anymore. I see her feet as she approaches me, then feel her hands on my face, gently lifting it up again.

“Linda. You were perfect before and you’re perfect now.

Trust me, I don’t see what you see in that mirror.

” She swipes the pad of her thumb over my lower lip.

“I see your gorgeous face, with these beautiful eyes and lips, and your amazing hair.”

She caresses my unbound hair and her voice turns huskier.

“These curves that have made me live in a constant state of horniness since I first laid eyes on them,” she practically growls, looking down at my breasts and hips.

My face heats up at the praise I’m not used to receiving.

There’s an open wound inside me that I’ve carried for as long as I can remember. It makes itself known now, pulsing, tingling, possibly healing just a little bit as Noa’s hand sweeps down my side and settles on my hips.

“Get in the tub, baby,” she whispers, then turns to grab the water she boiled. When she pours it into the lukewarm water already in the bathtub, steam rises, filling the bathroom.

Gingerly, I step into the warm bath, my feet instantly relaxing. I moan at the sensation and Noa snorts. She helps me lower myself down, then sits on the floor next to the tub.

“You don’t want a bath?” I ask shyly, stretching as much as I can and wiggling to get comfortable.

Noa gives me a signature smirk before grabbing a fresh packet of soap.

“Maybe later,” she says, lathering up some bubbles.

She starts cleaning my neck and shoulders, lingering over my breasts and swiping her thumb over my nipples so many times I all but cross my legs.

Then her hand moves over my belly and sides, skipping over my pussy to clean my legs instead.

Her eyes catch mine when she lathers up more suds and I know what's coming.

I welcome it because having her reverent touch on my skin makes me forget about everything but the need to come.

Noa's soapy hand washes between my legs, thoroughly cleaning every crevice, her finger pressing against my back hole as well.

My breathing picks up speed with every pass of her slickened fingers against sensitive nerves.

When the tip of her finger breaches the tight ring of my ass, I jump, splashing water over her.

"Oh!" I exclaim in surprise.

Noa blinks water off her eyelashes, but she doesn't get mad that I got her wet. Instead, she looks at me like I'm a precious thing. "We'll revisit this later," she says, wiggling her fingertip inside me a bit before removing it.

I'm still blinking at her when she brings an object out, waving it in front of my face. It's the purple rose toy. My mouth falls open.

"It's waterproof," she whispers with a conspiratorial wink.

At a loss for words, I watch her as she turns on the sex toy. The humming sound seems so loud, bouncing off the tiles and water, and I can feel the tips of my ears ignite. When it hits the water, sputtering joins the buzzing.

"Spread your legs, pretty girl."

She must have my thighs charmed like snakes with a flute because they spread at her command without my brain giving any input. I watch in a daze as she positions the toy over my clit, swollen and peeking out from between my nether lips.

“Ah, oh my God,” I squeal as it makes contact, my head hitting the edge of the tub. I don’t even care that it smarts.

“Shh,” Noa soothes, her other hand pressing on my stomach. “Let me take care of you, baby.”

“I—I—I’m s—so c—close already,” I stutter through clenched teeth, my whole body shaking from the pleasure. It’s too much, too fast.

“I know, sweetie, I can tell,” Noa exhales, leaning down to take my nipple into her mouth, rolling her piercing over it.

When she sucks so hard her cheeks hollow out, my back arches up, my pelvis pressing hard against the toy.

I scream and her mouth covers mine, swallowing the sound.

I feel like I’m floating in more than just the water as waves of bliss roll over me, again and again.

When I open my eyes, I see nothing but Noa’s face. Our foreheads are pressed together and she’s smiling gently at me. “Are you alright?” she asks.

I nod then reach up to tug at her top. “Get in here,” I breathe, my voice rough.

Her smile is brilliant and doesn’t leave her face the entire time as she shucks her clothes and carefully steps between the tub wall and my legs.

When she lies down on top of me, water splashes out of the tub, and we both giggle.

For long minutes, we kiss, caressing each other's bodies.

I don't think I've ever had a moment like this with a boy.

As the water cools, I'm made aware of the heat between Noa's legs over my thigh and the way she squirms against me. "Do you..." I bite my lip and Noa lifts a sculpted eyebrow. "Do you want to come too?" I finish, drowning in embarrassment.

When she licks her lips, I'm briefly mesmerized by the glinting piercing. "Could you do something for me?" she asks quietly.

"Anything," I reply, my voice coming out breathy.

