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“Hush little baby. Don’t say a word.”

I lift the music box to my face, revelling in the sound of its delicate plinking. I sing softly, quietly, trying not to overpower it.

“Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.”

The room is darkening around me, but I can still see it; the pale pink walls, the white netting over the bed, the name ‘Chloe’ painted on the wall, adorned with a tiny crown. A little girl’s room – girly and soft and pretty. Every surface is covered with trinkets, small charm bracelets, and stuffed toys.

And the music box.

“If that mockingbird won’t sing...”

The plinking begins to slow, and I close my eyes, wishing that somehow it will play to the end.

“Mama’s gonna buy you-“

The tune dies down and suddenly deafening silence presses in on me. I stare forlornly at the box for a few seconds, then gently place it back down. I straighten up and look to the window; the blinds are open, light streaming through and softly illuminating the bed.

My eyes focus on the darkened, still form tucked under the covers, and I hang my head. Chloe. I never knew the kid, but it's still sad that she died alone in her princess room.

I turn to walk out of the door, then pause and lift the silver music box. Music isn't something you hear a lot of these days – it'll be nice to hear it once in a while. I take a final glance at the figure in the bed before turning away.

I force open the front door to the house and stumble out into the street. It's quiet, calm, the sunset just fading into the distance. I reach up and pull the surgical mask over my mouth and nose. It's not that I'm scared of getting infected – but it helps hide the stink.

Bodies line the road. Most are laid straight, with blankets wrapped around them to hide the rot, but others have simply been thrown out by family too scared to keep them around. Towards the end people became less sentimental, burning anything and everything to try and keep the disease contained. Of course it didn't work – but they tried.

I turn and head to the next house. Ironically, it's difficult to find somewhere to sleep most nights; victims died in their beds, and even if I had the stomach to move the bodies I know better than to sleep on infected covers. The houses with corpses out front are usually my best bet. Fewer people inside.

I reach out and try the front door. Locked and dead bolted. Of course. I take off my rucksack and search inside, pulling out a thick pair of industrial gloves and some goggles. I glance down to make sure that my knee and elbow pads are secure, then hoist the bag onto my back.

I might not be able to get in through the door, but there's always a way. One floor up, an open window, the wooden frame wet with mildew. It looks about ready to rot away altogether, but that's alright. All I need is to get through.

I grab hold of the trellis on the front of the building and hoist myself up. It creaks loudly, and I grasp at the sill of the door for support. It doesn't take much effort to climb up to the window, although with each sound I find myself clenching my limbs, preparing for a fall that never comes.

The first room I enter looks to be a bathroom. Black and white tiles, a massive bathtub with claw feet. Obviously a well-off family. I head through into the hallway – I see two sets of stairs, leading up and down. I head up first.

The next floor up is an open plan bedroom, the bed incredibly dusty but otherwise clean. Yet another bathtub takes pride of place behind a misted glass wall. I rub my hands together and beam. Perfect.

A quick shake of the blankets and I'm in bed, curling up into myself to stay warm. It's not every night I'm this lucky – much of the time I sleep in the street, or in someone's bathroom. Anywhere I can lie down. I pull off my gear, sink into the pillows and sigh deeply.

After a few minutes I reach into my rucksack and pull out a can and a bottle of water. Surprisingly, I don't struggle for food & drink – there's a lot left over if you know where to look. I peel back the lid of the can and scoop out a slice of peach. Perhaps not the most graceful way to eat, but certainly necessary. The water tastes stale and somewhat warm, but it quenches my thirst.

Once I've finished, I tuck my bag under the bed and lie down. The room is almost black by now, so I close my eyes and attempt to sleep.

It doesn't last long.

In minutes I'm sweating, even despite the cold winter night. My breathing is uneven, and my eyes keep flitting around the room. I can never sleep straight

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away, no matter how tired I am. It's like a deep seated paranoia, a fear that something will happen – even though nothing ever happens.

Soon enough the panic starts to form images. I lie there, staring blankly ahead, faces and patterns and shapes passing me by. Memories. Memories so vivid and scarring that I relive them every night.

The first few cases. The drama as people made out it was so much worse than it was. How the government calmed people, told them it would never happen.

The silence when it did.

The spread throughout the world – news channels showing maps glowing red, marking how much of the country had been infected. The panic, the riots. People went crazy in the streets, attacking one another, looting for the most unimportant things – killing without reason.

A woman's face flashes by and I pull the blanket over my head, trying to block out her soft smile.

Mom.

My gut clenches and I bite back a sob. It's been six years, but that image is still playing in my brain. Being forced into the car, the door slamming, and Mom turning to try to reason with the man outside. I recall his face – the rolling eyes, the deep creases. The way his hand shook as he raised the gun.

I close my eyes and pull tightly into myself.

“Stop it,” I whisper, “there's something else now. More. Stop it.”

The fear fades, but her face remains. Pale, like me, with blonde hair. Warm eyes and a sharp tongue. The kind of woman who would smack you upside the head if you did something stupid, but then hug you in relief.

“It’s okay, Mom.”

I know she can’t hear me, but it makes me feel better to say it out loud.

“You don’t have to worry about me anymore. I won’t be alone forever. I’m heading to Keep. There are people there, people like me. So don’t worry about me, okay?”

It seems to work. The picture fades away, and finally I feel exhaustion building up. I close my eyes and let sleep take me.

The morning light breaks through the window, the blinds splitting it into stripes that fall across the bed. A ray hits my eye and I groan quietly, rolling over and sitting up. I breathe out and watch my breath dissipate into a tiny white cloud. It’s cold.

I push the blanket to one side and swing my legs over the side of the bed. My skin immediately erupts into goose bumps and I shudder. Damn. Taking a few unsteady steps over to the window, I lean on the sill and stare out.

“Oh, great.”

The street is pale, the cold winter day punctuated by gently falling snow. I wipe at the window with the side of my hand to clear it – no wonder it’s so cold. I hadn’t expected winter to arrive for another few weeks. Of course it would help if I kept track of the months, but generally I have an idea.

I place my fingertips against the glass, watching drops of condensation drip from them and stream down the pane. My breathing is a little uneven, a little unsure. It’s not fear by any means, but I’m certainly cautious. I’ve never got to this point in the year without being completely packed up and settled in

somewhere. Every winter for the past six years has been spent in a small but secure shelter, with a tiny fire and a massive stock of supplies. Sleeping and staying warm, trying to survive the harsh winter.

This time round, I have no such plan. No secure place, no firewood. No supplies. It's simply not possible for me to spend another season alone like this. I need to keep going, and get to Keep before the storms really hit.

I gather up my things and throw my rucksack over my shoulder. I raid the kitchen for a couple of cans of baked beans and a bottle of shloer before busting out of the back door. Pulling my surgical mask over my mouth, I turn and begin to walk.

The road is long – so long that it's taken me several weeks just to get this far. No matter how cautious you are, there's still a lot of danger involved with travelling. If you somehow manage to avoid catching the flu, you could still just as easily die from infections or straight up injuries. I pause to pull my woollen socks up to my knee and carry on.

As I walk, I stare at the streets around me. The snow only helps to hide the bodies on the side of the roads, and the cold air somehow controls the scent. As it builds, the corpses fade away, and the street looks almost like it would have long before the whole thing started.

Despite having never been here before, I can easily imagine what it was like. This is the kind of neighbourhood every city wants you to believe they have; white picket fences, perfectly manicured gardens, pebbled driveways leading to overly-ornate doors. I stare into the falling snow and imagine children racing across the street, perhaps throwing snowballs at one another, while kindly Moms bring out trays of hot cocoa and Dads present the kids with scarves for their snowmen. For a second I even imagine flashing lights, red and green, accompanied by a merry jingling sound.

I stumble – and when I look back up, the street is as cold and dead as it's ever been. I pause, staring into the white.

I can't believe how different it is now.

Having said that, this is one of the lesser-hit areas. I've been to a few built-up places before, cities and larger towns. The centres are often so bad I've had no choice but to clamber over corpses just to keep moving. They were of course the centre of the panic, especially near to hospitals and police stations. Inevitably people died, from violence or crushing or illness.

I try to think about how long it's been since I've seen another living human being. Assuming it's now around or just after Christmas, and I stopped keeping track of the day in November, I'd say it's been at least two years.

Of course, I've seen people. Hundreds. Thousands. I've seen their laughing faces, heard their consoling voices. The photos, the messages. All that's left over of all the people on the planet. Seven billion humans, all dead. All reduced to nothing but photographs and handwriting.

But that doesn't have to mean everyone. I survived. Despite being around the disease more than most, I've never once become symptomatic. And if I've been able to avoid it, then I'm certain others must have as well. There were settlements for a while, and although most faded there was one I was hearing about right up until the end. Keep.

"I hope they're still alive," I mumble. The words might sound awful, but it's true. There's a very decent chance – unless they've been even more cautious than I have – that one of them became infected at some point. In which case, there's very little chance they're still alive, let alone thriving.

The snow piles up quickly, and soon enough I have to lift my boots higher, listening to the crunch of my every step. Maybe it's just me, the way I see

things, but winter seems to hit harder every year. Just last night I was kicking the skeleton leaves aside and revelling in the chilly fall air.

After a few hours of walking, I finally catch sight of the city. I could see it from a distance before, the shadows of large buildings looming overhead. But now I can see it clearly, the broken window panes of skyscrapers, the way that one of them leans and falls into the other. For a moment I wonder what could have happened to knock over a building, but then I spot the shards of shrapnel embedded in the side of the structure. Plane crash. I wince a little at the memory.

The plane crash was, for me, what started it all. I'd heard the reports on the news, though Mom always tried to cover my ears and usher me away when it was on. I was only eleven; it makes sense that she didn't want me to panic. It became like a routine – putting on my coat, my shoes, my mask. Wrapping a scarf around my mouth so it wasn't too obvious. For a while it seemed like we were going to push through it, like smallpox or the plague. An awful, murderous disease that killed millions and then simply died out. At least, that's what we'd hoped.

But one day, as I walked hand in hand with Mom down the street outside our apartment building, we heard it. The strange, desperate choking of a plane engine. Looking up, we saw a dark shadow pass over us. A jumbo jet, one of its wings alight. In the split second it passed us, so low it was barely missing the roofs of nearby houses, Mom jumped up and grabbed me. She pulled me back, into a bush and as far in as she could. She hugged me close and started to hum.

But it didn't help. I could still see and hear perfectly as the plane's wing finally struck a house, knocking half of it down and spinning a little on its ruins. Then, the nose dipped, and the plane flipped over itself and burst into flames.

For the first few seconds, I was convinced I was somehow blind. Deaf, too. As soon as I was able, I threw myself out of the bush and into the street, where everything was burning. Screams filled the road. I could see in the distance someone trying helplessly to run from the flames that were already engulfing them.