"Switch places with me," she instructs, lifting up so I can maneuver enough to give her space against the backrest. "Sit back on your heels."

Confused, I position myself so I'm kneeling between her spread legs. I quickly forget about everything other than the sight of her trimmed pussy, the tattoo of my name just visible between her thighs.

"You like it?" she asks with a purr and I flush for the hundredth time this week.

Yes, I freaking like, and I don't know how I feel about that.

Vaginas never used to make me drool. I glance up and nod, my gaze quickly drawn back to her taut belly and what lies underneath.

"Good," she breathes. "Now, eat me out."

I sputter and cough, looking between her face and her pussy. “Really?” I squeak. “What... what if I do it wrong?”

Her chuckle sends an echo of lust through my womb. “There’s no way you’re going to do it wrong, baby. I’ll tell you what to do.”

“O—okay,” I concede, nervously chewing on my bottom lip.

I scoot back as far as I can, then lean down.

There’s still too much space between my lips and her pussy, though, so I place my hands under her bum and lift her up to my mouth like she’s the holy grail and I’m about to drain the very last drop.

When my lips are so close that her short pubic hair tickles my lips, I hesitate again.

“Use your tongue. Lick anywhere you want to start.”

Grateful for her instructions, I extend my tongue, my shaky breath coming out of my mouth with it.

I lick around her opening and warm musk, diluted by the bath, teases my tastebuds.

“Mpf,” I hum in surprise. Noa laughs softly, her hand coming to the back of my head.

Intrigued, I stiffen my tongue to pierce into the source of the inviting taste, swirling around for more.

This time Noa grunts in surprise, her hand clenching in my hair.

“God, pretty girl. That’s so good,” she praises.

Emboldened, I bring a hand up to replace my tongue with my finger. I watch as it slowly disappears into her silky channel. When it's as far as I can push it, I turn my hand so I can stroke the upper wall.

“Fuck, Linda!” Noa hisses. “You’re a natural.”

Feeling almost cocky now, I smile as I lower my mouth to her pussy again and take her throbbing clit between my lips. Noa grabs the back of my head like she’s going to pull me in closer, but obviously stops herself. I take the hint, though, pressing harder, sucking on the little nub.

Noa’s moaning in earnest now, the titillating sounds seemingly coming from every corner of the bathroom as they bounce from the walls.

“You’re killing me, baby,” she gasps, rhythmically lifting and lowering her bum like she wants to hump my face. Wanting to give her more, I start thrusting my finger inside her faster, harder.

“You’re gonna make me come like that. God, I love you so fucking much, Linda.”

Something snaps inside me with those words and I descend on her like an animal. I add another finger and fuck her as fast as I can. I take her clit between my lips and start flicking my tongue over it rapidly.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

The dam breaks. With a guttural groan, Noa clenches over my fingers and gushes over my hand and face. Sobbing my name, she falls apart in my arms as her muscles contract and expand over and over in a seemingly endless orgasm.

Noa

Spending the night with Linda sleeping in my arms in a proper bed was everything I had imagined and more.

She's not a very active sleeper; she doesn't toss and turn.

Instead, she huddles into a warm ball of blonde hair and soft curves, like a body pillow made for me by God.

I woke up refreshed and content, and as we said goodbye for now to Harriet and Jack, I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

I thought my brother's eyes were going to roll out of his head.

"I heard you two, by the way," he mutters now as we cross the C.G. Meigs Bridge. "Chances are the old folks probably heard you, too."

Linda gasps in outrage, her face paling as her mouth drops open with the imagined horror of Harriet and Jack hearing our moans of pleasure. I punch my brother's arm.

"Ouch! What? I was just telling the truth."

I growl at him. "Sometimes the best thing you can say is nothing at all, Axel," I say, exasperated beyond belief. I wrap my arm around Linda's shoulder and kiss the top of her head.

“I’m just saying,” Axel unwisely continues. “On the base? Say goodbye to privacy. We’re probably going to be sleeping on top of each other like in some third-world prison.”

“Then we’ll go back to Jack and Harriet after I’ve spoken to my parents,” Linda says with a determined edge in her voice, something I don’t often hear from her. “Or maybe we can even head to California,” she adds.

Before we can comment, the thrumming sound of a helicopter’s rotor vibrates through the bridge underneath us, scaring us all at first until we recognize the sound as human-made. Soon, we spot the aircraft, coming at us from the direction of the base.

“Think it’s worth waving at them?” Axel yells over the increasingly louder sound.