My Mom grabbed my hand and started running.

I snap back to reality and almost slip on a patch of ice.

“Damn.”

I force myself to stop and focus. I’m almost there. Almost at the place they kept talking about. I shake my head, rub my hands together and breathe heavily on my fingers. It doesn’t help. My gloves, despite being thick, are made of harder material and they don’t retain heat at all.

I’m not prepared for winter at all. My gut clenches at the thought. I’m usually such a careful planner. Surviving a harsh winter alone isn’t easy. If the people at Keep are dead, or if they choose not to let me in, then I don’t stand much of a chance. I shiver in the cold and carry on walking.

It seems like forever before I finally reach the inner city. Buildings loom around me; although it feels less cold, it’s certainly windier. My hair blusters around my face and I push it back, trying to force the loose strands into my poorly-done braid.

Finally, I can see it. A large wall, too high for anyone to climb even if they had help. Words scrawled on it with black paint, worn and dirty from years of wear. I pause a little to climb over a fallen motorbike and stare at it. My eyes trace over a word I’d never seen written, only whispered.

“Sanctuary.”

The word feels so good on my tongue. Sanctuary. A place that's safe, secure. Somewhere that's far enough from the danger, with walls high enough to be totally bombproof. With living people. Breathing, warm-bodied people with words and faces. My chest swells.

"Sanctuary. I made it."

And suddenly I'm running, as fast as I can on the darkening, icy path. Unhooking my bag from my shoulder and waving one arm as I speed towards the wall. Already I can feel it, the thrill of company, the feeling of cooked food in my stomach. The warmth of a fire.

I skid to a stop outside the wall and cup my hands around my mouth.

"Hey! Is anyone there?"

Silence. I squint hard, trying to see if there's any glow of light coming over the wall. Nothing. I listen hard for sounds of speech or movement. No.

"Hello! I'm outside the wall! Let me in!"

I wait a few seconds, but nothing comes. My heart clenches. That can't be it. They can't have all died. I wait breathlessly for a few more moments, but when nothing happens I turn and start to walk away.

"Oi!"

I freeze, and whip around.

"Hello? Who's there?"

"One sec," the voice responds, "we're coming up."

I stare at the top of the wall for a few seconds. Suddenly, a head pops up over the top of it. A man a little older than me, with a flop of reddish brown hair falling over dark eyes.

“Oh, my god.”

He stares down at me with wide eyes, mouth hanging open. I shift a little on my feet and then wave.

“Hi. Um. Room for one more?”

His expression doesn't change, and for a few seconds I wonder if he's even seen me. But then he jumps backwards and leans over the railing, mouth agape.

“Seriously. Am I seeing things right now?”

His voice is loud and clear, with a sharp American twang. I shuffle a little on my feet.

“I'm sorry. I know it's late. I, uh. I was just wondering about your rules.”

He stares at me blankly.

“I mean, about letting people in,” I stammer, “I know it's dangerous, so it's not like I expect a free pass, but...”

I trail off, unsure what to say next. It's been two years at least since I've even seen another person, let alone spoken to them. The words feel strange and alien on my tongue. For a minute, we stare at one another, our eyes wide.

Then, he breaks into a grin. Beaming, he waves his hands madly.

“Oh my God!” he cries, “I can't believe this! You're actually a survivor!”

I shrug and force a smile.

“Yeah, but that’s not too weird, right? Isn’t this a survivor camp?”

His face falls, but only for a moment.

“It used to be,” he mutters, “But we’ve not seen or heard of anyone new in years.”

“Oh. So, uh. You don’t let people in anymore?”

My stomach twists. This place was my only hope. Without it, I’m not likely to ever survive this winter. This could be it.

“It’s not that,” he says, “our doors are always open. Or rather, they were. I don’t know what the rules are anymore... I’ll tell you what. Wait, right there. Okay? I’m going to go and get Lyons. I know he used to be in charge of letting newbies in. Retired for a while, but I bet he has a process.”

“A process?”

“Yeah. No offence or anything, I’m sure you’re a great gal. Unfortunately, the flu can spread really easily. A droplet of blood on your clothes, that could kill all of us. It’s a miracle it hasn’t killed you.”

I wave my hands in a motion of surrender.

“No, I mean, I’m not actually symptomatic. I never have been. I’ve been around the sick for a long time, and after that, the dead. But I just never caught it.”

“That is impressive,” he smirks, “but I can’t just let you in. I’m sure you understand.”

I nod, and his head dips below the wall. For a few minutes I stand still, one foot tapping the floor, trying not to appear too obviously cold. I’m freezing my ass off out here, but even the slightest hint of sickness and I’ll be turfed out.

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Still. They're alive. They're actually alive. I'm not sure how many there are, but there's at least two. And they're clever, too. Damn clever if they know better than to let me in.

Soon enough, the guy pops his head over the wall. He points at me with one hand, summoning someone behind him with the other.

"Look, I know it sounds crazy, but—"

"Not just crazy, Lucas," a voice replies, "Stupid. We don't know if there's anyone out there still alive, much less anyone dumb enough to come stand out here in the middle of the snow and ask for shelter."

Nevertheless, they look over – a slightly older man with greying hair and a whiskery beard. He stares intensely into the darkness, and again I wave up at him.

"Hi. Dumb person here."

Lucas chuckles.

"Well, I'll be," mutters Lyons.

He quickly gathers his composure, and starts eyeing me up and down.

"Miss. Can you tell us who you are?"

"Uh..."

"Your name, Miss. Your age. Where you're from. Your exposure."

"Oh!" I reply, "Um, I'm Harriet James. But I prefer Harri."

Lucas smirks.

“I’m seventeen,” I push on, “from practically the other side of the country. I’ve had no exposure to living humans in over two years. I’ve been around bodies, but I’ve avoided close contact.”

“And what are your symptoms?”

“None,” I say, trying to speak clearly, “I’m not symptomatic. I swear.”

He pauses for a moment, then waves at Lucas.

“Go prepare things.”

Lucas nods and vanishes below the wall.

“Very well,” he says, “you can come in. But there are rules. Things you need to do first.”

I shudder at the thought.

“First of all,” he says, “take off your clothes.”

Immediately, I go on the defensive. I pull a knife from my pocket and brandish it.

“I hope for your sake that you’re joking.”

“No joke here Miss. The flu virus doesn’t need a live body to survive, at least for a while. It’s entirely possible that you carry the virus on your clothes and belongings. You can’t bring them in here. Leave them out there, and we’ll burn them in the morning.”

A cold wind rushes past and I shiver.

“No chance. It’s snowing and nearly the middle of the night. If I start stripping off, I’m going to catch my death out here.”

“Once you come inside you’ll be granted clean clothes and a warm bed. But you can’t come in like that. It’s either remove the clothes or leave. Your choice.”

I scowl at him, and throw my rucksack to the ground. I pull off my clothes and toss them aside, removing my gloves, my kneepads, even my precious surgical mask. With the removal of each layer I feel the chill run deeper into my skin, and soon enough I’m frozen through, my hair and skin dripping with barely melting snow.

“Okay, we’re opening the gate.”

And they do, sliding the doors open. Lucas and Lyons stand in the way, blocking my view of the inside. Lucas raises an eyebrow at the sight of me hunched over.

“Yikes. I know about the whole clothing risk thing, but in the snow? Brutal.”

I scowl.

“Tell me about it.”

I reach down and grab my rucksack – but Lyons lifts a hand and I pause.

“Sorry. No personal effects. Just like clothes, there’s just no way we can take the risk for the sake of sentimentality.”

I pause, one hand hovering over the bag. There’s not an awful lot in there. A couple of scraps of cloth. A bottle of drinking water. A few snack bars in case of emergencies. Packs of painkillers and some plasters. Beyond that, nothing.

Except Chloe’s music box.

Just thinking about leaving it out in the snow makes my heart ache. I know I never knew the kid – she and her whole family were perfect strangers who never knew or cared that I even existed. Maybe they wouldn’t have liked that

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I took it. Maybe they'd have wanted me to leave them alone in their house, to rot away like the others.

But maybe they want me to take it, and make sure something happens. That I'm not the last person to ever hear it. I bend down and take it out of the bag, then hold it aloft so that he can see it.

"How about this?" I call, "It's a music box. Silver. It... it means something to me."

He peers down at me.

"Are you really asking me to bend one of our founding rules for the sake of a music box?"

I fall silent. He's right. Realistically, there's not much I can do about it. Silver might repel germs, but there's no way of making sure it's completely safe. I clench the tiny box in my hand, rubbing a dirty thumb over the glossy surface.

"Ah, let up on it this one time," says Lucas, "Besides, she's freezing her ass off out here. Hey, Harri. Come on in."

I smile at him, pull the box close to my chest and race inside.

I don't see much; it's still dark in the alleyway they let me into. But I can see some light ahead, and take a step toward it.

"Not so fast."

Lucas and Lyons take a pointed step back from me, their hands raised as though to make doubly sure they don't touch me. I step back too, more out of respect than fear.

“What?”

“You have to be cleaned before you can come in.”

I stare down at my naked body, covered in goose bumps.

“Do you want me to freeze to death?”

“Just go through that door up there,” says Lyons, pointing the way. I do so, and immediately the door shuts behind me and I feel something cold soaking me from all directions. It stinks; I splutter and spit it out.

“Ugh,” I groan, “how is this clean? Smells like bleach.”

“It is bleach,” says Lucas from the other side of the door, “very weak though. It’s the only way to clear your skin completely. Wash in it, okay? Get it in your hair and everything.”

I do so, if only to silence him. It’s unpleasant – the chemicals don’t burn me, but they certainly smell. I’ll be stinking like this for weeks.

But then it’s over, and someone walks up and throws a blanket over me. The chemicals drip into my eyes and I rub them hard, allowing the stranger to lead me through the darkness. I hear bars collide with one another and someone sits me down.

“Alright,” a female voice coos, “just relax.”

They walk away, and the bars collide again. I wipe the last of the chemicals from my eyes and look around the room. Things are still a little blurry, but I can make it out well enough. A small room, a halogen heater in the corner. Folded up next to them is a set of clothing, which I pull on. I use the towel to dry off the rest of my hair, and then lay it out in front of the heater. I place the music box in the corner of the room, too.

“This feels great,” I say, “thanks, you guys. I know it’s not easy for you.”

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No response comes, so I look behind me. Only to see Lucas, standing just outside the door, his hand resting on the sealed bar door. I stand upright and glare at him.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, “I know we lied to you. We said you could come in. But the truth is, you can’t. Not yet.”

“Why have you locked me in here? Let me out!”

He shakes his head.

“I can’t. Not for 24 hours. You should know by now that’s the incubation time. Right? It’s just in case. We need to make absolutely sure you’re not infected before we let you around the kids.”

I take a step forward, my heart leaping.