I shake my head, caressing Linda’s arm as she clings to me like a baby monkey. “I really doubt they’re wasting fuel to pick up civilians!” I shout.

“We’re almost there anyway,” my girl adds.

Still, we don’t move as the helicopter approaches and then passes above us. Linda does a cute little greeting wave, and my shoulders shake at how adorable she is.

Once the helicopter disappears in the distance, heading the way we came, we silently carry on.

We pass a church and hear banging noises inside, so we walk faster until the sound doesn’t reach us anymore.

Out of sight, out of mind, I guess. When we get to a gas station, we take a moment to look around for anything useful, but of course, it’s been completely looted, all the

fuel hoses off their hooks and scattered around like dead snakes.

Now that we're in a city again, we keep our eyes peeled for a functioning car, but on a major road like this, all the good ones have been taken, the empty or broken-down ones left where they last worked, sometimes in the middle of the road.

We see roadblocks again, and as we pass them, my stomach clenches so hard I think I'm going to puke.

Axel has his bat, Linda her gun, and I took a nice butcher knife from the apartment we slept in, but I'm still worried we'll get ambushed by lawless mobs and Linda will end up injured. Or worse.

As we stop to skirt potential traps and check the odd car, it takes us nearly two hours to cross Niceville and get to Turkey Creek on the border of Valparaiso.

"Let's stop here to eat," I say, pointing at a walkway over the water. I guess that's as romantic as an early lunch gets when you're dodging aliens and modern-day bandits, not to mention when your brother is with you and your girlfriend, always grumbling about something .

"Where do you want to bury the food?" Axel asks with a mouth full of canned tuna. Linda and I are sharing a can of fried beans with tomato sauce, taking turns dipping our spoons in. My leg tingles where it's pressed against hers, dangling off the pedestrian bridge.

Unlike my brother, I swallow my food before answering. "Isn't there a park with a pond or something nearby? We can hide it there."

Linda's suspiciously quiet, so I nudge her with my elbow. "What's up, pretty girl?"

Her lips twist into a grimace. “It’s just... are you sure we need to hide the food from other people at the base? What if they’re hungry?”

I ruffle her hair, then run my fingers through it to gently untie the windswept knots. The contentment the action brings me makes me realize why animals enjoy grooming each other. “If they’re hungry, we’re going to be hungry pretty damn fast too,” I say, keeping my voice even.

“If food isn’t an issue there, we can pick it up on our way back to the old folks’ home,” Axel adds, surprising me.

I raised him to pretty much put our needs first, because the world certainly wasn’t.

For him to want to share our scavenged food with Jack and Harriet must mean the couple really grew on him during the half a day we spent together, talking and eating.

Linda perks up, though, smiling at my brother and me, chewing happily.

The familiar click of a gun being cocked makes us freeze with food on the way to or in our mouths. Not again. Can we go one day without being a target?

“Put that down, nice and slow. Step away from the backpacks,” a female voice says.

“Are you kidding me?” Axel mutters, voicing my thoughts, then gives Linda a nod.

I turn to look at the woman who spoke and the two men with her.

Only one gun, though, in the shorter man’s hands.

The men are dressed identically in ripped jeans and T-shirts.

The woman has a bright red top, short shorts, and fishnet tights, torn at the knees.

At first, I wonder why she's bothering with fashion during an apocalypse.

Then I notice the state the trio is in: dirty and unkempt.

They obviously haven't bothered to go near water in the week since the aliens came – maybe even before that.

“Get up and walk away if you know what's good for you,” the woman says. She's obviously the one in charge. When we don't move, she pulls out and opens a switchblade. “Now!” she screams, her voice shrill, making Linda flinch against me.

“Let's talk about this,” I say carefully. “Are you guys heading to the base?”

The men snicker while the woman clicks her tongue. “Fuck that and fuck you,” the one with the gun says, moving the sight from Axel to me. Linda's hand clutches at my arm almost painfully. I put my hand over it, bringing it closer to the knife at the side of my backpack, hidden from their view.

“Let's all head in separate ways then, friends,” Axel says, slowly getting to his feet. “Nobody needs to get hurt.”

“Not your friend,” the woman mocks, pointing her knife at him. “And we'll be on our way, alright. As soon as you step away from those nice backpacks.”

I exchange a glance with my brother. We're not that far from the base. I know we'll be okay without the food, but every fiber of my being screams at me to protect our necessities. You don't spend as much time roaming the streets as I did without learning to take care of your shit.

“Fine,” I finally say through gritted teeth.

“And the juicy girl,” the taller of the two men says.