“Kids? You guys actually have children?”

He shrugs.

“Well, not me personally. But some of the others do. Probably seven kids in all.”

“Seven? Wait, how big is this group?”

“About forty.”

“Forty? That’s incredible.”

Suddenly Lyons steps into my view, his arms crossed and a stern look on his face.

“Yes, it is. For a group that started so small. We’re probably one of the biggest groups left alive. But we didn’t get this way by being lack about our

rules. You are going to stay in here for one day. If you're infected, then we'll know for sure by then."

My teeth clench; he might be a good guy, but he's a little too stern for my liking. But I turn my head away and nod. Lyons walks away, but Lucas pauses outside the cell.

"We'll leave the heater on for you," he says kindly, "someone will also be here come morning to give you some food."

I force a smile. I won't lie; as grateful as I am to be here, I'm not the type to take kindly to being locked up. Vengeance isn't really something I'm interested in, but I get the idea I'll be able to use this to my advantage once I get out.

"Thanks Lucas," I mutter. He smiles weakly.

"Listen. I know we seem like the bad guys. Believe me, I know. But we're only trying to do what's right, you know? We're not bad people."

With that, he walks away. I stand up and look around the room; a mattress sits in one corner, and I crawl onto it, pulling the threadbare blanket over myself.

"Ugh," I mutter, pushing a wet strand of hair from my face. So far, everything that they've done makes perfect sense, but that doesn't make it any less unpleasant. I sit upright, lean against the wall, and shiver. It's freezing in here, despite the halogen heater in the corner. I reach out a hand – the air around it is warm, so much so that it seems to shimmer. But as soon as I pull away, goose bumps course up my arms. They may not have thought this through.

I climb to my knees, pull the mattress as close to the heater as I can. It helps. I pull the blanket around myself and lie on my front, waving my feet near the heater to try and keep them warm.

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I've been wanting to come here for so long, but somehow now I feel a little empty. It's all I could have asked for, a large group of people who are thriving in the middle of the dead city. But having left my clothes, my bag, my mask on the road outside, I feel a small sense of loss.

Then, I remember. Chloe's box. It's still on the floor where I left it, its shiny surface covered with tiny wells of bleach water. I lift it and wipe it dry with my shirt, then place it on the floor next to me. Somehow, it serves to comfort me, the fact that I've still got something left from out there. I curl into a ball, bury my head under the blanket and try to sleep, listening to the tinkling sound of the music box.

It's about three hours before the heater goes out.

I wake up immediately as the room darkens, and almost instantly my whole body is overcome with cold. I wrap myself closer into the blanket, hoping that I can keep some warmth, but I can't. It's suddenly unnerving to be without the heater's bright light and soft humming. I can hear the wind blustering outside, blasting through the bars. At least I'm under a roof – but the sound just confirms to me that I wouldn't have survived the winter without these guys.

"Harri."

I jerk upright, and start shivering as my skin hits the cold air. I look up; Lucas is standing at the bars to the cage, a bundle of blankets tossed over his shoulder. He carries a small bag as well, which he places down outside the door.

"Lucas? What are you doing here?"

He points at the heater and shakes his head.

"There's a bit of an issue with the generator at the minute, and we've had all our power cut. It sometimes happens."

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“Yeah, I noticed.”

“So, I’m here to keep you warm, plus to keep a little company.”

He sits down, passing one blanket through the bars to me and wrapping the other around himself. He reaches into the bag and pulls out a small amount of kindling, which he lights. The light and warmth is instantly pleasing; I lean towards the door, holding out my hands and feeling the heat on my palms.

“Better?” he asks. I nod furiously, pulling the blanket closer and sighing.

“Yes. But, why are you sitting out here? Aren’t you scared that I’m infected?”

He shrugs.

“The way I see it, if you were going to get sick, you’d be sick by now. Besides, as long as I keep this distance...”

He brandishes to the space between us.

“I’m technically not breaking any rules.”

I find myself smiling at him. He seems like such a genuine and nice person, despite the atrocities that he may have been witness to in the past.

“I was on watch earlier and I heard something down here,” he says, “was that it?”

He points at Chloe’s music box. I nod, lifting it and placing it in front of me. He doesn’t ask, but I wind it up nevertheless. For a minute or two we sit in silence, just the tinkling music and the warmth of the fire. When it fades to silence he sighs.

“It’s been forever since I’ve heard music. We sing a lot here, but it’s just not the same. I’ve gotta say though, that looks like a kid’s one. Is it yours?”

“No. It’s Chloe’s.”

“Is Chloe someone you knew?” he asks sympathetically. I shake my head.

“No, I never knew her. But I found her music box, and I couldn’t bear to leave it behind.”

“I can understand that, certainly.”

We sit in silence for a moment, and then I speak up.

“So. Tell me about this place. When did it get set up? Who runs it?”

He gives a dismissive wave of the hand and laughs.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that tomorrow. In fact, if you choose to stay then we have a lifetime to talk about that. But right now, I want to know about you.”

“We have a lifetime to talk about that, too.”

“Technically,” he says, “but we don’t encourage it. You can’t live in the past here, it makes people uneasy. You have to leave your pain at the front door.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy.”

“Neither does bottling it up. So tell me.”

I sigh deeply, stretching my hands out towards the fire. I suppose I can spare a bit of time for Lucas, after what he’s done for me. Letting me in, convincing Lyons to let me bring my music box, even coming out here in the middle of the night to keep me company. He’s clearly a good guy, so maybe it’s fair that I tell him everything.

I pull my knees up to my chest and start talking.

“I was eleven when the virus got out.”

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“Just eleven?” he winces, “I thought it was bad that I was fourteen at the time.”

“It was awful,” I say, “me and Mom tried to stay safe and out of the way. We were cautious. Masks, gloves, the typical fare.”

“But they didn’t work?” he asks, a solemn look on his face.

“Maybe they would have. I mean, I obviously have some kind of resistance, so it’s likely Mom did too. But then the riots broke out. Mom tried to get me out of town, she wanted us to go into the forests and stay there for a few weeks. She stocked up the car with supplies and we were out on the road.”

Lucas looks on expectantly, but I suddenly find the words catching in my throat.

“And then... and then this guy showed up.”

His expression falls and it’s clear he knows where this is going.

“Who was he?”

I shrug half-heartedly.

“Dunno. I had never seen him before. Maybe he knew us, maybe he didn’t. Either way, he didn’t care. He held us at gunpoint.”

“What did he want?”

“The car. I was still inside, Mom had gone out to get fuel. She’d told me to stay inside, lie low against the seat and stay quiet. But the second she got out of the car he was there, gun out, demanding that she back up and give him the keys. She tried telling him that there wasn’t any fuel, that it wouldn’t drive, but he wouldn’t listen.”

As if on cue, the memories flash in my mind. The gun shaking in his hand, his eyes rolling in his head. My Mom backing up against the window, shielding me from his sight. Her pleading with him, begging him to stop and leave us alone.

Lucas leans forward, his eyes full of sympathy. I clear my throat.

“She kept trying to calm him down, but...”

“It’s alright,” he coos, “you don’t need to say anything else.”

I shake my head. As much as I appreciate his consideration, what happened then is something I’ve not talked about in a long time. I need it.

“He killed her,” I say, my voice quiet. He stays silent, simply looking on, his face full of sympathy.

“That’s it.”

“That’s it?” he asks softly, “No. There’s more to it than that. It’s been years since then – you can’t have just been wandering alone for all that time.”

I shake my head.

“No. Someone came and helped me. They fought off the gunman and took care of me. We travelled together, we grew and learned and fought together. Up until two years ago, when we parted ways.”

“Did they die?”

I look at the ground, and I feel my face grow dark. I haven’t been able to bring myself to say his name in years, even to myself. Just imagining his face fills me with a sense of hate unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. When I speak, my voice is hard and angry.

“They may as well have.”

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He sits with me for the rest of the night, and although we talk about my past a few more times he never asks about that person. I can tell that he's nervous, after seeing my earlier reaction.

But finally the sun rises overhead, and although the air is still cold I can breathe without it hurting my lungs.

"So this was fun," says Lucas, standing up and grabbing his bag, "Later today you'll be allowed out, so I'll try and make sure I'm here for that."

"Thank you."

"Lucas!"

We both turn; Lyons stands nearby, a surgical mask over his mouth and a stern expression on his face.

"Morning," says Lucas. Lyons marches over, reaching a hand up and pulling Lucas towards him by his shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing out here?"

"N-nothing."

Lyons snarls at him, his eyes narrowing.

"We share a bunk, Lucas. I know you sneaked out last night."

Lucas gasps, comically pretending to be offended.

"No! How could you even suggest such a thing?"

"Save it. This girl..." he points at me, "is a high risk person. Getting too close to her could lead to an infection."

"I don't think she's sick," he says, "If she were she'd be symptomatic right now."

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“Do you have total confidence in that?” snaps Lyons, “We’ve seen this virus do incredible things before. We’ve seen it infect someone in solitary confinement, for Pete’s sake. You have to be one hundred percent certain. Now would you please come and help in the crop field?”

Lucas shrugs, then looks at me.

“Sorry. Looks like I have to go.”

I step towards the bars, looping my fingertips around them.

“Okay. I guess I’ll just...”

The two stride away, off into a bright area that my eyes can’t see through.

“...stay here.”

It’s another twelve hours before I’m allowed out. The sun is still in the sky, albeit slowly starting to sink. Lucas and Lyons walk up to the bars of my cage; Lucas smiles at me, lifting a ring of keys towards the lock.

“Wait,” says Lyons, turning to me, “Any symptoms?”

I cross my arms and sigh.

“List them.”

“Fever. Dizziness. Faintness. Nausea.”

“No to all. Though I am almost bored to death. Can I come out now?”

He hesitates, then motions for Lucas to open the cage. As soon as he does I burst out, a massive smile on my face. I know that they only put me in there because they felt there was a valid reason to do so, but it still feels amazing to finally be out of there.

“Thank god for that,” I say, stretching, “I thought I was going to rot in there.”

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“No, no,” says Lyons, “We wouldn’t keep anyone as a prisoner.”

He smiles, and I notice that his expression has softened. He seems more at ease now that he knows I’m clean, and I wonder briefly if the only reason he was so hard before is just because he was scared. I can’t blame him – I would be scared too.

“So, I’m clean,” I tell them, “Immune, too, if you want to take that stance. Can I please go and check this place out now?”

“Sure,” says Lucas, “we’ll show you around. Though I’m told I have to run the rules by you first.”

“Rules?”

He nods.

“In this place, there are some who have been here since the start. There are others who have proven themselves to be wonderful, insightful and brave individuals. We follow these guys, we let them make the rules. If they tell you that something has to be done, then there’s no questioning it. Just do it, and do it right.”