My lip raises into a snarl. “What did you just say?” I growl.

“Not you,” he says dumbly. “The one with the tits. I’m gonna tie her down and fuck them with my fat cock.” He throws his head back to laugh, and I see red. Unthinking, I grab my knife and charge at the man, sailing toward his middle.

“Fuck!” Axel swears, but I don’t pay attention to what he’s doing. I land on top of the man who’s not laughing anymore and bring my knife down, stabbing his neck with a two-handed grip .

The woman screams, making my ears ring. “Shoot her! What are you waiting for, Pete, for fuck’s sake!”

As the man underneath me gurgles and chokes on his blood, I roll off him to get to my feet and get ‘Pete’ in my sight.

Before I’m fully off, a loud pop of gunfire sounds.

I feel a sting in my arm and register that the man I stabbed stopped making the sounds of the dying. Because he’s now well and truly dead.

“Fuck, you shot Greg, you fucking asshole!” the woman shrieks at Pete and a part of me feels like laughing. I go to cover my arm with my hand, but stop just in time, realizing my arms are covered in ‘Greg’s’ blood. God only knows what kind of diseases he’s carrying.

First, Axel roars, then a loud thud sounds, and Pete’s body lands next to me, his skull

caved in. The woman's screams are cut short by another deafening pop. I eye my girl, her gun still extended, a frantic glint in her green eyes.

Week one after the end of the world, and we all already have blood on our hands.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:02 am

Linda

Sometimes I still feel like this is all a dream.

As I bandage Noa's arm after disinfecting it with vodka (and taking a hefty chug of it myself), I feel like I'm about to wake up in my dorm bed and laugh at my silly dreams. I'm woman enough to admit one thing to myself, though: the first thing I'd do after waking up would be to find Noa and kiss her as soon as she opened her mouth to flirt with me.

I snort at my thoughts. That would be something.

"Are you drunk, pretty girl?" Noa asks, her eyes sparkling at me from a pale face. Thankfully, the bullet only grazed her, but the chunk of missing flesh surely hurts like the dickens.

I shake my head at her. "Maybe loopy from adrenaline," I admit.

I twist the gauze a final time, then secure it with the clip.

I'm glad we've been lugging the small first aid kit from the car with us this whole time.

I'm also not sad that I shot that crazy woman.

When I saw her turn on Noa with her knife held high, I didn't think twice before shooting.

I just wish I'd done it before Noa got hurt.

"I'm sorry you got shot," I mumble, putting everything back in its place like I know she'd want it.

When she reaches out to caress my cheek, I lean my head into her hand. Yeah. I'd definitely kiss her.

Her eyes are gentle as she smiles at me. "At least you got to play nursemaid too," she says with a smirk. You know what? I might kiss her now...

"Ladies," Axel interrupts. Again. "If you're done blowing on the boo-boos, those gunshots were loud AF. Who knows who's out here. "

Noa grunts like a disgruntled bear cub. "He's right," she grumbles. "Let's just get to that base, we're so close."

I scrunch up my nose and stand up, dusting off my knees, then look back at the other side of the road by the walkway where we left the ruffian's bodies after taking their stuff, including a nice new gun.

I narrow my eyes at them. Good riddance .

They won't be able to hurt people like Jack and Harriet anymore.

Shouldering my backpack, I help Noa with hers before we catch up with Axel.

"Are you sure you can carry that?" he asks his sister with a frown, obviously concerned.

"Yep." She grins at him, clearly putting on a brave face. "We're almost at the park."

After taking the small detour to bury our cans, Axel and I redistribute the contents of Noa's backpack, unburdening her. She doesn't say anything, but the look of relief in her eyes is apparent.

We decide to cut through some neighborhoods to save time, anxiously looking at every suburban house and its windows like they're all harboring snipers.

"Maybe we should steal that boat and sail off," Axel snickers, pointing at a small speedboat parked on a trailer in one of the driveways.

"If only it had enough gas to get us to California," I sigh.

Noa snorts. "Might need a tanker for that."

I can't believe I can laugh after the week we've had.

It's almost over, though. We're nearing the bridge across the bayou, and the East Gate is just beyond that.

I don't know what our life will look like a week from now, but I'm certain hearing that my parents made it safely to Fort Hunter Liggett will take a huge burden off my shoulders.

"I think I need new sneakers," I muse, looking down at my Sketchers. "The memory foam isn't... memory foaming anymore."

When I look up at Noa, I see her eyeing me with an eyebrow raised and an indulgent smile. "That's what you're thinking about right now?" she asks.

"Mmm," I hum, nodding. "That and an omelet. Think we can find some hens to raise one day?"

The light in Noa's eyes warms my insides faster than the vodka did. She opens her mouth to respond, and I can't wait to see what she's going to say. But then a shrill scream freezes all that warmth to ice.

A woman runs out from behind a corner, and Axel steps in front of us protectively. She's not paying us any mind, though, running like a headless chicken in the direction of the bayou.

"What the fuck?" Axel whispers as we watch her go.

"I don't care what it is, let's get out of here," Noa says, her tone allowing for no argument. Fully agreeing, I forget all about the state of my shoes' memory foam and start hoofing it in the direction of the base.

We don't get far when more people burst out of the side streets, running and screaming.

Before long, we're surrounded by a dozen people, more than we've seen all week combined.

I don't know why we're running, but the herd mentality is definitely strong.

With every step, I worry about losing sight of Noa and Axel, of tripping and being left behind or trampled.

Noa would find me, I think to myself, as the rapid way I'm breathing dries out my throat.

Just then, someone knocks into her side, pressing right onto the fresh bullet wound.

Her husky scream of pain stops my heart and my feet.

Axel and I surround her and protect her with our bodies as the last man passes, no one bothering to ask if she's alright.

"Sis, you okay?" Axel asks, as out of breath as I am.

Tears stream down Noa's face, her brave and confident demeanor faltering when faced with the body's response to pain. Her lower lip trembles as she nods, gingerly holding her arm. "Let's go," she says, her broken voice stabbing me right in the heart.

Just as we start moving again, following the departing crowd, I see the reason for the stampede.

"Oh. My God," I breathe. Axel and Noa turn to where I'm looking.

It's the aliens. Two of them stalk in our direction, casually, without hurry.

They're covered head to toe in heavy, matte green armor that looks like it's molded from oxidized metal, the surface scored with gouges and ridges, the lines sharp and disturbing.

They're huge, at least seven feet tall, and brutishly bulky.

But they don't seem to be clumsy – more like tanks shaped into humanoid forms.

They're wearing angular helmets, featureless except for a black, segmented visor that pulses faintly, almost like it's breathing.

Tubes run from the base of the helm into their neck plating, exhaling small, rhythmic hisses.

One raises an arm, and its fingers split into a clawed mechanism that clicks softly

before curling back in.

There's something wrong with the way they move. It's not robotic, but not entirely organic either. Like something wearing a skin it wasn't born into. And their armor looks almost like it's alive, shifting, pulsing, groaning with the movements.

I'm suffused by dread at the sight, like a teabag dunked into boiling water. My every hair stands at attention, my body screaming at me that a predator approaches, that I'm not safe, that my loved ones are in danger.

"R-Run," I stutter, tugging on Noa's uninjured arm. Axel remains frozen to the spot, his mouth wide open. "Axel!" I hiss. I can't believe I'm being the proactive one here!

When the siblings tear themselves out of the daze of seeing extraterrestrial beings, something I'll be having nightmares about for the next fifty years – if I live that long – we burst into a sprint, running faster than we did before.

"Drop the backpacks," Noa gasps after looking behind us.

"They're... not... heavy... anymore..." I gasp between shallow breaths.

I'm afraid to check how close the aliens are, looking only ahead as we run across the bridge. Axel is braver than I am, though.

"They're gone," he says. "But don't stop."

I don't have the spare breath to tell him I didn't plan on stopping. Instead, I focus on the people I see ahead and pretend we're playing catch. I'm it .

"I see the gate!" Noa exclaims. I squint ahead.

Are her eyes better than mine? Must be all the romance books I read late at night.

It's not long, though, until I see the barricade set up where the checkpoint used to be.

Clearly, they fortified the area. But is it enough against these foes? We might just find out.

Uniformed people wave the running people through, their guns out and aimed. Maybe they're worried that some of the zombies – or whatever they are – are among us.

“Almost there, pretty girl,” Noa says, her hand searching for mine. It takes me a couple of tries to grasp it, my limbs shaky from the exertion. Finally, I take her hand just as we enter the base.

We've made it.

Tara

Four years ago, an alien species came to Earth.

They weren't interested in our technology or resources.

And they definitely weren't here to reenact any 'Mars Needs Women' tropes.

No, they were seemingly conquerors for the sake of conquering, killing our people, or infecting them until they were mindless drones, aggressive toward their own kind, but not our extra-terrestrial invaders.