“Fair enough. What else?”

“I told you there were kids here. They don’t fully understand the state of the outside world. We tell them it’s dangerous and that they shouldn’t go out there, but we’ve never sat them down and told them the really hard truths. If you talk to any of the kids, they can be warned about going outside, but spare them the gory details.”

“Obviously.”

“And one more thing,” says Lyons, “This place is supposed to be society, or at least some version of it. That means that any untoward behaviour is

punishable. No stealing, no fighting. Violence is bad enough, if you actually hurt someone you're out on your own. You get one chance. And just for insurance, we all carry these."

He shifts, lifting his shirt to reveal a pistol in his belt.

I nod. Simple rules to follow. After being on my own for so long, who knows, following the rules might be a pleasant change for me.

"Come on then," says Lucas, wrapping an arm around my shoulder, "let us show you what's left of the world."

I wander down the tunnel, Lucas still holding me close. He beams at me, his face bright.

"I've never had the chance to show a newbie around before. I mean, obviously. There haven't been any newbies at all since I took on the wall job."

"The wall job?"

"Yeah. Everyone has their tasks to do around here. For me, the morning is spent in the crop field. The afternoon is spent looking after the animals, and the night is spend guarding the wall."

"Wow. When do you sleep?"

He laughs.

"Usually, when I'm on watch. It's been two years and nobody's come here, it was pretty obvious nobody would. Well, until last night. Now I guess I'll be using my evenings for sleep."

"Your jobs will be simple to start with," says Lyons, striding smartly alongside us, "We won't have you in the infirmary for another few days, or near the food. But for starters, we need someone to clean out the waste systems and generally keep things clean and tidy."

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I cringe. I can't say that clearing out the waste system would be my first choice, but I suppose I'm stuck. I don't make the decisions anymore.

"Well, here we are, Harri. Welcome to Keep."

I gasp.

Keep is actually an old football stadium – seats take pride of place around the edges of a large pitch. Much of the furniture has been broken down and turned into small, makeshift shelters. To my right is a massive field of crops that takes up almost half of the space. Plants are crammed into every available spot, and there's around ten men working in it.

"Hey Lyons, who's that?" one of them asks, wiping the dirt from his brow.

"Newcomer," he replies, and immediately the men all start whispering. I suppose I can see why; if nobody's been here in two years they probably weren't ever expecting to see someone new. They stare at me, wide-eyed, and I raise a hand and give a half-wave.

"The inside of the building is where we all live," Lucas tells me, "this outside bit is mainly for farming, but we also distil the rainwater out here."

"You do? That's clever. I've been surviving off stale bottled water."

"That's gross," he laughs, "and over there we keep the animals."

I squint – down the other end of the field is a small stable built out of what looks to be airplane scrap. I can see some larger animals, perhaps horses, and as I listen I can just hear the mooing of cows.

"Where did you even find animals?" I ask as we walk towards the sound.

"Most of them we found," says Lyons, "especially the sheep, they came from an overturned truck in the middle of the road. Most were dead, but four had

survived. We brought them back here, fixed them up, and every year we get a couple more to add to the flock.”

“Impressive!”

We near the stables, where a couple of men are working. One man is holding a sheep, trying to shear it using a pair of jagged scissors. It looks a little scary, but I suppose that they have to make do with what they have. Another guy is cleaning out the stables, piling waste straw into a wheelbarrow. Yet another man is fixing something near the stable door; he’s turned away from us, so Lucas raises his hand and shouts.

“Oi William, how’s it going?”

The man stands upright, wiping the tool on his apron. It comes away greasy, but he doesn’t seem to care.

Then he turns, and suddenly my blood runs cold.

I know him. The curled black hair, the dark eyes. The smattering of stubble across his face. He takes a few steps toward us, then stops in his tracks. He stares at me, and I see a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

“H-Harriet?”

I step back, reach out to Lyon’s belt and pull the pistol out. Just holding it in my hands is unnerving, but the rage snakes through me so fast and hot that I can’t begin to control it. I aim the gun squarely at his head.

Everyone immediately starts yelling, out of fear and confusion and panic. I yell back, louder than all of them.

“Why is he here?”

“Harriet,” he says, his expression unreadable. Lucas steps towards me, holding out a hand as though he wants to touch my shoulder but is too afraid to.

“Hey, put that down...”

“No! Why did you let him in here?” I yell, my voice breaking. I stare back into his eyes and the hate burns in my chest – I check that the safety’s off on the gun and loop a finger around the trigger.

“William’s been here for two years,” says Lyons, “He’s a part of us.”

“You’re being tricked!” I cry, “that bastard isn’t one of you! He’d abandon you all in a heartbeat if it helped him!”

William takes a step towards me and I tense; instantly the area falls silent.

“William, don’t...”

“It’s okay Lucas,” he responds, his voice smooth, “Me and Harriet go way back.”

“You do?”

“Oh yes. You see, when dear sweet Harriet was left alone I’m the one who looked after her. I’m the one who protected and raised her into the woman you see now.”

“Don’t lie!” I tell him, “you know what really happened!”

“Yes. And I know that neither of us acted with decorum. But I’ve changed, Harriet. I’m a new man now, immune to the weaknesses of before.”

He takes another step and I start, my finger tightening around the trigger.

“Stop! Stop right there!”

“You’re not going to kill me, Harriet.”

He steps again and again, and with each step the tension grows. I take a step back and shout.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t blow your brains out right this second!”

“Because violence is not acceptable here,” says Lyons. I freeze instantly, staring breathlessly into William’s determined eyes.

“William is a permanent and highly valued member of our family here,” Lyons continues, “and even just one act of violence against him is punishable. You agreed to the rules, Harri. If you pull that trigger, you’ll be back on the streets within the hour.”

I pretend to ignore him, still glaring at William. He takes another step towards me, and suddenly he’s so close that the barrel of the gun is resting on his chest. I look down at my hands – they quiver, a combination of rage and fear taking over my limbs.

“Put the gun down,” he croons, reaching out a hand. I tense, half expecting my hand to move instinctively, but it doesn’t happen. Instead, he simply takes the gun from me, steps back and hands it off to someone.

I stand frozen, every fibre of my being filled with rage and shame. Just seeing him again, just knowing he’s still alive and still able to spout his lies to people – it makes my stomach twist.

“There we go,” he says, rubbing his hands together, “are we feeling better now?”

I glare at him; I might not be able to fight him physically, but that doesn’t mean for even a second that I’ve forgiven him.

I grit my teeth and snarl – the others seem to take a pointed step back, and I don’t blame them. I feel animalistic in my hate, full of rage at the sight of him. But then arms loop around mine and suddenly I’m being restrained, by not one but two strange men. I don’t bother to fight it; I can’t be angry at them for being a little scared. For a seemingly peaceful place, it’s got to be a little unnerving when a newcomer starts waving a gun around.

“You need some time out,” says Lyons, walking alongside me as I’m led from the field. I nod. I want to stay here – even more than I want to kill William. If that means spending another night in the cage, then I really can’t hold it against them.

They push me into the cage and I huff loudly, settling down on the mattress.

“Just take tonight, okay?” says Lyons, and his voice is full of pity, “think things through. When the morning comes if you find you can’t deal with this, then you’ll have to make the choice to leave of your own accord. But until then, we can’t have you around our people. I’m sure you can understand.”

“I do. I don’t blame you.”

Lyons pauses, opens his mouth like he wants to say something, closes it, then turns to look at me.

“I don’t blame you for what you did, either. The rest of us have lived very sheltered lives here and there’s a lot of things that scare us, things that we don’t understand. You’ve obviously experienced a lot more hurt than those of us here ever have, so your actions are... no excusable, exactly, but understandable.”

With that he walks away, and for a few hours I’m left alone in the cold. It doesn’t take me long to start pacing up and down the room, slamming my foot down angrily as I go. As much as I’m willing to forgive them for throwing me in here, I still can’t let go of my sense of hate for that man.

That man. Everything about him was just the same as ever, right down to his smug grin and his slow, suave movements. A charmer all round, all smiles and kindness and lies. Lyons said that he’s been here for two years – so he arrived here just after we parted ways. Of course if he showed up and told them

some cock and bull story they would believe him. It's one of the main traits of a psychopath – they're charmingly manipulative.

"Damnit," I mutter, whipping around to pace around the room again. I can't believe it. For two years these people – these otherwise good and honest people – have been tainted and used and twisted in order to benefit him. He's got to be using them. People don't change – there's no other possibility.

"Hey."

I look up; Lucas stands at the doorway, his hand wrapped around the bar. I sigh deeply, taking a step towards him.

"Honestly," he smiles, "you need to try and stop getting locked up in here."

I shake my head sadly.

"I'm really sorry about my behaviour earlier. I shouldn't have reacted that way."

"I wouldn't worry about it. William is a pretty forgiving guy. He'll be back to accepting you with open arms by morning."

I scoff loudly.

"William, huh? He's changed his name in recent years. I knew him as Bill."

"Oh yeah? William did say that you and him go way back."

"You could say that."

He pauses, his eyes narrowing.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I shrug, knowing he's going to ask me either way.

"William... is he the guy you talked about? The one who cared for you and helped you?"

My stomach twists. I stare at the ground and nod.

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“Yeah. He’s the guy. I never expected to see him here, though.”

Lucas reaches out to something I can’t see, and a few seconds later the heater bursts into life. I sit down in front of it, enjoying the warm sensations but still feeling uneasy.

“He’s been here for a long time. If the two of you were split up I don’t see why he never mentioned you to us. He knows that if he’d asked, we’d have looked for you.”

“Thanks, but we didn’t exactly leave on the best of terms.”

He sighs, lifting his arms and placing them behind his head.

“Can I ask you what happened?”

“You can ask away, doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

As soon as I say it I feel guilt pooling in my gut. Lucas is a genuine person, as far as I can tell, and it seems so unfair for me to be snapping at him like this. It’s not his fault.

“I’m sorry. Ask me anything, okay? I’ll tell you.”

He hesitates, then sits down and crosses his legs. I follow suit, sitting in front of him and staring at the bars between us.

“William never talks about himself,” says Lucas, “whenever we ask, he just tells us that we wouldn’t understand. That he did bad things and has regrets. I think he’s scared that we might reject him if he told us.”

“So, your question is...?”

“Who is he? I mean, who is he really?”

I take a deep breath. As much as I want to be able to respond with an insult, or tell Lucas that William is the scum of the Earth, I can’t. In his eyes, William is a valued and respected member of their society. If I push too hard or stretch the truth too much, it could alienate him altogether.

“He’s a police officer,” I say, “or rather, he was. Constable, I think. He had a wife at some point, but I’m pretty sure she died of flu. No kids, at least as far as I knew.”

“He was a cop? I’d never have guessed. He seems so placid.”

“Now he does. When I knew him he was a strong and aggressive character. Loyal and dependable and kind, but still hard and solid. Nobody in their right mind would mess with Bill.”

“I find that kind of hard to believe. William’s always been very non-confrontational.”

I scoff.

“He would be. I don’t mean to be rude, but the guy’s shown a hundred times that he knows how to take advantage of people. Sometimes, that means being aggressive. Others, it means being nice.”

Lucas’ eyes narrow and he gazes at the ground.

“...I don’t think William would deceive us.”

“Just wait until you hear the rest of the story.”

He looks up, clearly intrigued.

“We met when my Mom died. She was held up at gunpoint... but you know all that already. Anyway, as the guy came up to the door, he was freaking out. I could tell he hadn’t meant to shoot but in a moment of panic he’d acted blindly. He was still losing it when he spotted me in the car. He raised the gun, and I can only imagine he thought he would end it all...”

My cheek twitches, and I briefly wonder if my anguish shows on my face.

“But then, William came. He fought the guy off, slammed his head against the car. He broke open the door and picked me up, and that was it. I was his, he was mine.”

“I know it’s tragic,” he says softly, “but that sounds like the start of something beautiful.”

I laugh.

“It was, for a time. I was so young, and so clueless, and he was a big, strong policeman. He took me back to the station where he and some others had been holing up through the riots. I know they were supposed to be out there calming the situation down, but by that point it had gotten out of control. Nowhere was safe – and it wasn’t long before citizens started flocking to us, asking to be let in.”

I breathe out, a deep rattling sound. My head fills with the memories of crowds clamouring at the doors, screaming at the windows, hammering their fists on the walls. I remember Bill holding me close, wrapping his jacket around my head so that I couldn’t hear the yelling. We sat like that for hours, both of us tortured.

“Once they broke through, there was no choice but to run. Me, Bill, and a couple of others – Ewan and Rob – piled into a cop car and just started driving.”

“They abandoned their posts?”

“They didn’t have a choice. It was kind of a big deal though – them leaving the station was like leaving their past lives. They just had to.”

He frowns at me, but I ignore it.

“So we went on the road, but every town we went to was the same. People got sick, then they got scared. So they rioted, but that just spread the flu even more. People flocked to hospitals and churches, and that just finished them off quicker.”

“I heard about that. I’ve been here for most of it, but apparently all it took was one person in a group to be symptomatic to end up killing all of them.”

I nod.

“Exactly. That’s why, even though we took on more people, we had to keep moving. Stick around one place too long and you become complacent. All it takes is one slip up. And these cops, they were pretty harsh. There were a few times when we had to leave people behind.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There was this one girl, Penny... she was so sweet, she always looked after me. But then she cut her hand, and got some infected blood in it. It took control quickly, and we didn’t want to leave her, but we didn’t have a choice. She was just lying there, totally unconscious. She didn’t even know that we’d left her behind.”

His expression softens, and he pushes a hand through the bars to gently rest on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

I shrug.

“It’s okay. It’s just one of those things, you know. Everyone lost someone. I happened to lose more than most, but that’s still not unusual. It’s just the way things are now.”

He stares at me for a moment, then pulls his hand away.

“What happened next?”

“Well, eventually we ended up alone, just the two of us. We travelled, and that was that. For over a year, we didn’t see anyone else. And then, one night, while we slept in an abandoned factory...”

I wince instinctively, the memories forcing their way to the forefront of my mind. The way his voice had grown louder, angrier. Cowering back against the wall, shrinking down to the ground in fear as he approached, his eyes rolling in his head, his fists clenched...

“He lost it.”

“Lost it?”

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“Yeah,” I tell him, “I don’t know what it was. Stress or fear or what. But one minute we were talking, the next he had me pinned. I couldn’t get away, I couldn’t fight him off.”

A shudder courses through me.

“... I think he would have killed me if he’d had the chance.”

Lucas shakes his head, clearly confused.

“I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. William doesn’t seem the type.”

I look up, meeting his eyes. He frowns, and I can tell that a part of him doesn’t believe me.

“M...maybe it was a misunderstanding?” he asks, his voice unsteady. I shake my head hard.

“No. He just lost it at me. I had to use a glass bottle to fight him off – the last time I saw him, he was unconscious in that room. I left and started running, and I just never stopped.”

I circle the floor with my finger, making rings in the dust.

“I thought that after all this time, he had to be dead. Or at least, gone. I never thought I’d see him again, anyway.”

“I think I can understand your reaction now,” he says, standing up, “and I’ll talk to Lyons for you.”

“You will?”

“Sure. It’s not your fault, and I think once I explain it to Lyons he’ll be happy to let you out come morning, as long as you promise not to pull a gun on anyone again.”

I laugh.

“I promise. Something tells me the rules don’t apply in here.”

He smiles weakly, then gives a small wave as he wanders from my view.

I sigh heavily and sit back down on the mattress. My fingers glide over the surface, pushing gently so that I can feel the springs inside it.

“I just couldn’t stay away,” I chuckle, lying back and closing my eyes.

It’s early in the morning when they open the cage. I stay hiding under the threadbare blanket, facing the wall, eyes closed. Someone steps near me, and I pause, fighting to remain motionless.

“...Harri?”

Lucas takes another step towards me. I tense, and as he gets close enough I whip around.

“Boo!”

He jumps back and yelps, then catches himself.

“Harri! Come on... why would you do that?”

I sit up and stretch, lifting my arms high over my head.

“I dunno. I just felt like it.”

He groans, then a smile creeps across his face. He holds out a hand and I take it, springing to my feet. I’m not sure why, but today I feel happy and full of energy. Perhaps it’s because I finally told someone about what happened two years ago. Maybe it’s just the feeling of being safe.

“So,” I ask Lucas, “did you talk to Lyons?”

“He did.”

I turn to see Lyons standing behind me, arms crossed as he leans back against the brick wall. He raises one eyebrow, clearly amused by our antics. I grin.

“Morning.”

“Morning. Could I chat with you?”

“Sure.”

He walks over and sits on the bench, signalling for me to do so too. I follow suit, taking a seat next to him. He sighs, squeezing the bridge of his nose, before facing me.

“About yesterday.”

I hold up my hands, shaking my head.

“I know. I know. Wildly inappropriate. It was more... the shock of the situation. I realise it wasn't the best plan.”

“You stole a gun and aimed it at one of our leaders, Harriet.”

I pause.

“Leaders? That guy is... but why?”

He stands up and starts pacing, leaving me feeling like a child being scolded by a teacher.

“Two years ago, me and a couple of the guys were out in the city. And we came across this stranger, just half-dead in the snow. He looked pathetic and stank like he'd bathed in whiskey, but as far as we could see he hadn't got any symptoms, so we brought him back here.”

I try to imagine it – big, aggressive Bill, being reduced to a drunken mess in the street. How severe had his problem been?

“And over the weeks and months, William proved to be an incredibly useful member. He was a people person, and although he asked us not to pry into

his past he was a very active and involved member of Keep. So, we appointed him a leader, along with myself and a few others.”

I stare down at the ground; instinctively my jaw grinds and I frown.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Lyons. I don’t trust him.”

“Lucas told me everything. What happened sounds awful, traumatic and just terrible. It also sounds like something that could destroy your trust and make you hate a person. For that reason, we’ve agreed to forgive you altogether.”

I look up.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. After all, there’s a lot that we can’t understand. We’ve been here all this time, in relative safety. We can’t begin to understand what you’ve been through, not just for the past two years but the time before that.”

I stand up and step towards him, smiling widely.

“That’s amazing, Lyons...”

“-But please don’t think that means you get a free pass every time,” he interrupts, “Remember that you agreed to come here. You approached us and asked for shelter. Now you don’t have to like William, or trust him, but for the sake of everyone here you need to be civil.”

I grit my teeth and sigh.

“Fine. But, for now at least, can I not work near him? I’ll do anything. I’ll clear the stables if you want me to, just give me a job that keeps me out of his way.”

He nods and waves a hand towards the door.

“Good. Come with me, I’ll show you where you’ll be living.”

I follow him out, then pause and look back to Lucas. He shrugs and kicks at the mattress.

“Sorry Harri, you’re on your own right now. What with you arriving as well as another couple of pregnancies, the clinic is officially over capacity. They need more people trained in medicine, so Jensen is going to be teaching me from today.”

“Jensen?”

“Our resident doctor,” says Lyons, “of course he’s not a real doctor, he was only in training, but he’s the closest we’ve got. You’d be amazed what that man can do. But you’ll meet him shortly. Shall we go?”

I wave at Lucas and follow Lyons from the cage.

The ‘clinic’ is nothing more than three rooms, each separated by a shoddily-built wall. Equipment lines the walls, each so crowded that I have to turn to squeeze between them. Lyons leads me into the larger part of the room, where a small child sits motionless, their arm outstretched. A younger man crouches over them, one hand holding their arm, the other slowly pushing down the plunger of a syringe. The kid cringes and moans, but he doesn’t stop.

“Sorry kiddo,” he mutters, “but it’s better than the alternative. Don’t want you getting an infection, now do we?”

For a brief moment, I’m taken by emotion. It’s been years since I’ve seen anyone under the age of fifteen – even when there were lots of people around, the children were always the first to die. Seeing this one, their tiny hands, their diminutive frames; it’s oddly touching.

But then the man turns, pushing his glasses up his nose, and approaches me. He offers his hand and I take it, shaking it absent mindedly.

“This must be Harriet,” he smiles, “I’ve heard all about you.”

“You have?”

“Oh, yes. This is a small place, news travels quickly. Imagine my shock when I found out that you’re an old friend of William’s!”

He signals for me to sit down, and I do.

“I wouldn’t say we’re friends.”

“No, I imagine not. You don’t try to shoot your friends.”

Blood rushes to my face and I look away.

“I...it’s not like that.”

He gives a dismissive wave of the hand and laughs.

“I’m teasing you. I don’t know the full story, but I don’t need to. So long as you can promise me that I’m not going to have to treat any life threatening injuries?”

I force a smile.

“I promise.”

“In that case, welcome aboard. I trust you’ll be happy here.”

We chat with Jensen for a little while longer before Lyons calls me away to see the dorms. They’re not that much better; each one is the size of a large cupboard and consists of two tiny camp beds. There’s not enough space for more than one person to even stand.

“This is cosy,” I joke.

“It’s not perfect, but it’s home,” he tells me, “you’ll be sharing a room with Vanessa. I think you’ll like her – most people do.”

It only takes another half hour before I meet her, too; a woman only a year or so younger than myself, with olive skin and incredibly long, black hair. She greets me with a hug and a warm smile.

“I can’t wait to have a roommate!” she beams, “I’ve been having to sleep alone for a long time, but I never liked it much. I’ll sleep much better with someone else in the room.”