I was thirty-two when they were first spotted, living halfway across the planet from where I grew up, separated from my parents and little sisters...

isolated from anyone who would give a damn.

As humanity's governments toppled, gangs formed, the strong taking advantage of the weak, the unfortunate nothing but fodder for slaughter.

By some stroke of luck, I ended up being taken into the fold of resistance fighters, those rare few humans who didn't demand child brides in return for a cot and threadbare blanket.

The resistance cell I'm in is led by ex-military men and women who taught us how to shoot, how to fight, and how to protect ourselves and those weaker than us from the monsters from above.

Those first months were hell. We had no warning, no idea what was about to descend on us.

We didn't know that getting scratched or bitten by the aliens would infect our brains in a matter of minutes.

Confusion, hallucinations, and a complete loss of control over your actions.

That's what happens once you're exposed to this alien virus.

We have no idea if the mindless husks shuffling around are aware that they're attacking their own, trying to eat their mothers and fathers, their children, raping indiscriminately.

While I'm sure various militaries, now funded and controlled by the surviving one percenters, are testing for cures and vaccines, we're far from their clean laboratories, fighting here in the slums. We have no choice but to neutralize the threat and, perhaps, put them out of their misery.

At first, we didn't even know what the aliens looked like.

They were wearing full-body armor and helmets from a dark alloy of some kind, like something out of a horror sci-fi video game.

Then the first footage came, showing the creatures under smashed helmets, all serrated teeth and sickly, pockmarked gray-green skin.

They were as horrible as their actions, and it took me years to be able to close my eyes and not dream of them.

Just as we learned to make peace with our circumstances, new spaceships appeared above us.

The first were spotted a couple of months ago.

Sleek and shiny, silent and deadly, they began shooting the boxy invading ships from the sky.

But I know better than to trust in alien benevolence, not after what happened the first time.

Just because we share a common enemy doesn't mean they're our friends.

Maybe once our invaders are gone, we'll be left with a new, deadlier threat, with seemingly even more advanced technology.

There were fewer of them than the first arrivals, and we haven't run across any of their corpses to know what they even look like.

Though both species are bipedal, the first invaders proved to be anything but human-looking underneath their armor.

The newcomers, however, seem less bulky, closer to our proportions, though they appear to be much faster than us.

The reason why we haven't gotten a chance to peek under their helmets is that they seem to have some sort of invisible shield around them, bouncing off the other aliens' lasers and, of course, our bullets.

If they had casualties, we do not know about it.

I'm not sure who fired on whom first when it comes to the new visitors, but I've been told that they don't hesitate to shoot back if fired upon.

Not that I blame them, but all this distrust breeds more distrust, and I've heard

skirmishes where all three species are involved end up with the newcomers as the last ones standing.

We're definitely at the bottom of the pecking order.

Our base stands on a cliff overlooking the Pacific. That means we have a few seconds of pissing our damned pants as we see the brutish alien ship approaching, the vibrations and groaning sounds not far behind.

"Tara!" one of the resistance officers, Kyle, yells over the blaring claxon of the warning alarm. I tear my gaze off the incoming ship and spin to meet his gaze. "Get the kids to safety!"

Shit, the kids.

We teach them how to shoot as soon as they can grasp the concept of a gun not being a toy, but they're also the aliens' favored prey. The monsters probably enjoy the anguished cries of their parents. Well, the parents who aren't dead, thanks to them.

I sprint toward Josh a football in his hands, his eyes on the approaching vessel.

"Let's go, pipsqueak," I urge, my hand on his back, pushing him to the closest shelter.

We try to avoid being outside when there's action in the skies, though they might have some kind of heat-seeking technology and just spared us so far.

It really does seem like they're going straight for us, though, the metal groaning becoming unbearably loud as it approaches.

Is it slowing down?

When the spaceship stops right above us, I know our luck has run out.

Aliens drop down from hatches, the distance between their vessel and the ground seemingly not an obstacle.

The tank-like brutes do their superhero landings, massive guns in their hands.

I know they're not likely to shoot us, though, not if their goal is to infect as many as possible.

They'll incapacitate us, then use their creepy morphing claws to pump us full of whatever virus or bacteria turns us into drones.

I pull out my twin Glocks and face the nearest alien, covering a trembling Josh. Flicking off the safety, I slowly walk backwards, pushing the boy to the closest building.

"Stay back, motherfucker!" I yell at the hulking alien and extend my arms in an obvious threat. "You do not want to fuck with me today!"