I simply stare back. I’m not sure what to think about sharing a room; I know that my evenings are usually quite distressing, and my sleep punctuated by nightmares. Do I talk in my sleep? Do I toss and turn? Do I scream? For all I know, I might.

“...Yeah. I look forward to it.”

Lyons passes me a small duffle bag – I open it up and find clothes, towels and other basic bits and pieces.

“These are your supplies. I recommend you keep them in the dorm, along with anything else you might have.”

I nod and bend down, pushing the bag under the empty camp bed. Then I pause, and pull Chloe’s music box from my pocket.

“I was meaning to ask about that,” says Lyons, “that clearly has some meaning to you.”

“Not really. I found it.”

He falls silent, and I look hard at the box. For all my insistence that it’s meaningless, I can’t bring myself to treat it poorly. It might just be a trinket, but it’s my trinket. I crouch, laying the box softly next to my pillow. For a moment we both stand silently, and then he speaks up.

“Well, that’s everything. You’ll hear bells twice a day for breakfast and dinner. You’re not allergic to anything?”

“No.”

“Good. Then I guess it’s time for you to get to work.”

I follow Lyons out onto the field. In the distance I can see the stables and I hang back, hoping that I don’t have to go near where Bill is. But instead he makes a sharp turn away from it.

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The stench hits me and I start to choke.

“Oh god,” I gasp, my eyes streaming, “what is that stink?”

He indicates towards a series of long tunnels dug into the field. Blackish water courses through them, occasionally being filtered by metal grates. Lyons reaches off to one side, then passes me something that looks like a giant toilet brush.

“Your first job,” he smirks. I can’t help but laugh – I’d been joking before, but I suppose I did promise him I’d do anything.

“Lovely. So I have to clean the grates?”

“Exactly.”

I take the brush off him and grimace.

“And I don’t have any choice in the matter?”

“We all have to play our part,” he says. I lean forward, looking into the tunnels.

“Fine. But for the record, this is disgusting.”

He laughs.

“Don’t think about it too much – a lot of our drinking water comes from there.”

“That’s disgusting!” I splutter, “What the hell?”

“How else can we keep a constant supply of fresh water? We filter out all waste products, then boil and distil the water. It’s totally sterile, so it’s not a problem unless you think it through too much.”

I stick my tongue out, but turn and get to work.

It’s disgusting. Despite the cold air the stench is unbearable – I can see why none of the others were willing to do this job. Luckily, I’ve done more than

my fair share of gross things in the past few years. I've eaten and drank things that are definitely not fit for human consumption, and as revolting as it is, it's what I had to do. So despite the stink, I buckle down and get to it.

About three or so hours later, Lyons returns. This time he's beaming, looking down at the grates with a smile on his face.

"Hey, that's a pretty good job."

I wipe the sweat from my brow and lean the brush against the wall.

"Thanks. I mean, my skin's crawling all over, but at least it's done."

"Yep. Why don't you go and clean off? It'll be time for dinner soon."

I do as I'm told, standing fully clothed under a downpour of water until the stench is soaked from my skin.

As I towel off, I hear a bell in the distance.

"That'll be dinner," says Lyons, "Let's go."

We take a seat in what seems to be an old food hall, and soon enough food is served. In plastic bowls with either a fork, spoon or chopsticks. I prod at the strange yellow goo in my bowl. Lyons laughs, clearly amused by the look of disgust on my face.

"I think you preferred cleaning the ditches!"

I scoop up a small amount of the goo and taste it. Immediately I spit it out, lifting a napkin to my face and wiping it vigorously.

"What even is this?"

"Custard," says Vanessa, walking up to the table. She removes her oven mitts and puts her hands on her hips. I blush, then try to scoop more of it into my mouth.

“I know it’s not much,” she sighs, “and it doesn’t exactly taste great. But we’ve got forty people to feed here, and we can only do so much. Sometimes we have no choice but to make custard with goat’s milk, okay?”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright. It’s just something you’ll have to get used to.”

I grimace, but manage to force down the rest of the gruel. Somewhere along the line Lyons volunteers me to help clean up, so as the sky darkens overhead I’m left standing in the cold and gathering cutlery with Vanessa.

“So, how are you doing?” she asks, passing a bowl to me. I take it and stack it on top of what I’ve already got.

“Good, I guess. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Y-you can?”

She looks up at me, wide eyed.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that you seem kind of surprised by everything today. You look a little stunned.”

I chuckle nervously.

“I suppose I am. I don’t know why, maybe I’ve just been away from people for too long. But I’ll get there. I mean, Lucas and Lyons are great guys, I think they’re probably going to help me settle in.”

She looks away, and for a moment I could swear I see a look of disdain on her face. But then she smiles, and gently taps me on the shoulder.

“I’m sure they will. I will, too. If you ever need anything, just ask me. Okay?”

I smile, nod, and reach for another plate.

It's around midnight before Vanessa and I make it back to our dorm. She heads in first, and I wait until she's laid down before I try and squeeze in. I sit down on the camp bed and pull the blanket up around myself, then lie down. The room is pitch black, but I just know that we're facing each other.

I open my mouth, hoping to say something, but nothing comes. I don't know what I can say. What else about me is there that they don't all know by now? So I close my eyes and try to force myself to sleep.

It only lasts for a few minutes before the sweat starts pouring. I wipe it away, shifting slowly so I don't wake her. But it doesn't help. As it does every night, the panic starts to set in. My eyes flit around the room, and I try to force myself to speak.

"Damnit. Stop..."

My breath comes rough and unsteady, and although I try to keep my voice down it still comes out louder than I intended.

"It's okay now. It's safe. Stop."

Vanessa shuffles, and through the darkness I hear a whisper.

"You okay?"

"Y-yeah," I mutter, "I am. I'm fine. Ignore me."

She pauses, then I hear her take a deep breath.

"Is it... really so bad out there?"

"...Yeah. I know. I need to get over it."

"Sometimes you can't help how you feel," she mutters quietly, "even if you know it's wrong."

I nod, though I know she can't see me, and bury my head under the covers.

The next day I find myself walking the perimeter alone. I've not got any tasks to do, except to deliver a few bits to the clinic. It seems that they're still gauging my skillset, trying to figure out something for me to do. I feel like a bit of a spare part, just wandering aimlessly until I'm able to find purpose.

"Harriet."

I freeze. The voice came from behind me – William steps up behind me and I can hear his heavy, unsure breathing.

"Harriet. Can we talk?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

My voice is hard and emotionless – but this man used to make me feel like I was on top of the world and that nothing could touch me. How strange that now I feel so empty.

"We need to talk about what happened between us."

"We don't. Look, this will be easier on both of us if we just ignore each other."

He grunts a little, perhaps irritated by my comment.

"You can't be serious," he tells me, "Harriet, what happened two years ago was a total accident. I had a breakdown. I don't know if it was stress or what exactly, but I wasn't myself. As soon as I came to and noticed you'd gone, I started running after you."

"That's a lie. If you'd come after me you'd have caught me. But you've been here all this time."

"Yes. I remembered that we always said, if we were ever parted, or if you ever lost me, then you should go to Keep. It was the last populated place we knew about. So I came here, hoping that you'd follow."

My hand instinctively curls into a fist and I fight to keep myself calm.

"And when I didn't? You didn't try to come back out and find me."

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“What reason did I have?” he cries, “I had nothing to suggest to me that you were even alive. But it’s not like I didn’t care, Harriet. I did. I cried for you every day.”

My gut clenches. I can’t deny that Lucas is right; this William does seem to be totally different from the Bill I used to know.

“And about the other day,” he presses on, “you had every reason to be mad at me, and I don’t blame you for what you did. But I want to move past it, and I want to get back to how we used to be.”

I set my jaw, turn and stare him down. He visibly shrinks back.

“Listen here,” I say sternly, “once, you were my world. I’d have done anything for you – anything. But you tried to kill me. You told me things that nobody should have to be told.”

“I know it seems bad...”

“It is bad. But it’s in the past. I’m not going to try and kill you for it, even though I want to.”

He steps up beside me, his face the very picture of innocence.

“If it’s in the past, then you can forgive me.”

I shake my head hard.

“I won’t forgive, I won’t forget. I’ll let it go, insofar as I won’t kill you. But for the record – and I’ve told Lyons the same – I don’t trust you. Mental breakdown or not, there’s clearly something unstable about you. Something dangerous. And I know first-hand how manipulative you are.”

He stares at me, and for a brief second I can see the man I used to know. The cold eyes, the creased brow, the start of jowls around his mouth. My heart races as I remember what he did; the bruises that had graced my back for weeks, the scars that haven’t healed even today.

“I’m different,” he lies, “I’m better now.”

“You’re no different now than you were that day. You’re still selfish, and cold, and cruel. And the people here, they’re good people. They might trust you, but that’s only because they never saw what outside can do to people. They don’t see you for what you are.”

I push past and continue to walk, supplies in hand. As I do so, William cups his hands around his mouth and yells.

“And what about you, Harriet? Do you think they see you for who you are?”

I pause, staring at the ground. Perhaps he’s right. Two years outside has ruined me. I’m colder, and I don’t want to grow attached to anyone. Even now, I see my presence here as a business deal. Service for service, nothing more. I don’t understand the people around me.

I half turn towards him and stare blankly.

Maybe I’m not who I say I am, either.

I turn and walk away.

The next few weeks go by in a blur. My time is spent bouncing between different jobs in Keep, trying to find something I’m suited for. Most jobs are fine, though I find that animals have a strange hatred of me. The horses rear up and kick out when I come near, so I’m obliged to keep my distance.

A couple of times, I mention the city trips to Lyons, but he just shakes his head. I can tell he doesn’t want me to go back into the outside world again just yet – maybe he’s scared I’ll run away, or maybe he’s just scared I’ll come back. Either way, he won’t let me go.

I enjoy a few sessions of work in the clinic, alongside Lucas and Jensen. I’m given the run-down on emergency protocol – in case the place ever goes down and has to be abandoned.

“These are the emergency vaccines,” says Jensen, indicating a number of small, white packets, “make sure that you don’t use them. They’re in case we

ever experience a breach. All the kids get one vaccine. It's not much, but it's the best we can do to help prepare them for life out there."

I pick up one of the packets and roll it between my fingers.

"How come you only have enough for one each?"

"They're impossible to come by these days. As soon as the flu got out people were begging for vaccines. We've cleared out all the major areas nearby."

I place the packet back down gingerly.

"That's pretty scary. Maybe this isn't something I should be getting involved in..."

I experience a few cursory attempts at cooking, but Vanessa's goat milk custard is apparently rather well made. My own version is much more foul, nearly inedible, but Lucas, Lyons and the others still force it down and tell me how delicious it is.

Every day though, I catch William looking at me. It's never a look of hate, or pity, or really any emotion. It's just... blank. Blind. Like he's not sure what to think or feel, but he knows he should be doing something. I do my best to ignore him; and luckily, he never attempts to talk to me.

Good thing, too.

Over the days I settle in rather well, but there's still a strong sense of unease about this situation. I can't put my finger on it entirely, but something's amiss. The only thing I can find to blame it on is William. His lingering eyes, his cold stare.

Each night I wake up gasping, and more than once I'm forced to take a night-time walk around Keep to keep myself sane. It helps, pacing around the cold, silent space. It reminds me of how it felt when I was on my own, the strange comfort that comes with knowing nobody is around to hurt you.

I wake up one particularly cold morning after a night-time walk. Rolling over, I can see Chloe's music box sitting next to me, where it always is. I reach out,

sliding the tips of my fingers along the metallic surface. I breathe out and my warm breath fogs up the silver; I gently shift, drawing a tiny heart in the fog.

“Morning, Chloe.”

My voice comes out soft and kind. Despite my feeling of unease, I’ve never felt better. Physically at least. I’m no longer struggling for food and water, and sleeping in a bed every night makes a huge difference. I wake with the sun and work all day, which only makes my sleep easier.

I drag myself out of bed and get dressed. Vanessa’s bed is empty – clearly she’s already gone to work. Sunlight streams through the tiny window and I stretch; I feel so well-rested.

I take a steady walk down and into the field.

“-makes you think that I know anything? You know me better than that!”

“Look, somebody did it. I want to know who.”

I emerge onto the field only to see ten or so people crowded around one another. They yell, none of them making an especially coherent argument. I step closer, and try to listen in.

“Those vaccines are our only hope!” cries one woman, pulling a child close to her, “without them the children will get sick!”

“...we can find more,” says Lucas, “I’m sure we can find more nearby.”

“There’s nothing!” injects Jensen, “We’ve stripped it all clean. We need to know who took the ones we had!”

I step forward a little more, and suddenly the crowd falls silent. One by one they all turn and look at me, and I find myself bristling for a fight.

Lucas takes a step forward.

“Harri! Have you heard what happened?”

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“Someone stole the emergency vaccines?”

“Yeah! I can’t believe this happened!”

“Nobody here has a reason to take them,” I say, crossing my arms, “are you sure they’re not misplaced?”

“We’re sure,” says Jensen, “we’ve torn the whole place apart to make sure. They’ve been taken. It would need to be someone who has access to the clinic.”

“And someone who could get in and out without raising suspicion.”

“They were there last night,” says Lyons, “we check them daily. Whoever took them, they must have gone in the night.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Vanessa steps forward. She gazes at me, her face full of guilt.

“I don’t want to be accusatory, but... Harri, you went out last night.”

Immediately they all glare at me, and I shrink back instinctively.

“What? No! I mean, I did go out, I couldn’t sleep, but...”

All of a sudden William strides into the picture. He turns on me, his eyes flashing angrily.

“Harriet, how could you do this?”

“I didn’t! I wouldn’t!”

He steps forward, grabbing my shoulders and pushing me back. I stumble, and he stares hard into my eyes.

“You would. You hate me, and you’d be willing to do anything to show that to the people here. But stealing the vaccines? That’s heartless even for you.”

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“That’s true!” someone cries, “She tried to kill William on her first day here! She’s obviously a firecracker ready to go off any minute.”

I step back, holding my hands up in surrender. I didn’t take them. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. But everyone stares at me with such reprimand that I start to feel like I really am guilty.

“This is ridiculous,” says Lucas, “this is Harri. We know her. She’s harmless.”

“Don’t you find it strange that for seven years nothing gets stolen, and within two months of her being here our emergency vaccines have vanished?”

“I didn’t take them,” I say, my voice hard, “I don’t even need to. I’ve been alone for years and never got sick. Why would I suddenly need vaccines?”

“You could have done it to try and get back at us,” says William, “you despise me, and you want to hurt the people here.”

“Will, don’t be stupid,” interjects Lyons, “you knew Harri for years, you know she wouldn’t intentionally hurt people.”

“People change.”

They glare at me and I find myself stepping back nervously. Damn. If they believe I’m the one who did this, they might send me away.

I step up to William and stand close enough that our noses almost touch. He glares at me and I just glare back, narrowing my eyes at him.

“I didn’t do it. But I can see you’re not going to believe me, so fine. What if I go and get more vaccines?”

Jensen shakes his head.

“There are no more vaccines. We cleared out everywhere nearby.”

“What about further afield? There’s got to be a hospital further into the city.”

“Cleared out. The only place that would still have them is the quarantine area, and that whole place is going to be crawling with the flu. There’s nobody brave or stupid enough to go there.”

An odd silence falls over the field, and I stare down at the floor. Is that the only way that I can win them over? My jaw clenches. I have no choice.

“I’ll do it.”

Everyone gasps, and even William winces.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not. Look, I never caught the flu even though I was exposed a lot. I don’t know if I’m immune or just have some kind of resistance, but I won’t catch it. If I go to the hospital, then I can break into the quarantine area. Vaccines are vacuum packed, right? They’ll still be usable.”

William shakes his head, growling under his breath.

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Give me a reason.”

He looks up at me and I hold his gaze, staring hard at him. When he speaks, his voice is soft and hoarse. He takes a step towards me and lowers his head.

“I lost you once before, Harriet. I know you hate me now, but I’m not about to lose you again.”

“Don’t pretend you care all of a sudden.”

He grimaces, steps back, and starts to shout.

“And how do we know that you’ll come back if we let you go? It would be pretty easy for you to just run away. That way we’d never be able to get any answers from you, or any more vaccines. It’s a big risk to take for us.”

I start to speak, but the words catch in my throat and I shake my head. He's right; they don't have any real reason to trust me now.

"Why don't I go with her?" asks Lucas, walking over and standing by my side.

"What?"

"I know she's not been here long, but I'm sure Harri didn't steal anything. I'm willing to take the risk on it. So, I'll go with her. She can go into the quarantine area, but I'll be there. I'll take a gun. She won't be able to get away."

He glances back at me, and I feel myself soften.

"Don't you think she could overpower you?" asks Lyons. He frowns at me, and I can tell he doesn't want to say it. But he can't be sure that he's right. His responsibility is to Keep, and he has to question me.

Just then, Vanessa steps forward. She walks up next to me and reaches forward, taking my hand in hers.

"Then I'll go, too."

"No way, Vanessa," I tell her, pulling my hand away, "you're not a scout. You don't take trips into the city, ever."

"I can handle it," she pouts, "give me a chance. Like Lucas, I have total belief in you. You wouldn't be able to fight us both off."

I look at her, and she smiles up at me.

"F...fine," William stumbles, "fine. You two take her into the city. Keep her at gunpoint the whole time, don't let your guard down. Bring back exactly ten vaccines."

He rounds on me, so close that I can smell his hot breath on my face.

"And you... I don't know what's going on with you, but I will not accept dissent here. If you try and run, or if you attack either of these two, you can expect full and swift punishment. And these guys... they're protecting you.

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They don't need to, but they are. If you're lying, it'll come out and you'll have to face the consequences."

"I get it," I sigh, rolling my eyes, "I'm not lying. But I see you're not going to let this go until I prove myself. Which I'm going to, okay? So back off."

With that I turn and head back towards the dorms, Lucas and Vanessa either side of me.

"This is ridiculous."

Lucas leans against the wall of the dorm as I gather a pack together. I stuff some basic supplies into a bag, then I pause. Chloe's music box glints on the camp bed.

I consider for a moment if I should leave it. But then my chest aches and I reach out, picking it up and placing it into the bag.

"Do you really need that?" asks Vanessa. I shrug.

"I don't exactly need it. I just feel a bit weird going without it."

She rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anymore. Lucas sighs, exasperated.

"Seriously, I can't see what Will and Lyons are thinking."

"Don't blame Lyons," I tell him, "he has to do what's best for the group, and he has no evidence to prove anything."

"What about William?"

I growl.

“Knowing that bastard, he’s putting it on me on purpose. I wouldn’t put it past him to have hidden them on purpose, to try and get everyone to drive me out.”

“William wouldn’t do that,” says Vanessa.

“Maybe not. But Bill would. And despite all the good things you’ve said about him, the fact remains. The man you know and the man I know are two very different people.”

We walk up to the gate, where Lyons and William stand guard. They step forward.

“Now then, you guys have to follow Lucas the whole way. He knows the way to the hospital.”

“We’ll be back within a day,” says Lucas, shaking Lyons’ hand. I glance down at Vanessa. She hangs back a little, kicking the dusty ground with her foot. Her face is pale, and I swear if I stood a little closer I could see her shaking.

I can’t say that I blame her. I’ve gotten used to it outside. I’ve been desensitised to the sight and smell of bodies. I’m no longer scared when I see a corpse rotting in the street – but with Vanessa’s naïve outlook and delicate disposition, I can’t imagine her handling it well.

The gates creak open and reveal the road leading up to Keep. I step outside, and the moment my foot crosses the threshold I feel a great sense of relief.

“Come back soon,” says William, but despite his smile I can see the hate in his eyes. I return it full bore, then turn away.

“You guys had better come back,” says Lyons, “I mean it. I know you’re trying to prove your point, but just keep this in mind. All of us here would rather get the three of you back here alive than come back with a lot of stuff but two men down. Protect each other.”

“Lyons, I know you don’t really think that Harri could do this,” says Lucas, “you could save us this whole journey if you just speak up.”

Lyons shifts, his eyes flitting from Lucas to William. Then, he sighs.

“One way or another, we need those vaccines. If this will help to clear Harriet’s name, then that’s what needs to be done. I’m sorry, Lucas.”

Lucas’ face falls, and I can tell that he’s upset. He’s the type to trust others instinctively, so the fact that Lyons isn’t trusting him now is distressing to him.

“You don’t need to come with me,” I say quietly, “you can trust me. I’m going to go into the city, get the vaccines and come straight back. I’ll spend a week in the cage if I have to. But I’ll come back, guard or not.”

“No chance,” he says, “I’m coming with you. The city’s in pretty bad shape, it’s not safe to go alone.”

I sigh, turn and start to stride out into the road. Lucas and Vanessa follow behind me immediately, but I can hear the hesitation in their steps. They drag, unsure, unnerved. But doing what they have to do.

As we reach the top of the hill, they stop. I turn to see them staring back at Keep. Vanessa’s shoulders are hunched, clearly uncomfortable.

“Guys...”

“It seems so tiny, doesn’t it?” she whispers, leaning close to Lucas. He wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her near.

“You get used to it. But it’s alright. We’ll go into the city, we’ll get what we need, and we’ll be back before you know it.”

“Y-yeah,” I smile, “and besides, Lucas comes out here all the time. Plus I know my way around ruins. So long as you’re with us, it’ll be fine.”

She nods, and together we continue walking into the city.

The walk into the inner city takes much longer than I would have thought. From outside it doesn’t look like it’s that large of an area, but as we get closer

and closer it seems to grow. Buildings loom around us, and I'm surprised that the city seems to be in a much better state than others I've visited.

"Can I just ask," I say, "it seems so... quiet. Most places are usually full of bodies, the diseased and those killed in the riots. But the streets here are mostly clear – nowhere near as bad as I'd have imagined."

"The city was mostly evacuated," says Lucas, turning back to me, "The only reason we stayed behind is because there was no safe way of getting out of the city. Massive pile ups on all the major roads... didn't you see when you were walking in?"

"No. I came through the suburbs. It was pretty bad there. Looked like people had tried to lockdown entire streets."

"Yeah," he says sadly, "we weren't the only ones to try and buckle down somewhere safe. But eventually it got to everyone. People didn't have the walls we had, or the numbers. Or the supplies. So they didn't last very long."

I fall silent, unable to think of an appropriate response – and we continue to walk on without speaking.

Finally, we arrive. We reach the peak of a hill and Lucas points towards a faded grey building. It's completely dead, but otherwise intact. No broken windows, no smashed walls. Just a clean, if somewhat faded building.

"That's the hospital? It's in good condition."

"Yeah. It was one of the first places to be evacuated. Most of the area is actually in a pretty good state, except the quarantine area."

“And what exactly is the quarantine area?”

“That’s where the worst of the disease hit. It’s basically the entire third floor. The whole area is crawling with the virus, though. That’s why we’ve never been able to go into it.”

We walk through the open hospital doors, and I’m met with a strange sight. I’ve been to hospitals before, and emergency clinics, and doctor’s surgeries. I’ve been forced to clamber over crowds of the dead, and to scale walls to climb up floors. But this? This is something new.

The hallway is empty. A few pieces of paper lie scattered on the floor, but there’s no sign of life. A wheelchair lies on its side in the middle of what looks to be a nurses’ station; Vanessa cringes away from it, almost as though she’s thinking of the poor person who had to live like that an age ago.

“This is... eerie,” I say. My voice echoes through the hallways.

“I know,” says Lucas, “but it’s better than upstairs.”

I follow him out and up the stairwell. The steps creak as we work our way up, and Vanessa has to remind us to lean to the side and hold tightly onto the railings.

But finally, we reach the door to the quarantine area. Yellow tape bars off the doors. It’s plastered over all the windows, along with dozens of written warnings. I place my hand on the door and try to peer inside.

It looks like a disaster zone. Bloodied bodies lie everywhere, some on the beds, others collapsed onto the floor. One corpse in particular leans against the cupboards, its blank, empty eyes staring at the door. The sight makes me cringe; I imagine for a moment a person dying, listening to the sound of the evacuation and knowing they couldn’t be a part of it. Wasting away on the hospital floor, alone, forced to hear others living...

I pull my bag off my shoulder and pass it to Vanessa. She takes it gingerly.

“I suppose I’d best get in there,” I say, but my voice sounds unconvincing.

“Just go in, look in the cabinets, grab any vaccines you can find and get out,” says Lucas. I nod, motion for them to back away, and then walk into the room.

The stench is almost overwhelming. I’ve been around bodies before and they don’t scare me any longer, but these ones have been here from the start. Cold weather, hot weather, in an enclosed space. I lift my sleeve to cover my nose and fight to take small, light breaths.

It takes me around twenty minutes of shuffling around to find the vaccines. As I lift them with one hand, my fingers shake. Finally. At long last, I’m going to be able to prove myself.

Once I take these back and give them to Lyons, even William won’t be able to deny me. He’ll be forced to accept that I’m not the destructive force he wants everyone to believe I am. That shred of doubt in Lyons will go away too, and they’ll start to trust me. Once that happens, I can start to move on from the past.

I won’t feel like the odd one out anymore.

I carry them carefully as I leave the room. Lucas and Vanessa start forward, but I hold out a hand to stop them.

“No way, guys. I’m probably crawling with disease right now. And the packets are probably infected too. So do me a favour, keep your distance on the way back.”

Lucas beams at me; but his smile is tinged with concern.

“Alright. But look, if you start to feel sick at all...”

I give a dismissive wave of the hand and he falls silent.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not likely that I’m going to get sick, you know. But if I do, then we stick to the plan. You take the bag, take the vaccines, and I’ll catch up in my own time. Deal?”

He hesitates.

“We can’t just leave you here.”

“Put it this way, if I get sick, you head back to Keep without me. If I don’t follow within a week, you should assume the worst. Alright?”

He bites his lip, and I can tell he doesn’t want to. But he knows that it’s the only option, so he looks away and nods.

“...Fine.”

I look at Vanessa – she stares at me, her expression unreadable. She either looks upset, angry or somewhere in between, but as I step closer she just turns away.

“Time to go,” she says, and suddenly her voice is devoid of all warmth. I want to reach out and ask if she’s okay, but I’m not stupid. I can’t touch either of them right now.

We near the stairwell, and as we walk I can hear loud creaking overhead.

“That doesn’t sound good,” I mutter. Lucas stares up at the ceiling and frowns.

“No, it doesn’t. We should be careful. This building was ancient back when it was operational. Supposedly they were supposed to be doing a full rebuild. And it hasn’t been maintained for seven years now, so it could collapse at any time.”

We heed his advice and walk slowly, gently padding our way over to the stairwell. But as Vanessa lowers her foot from the top step she slips, and suddenly the wall starts to cave in.

“Vanessa!”

In a moment of blind panic and stupidity I leap forward, wrapping my arms around Vanessa’s stomach and pulling her back from the edge. She hangs limply for a second, then clings to me as the floor starts to give way.

“Go up!” I shout at Lucas. He does so immediately, racing up the next flight of stairs. I follow immediately, still clutching Vanessa close to me.

Underneath us, the misstep has started a chain reaction. We keep running up, but we stay only barely in front of the damage. The stairs fall away almost beneath our feet and we stumble and jump at every step.

But finally we emerge onto the roof – where we race across the building. Lucas trips, skidding hard across the floor, and I pause to help him up.

“I’m okay!” he cries, “just get to the next building!”

I do as I’m told, running over to the edge of the roof. There’s another building nearby, close enough for us to jump to, and I take a running leap.

I hit the ground hard and roll. As I skid to a stop and clamber to my knees, I’m hit by Vanessa, who’s also just jumped over. She yelps loudly as I push her away and stare up at the roof of the hospital. The rumbling has now slowed to a stop, but the roof is too high and I can’t see anything.

I cup my hands around my mouth and start to yell.

“Lucas! Lucas, can you hear me?”

I wait – but no sound comes from over the blustering wind.

“Lucaas!”

Then, quietly, I hear him.

“Harri!”

I walk to the edge of the building.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he calls.

“Get down here!” cries Vanessa, stepping up beside me. After a moment’s silence, his answer comes.

“I... I managed to twist my leg around. I can walk, but I-I don’t think I can jump that far on it.”

“We can’t get back up there!” I call, “is there any way down?”

For a few minutes nothing comes, but then I spy his shadow at the edge of the roof. He waves down at us.

“I think I’ve found a way that I can get down. I’ll have to go through the building, though, and out through ground level.”

“Do it,” I tell him, “we’ll meet you at the bottom.”

“Wait. That building you’re on doesn’t have a usable stairwell. You’ll have to walk a few blocks over on the rooftops and get down the nearest fire escape.”

I turn and look across the rooftops – he’s right. The roofs are all somewhat close, and none of the gaps are so large that they can’t be jumped.

“O-okay,” I call, “we’ll do that then. You find your way down to ground level and wait for us. We’ll find our way across the roofs and get down that way.”

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“Meet outside the hospital,” he says, “or what’s left of it, anyway.”

I nod, hoist my bag back onto my shoulder, and turn away.

Vanessa is standing stock still, her eyes grazing her outstretched hand.

“Come on Vanessa,” I say, walking past her, “you heard Lucas. We need to find a way down to ground level.”

“You touched me.”

Her voice is quiet, hushed, and for a moment I wonder if I actually heard it.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“You. Touched. Me.”

She glares at her hand, and finally I understand. I’d told her to keep her distance, warned her I could infect her. But in a moment of stupidity on the stairs I’d grabbed her, pulling her against myself and destroying any defence she had.

“Oh no. Vanessa, I’m so sorry. It was just... at the moment, I couldn’t help it. It was either that or let you fall.”

“Then you should have let me fall.”

Her voice is stern now, with an unfamiliar hardness to it.

“If I’d have done that, you’d have been crushed under rubble,” I tell her, “and besides, it was only a small touch. I grabbed your body, not your hands or face. As long as you sterilise when we get back, you’ll still be fine.”

“How about, next time, you think things through?”

Her voice becomes higher now, her anger building.

“Look, I’m sorry. I am. But I can’t undo it now...”

“You never think, do you?” she yells, “you never stop and think whether something’s going to screw everything up for someone else!”

I remain silent, just watching her. It makes sense that she would be getting scared now, and I can’t be mad at her for taking it out on me. But then she rounds on me, and I can see anger flashing in her eyes.

“It’s your fault we’re out here in the first place!”

“It’s not,” I insist, “I never took those vaccines. I thought you believed me!”

“Why would I believe you on anything?” she cries, and suddenly she’s screaming, her face only inches from mine.

“You show up unannounced, you hold a gun to William’s head, and you cause a stir! Do you have any idea how long I’d been trying to win that man over? Chatting him up, trying to get him to warm to me? Being the partner of one of the leaders is the lap of luxury, but ever since you turned up he’s wanted nothing to do with me!”

I step back; I hadn’t known that Vanessa had any interest in William.

“There’s nothing going on between me and...”

“I know that! But do you think that matters to him? No! All he can see is someone he once loved and that’s all he cares about! Not me. My whole plan has gone down the drain!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know!”

“Oh, well how could you?” she snaps, “you’ve been so busy being dark and brooding and problematic! You don’t like the food, you’re too precious to care for the animals, and frankly I’m fed up of listening to you cry in your sleep every. Single. Night!”

She turns away now, still ranting.

“And what’s worse is that everyone still likes you! You tried to kill our leader? Oh, that’s fine, you had a traumatic past. Like that’s an excuse for anything. Even when they thought you’d stolen the vaccines, Lucas still rushed in to defend you...”

She clutches her head, practically screaming now.

“And for what? You have no defence, Harriet! You have to be guilty – that’s the only outcome!”

“I didn’t do it,” I tell her, “I’ll prove to William that I’m not that bad.”

“You can’t! You’ll never be able to!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m the one who stole them!”

An eerie silence falls over the rooftop, and for a time we just stare at each other.

“You,” I start, my voice weak, “you took them?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She laughs a deep, throaty laugh, smiling broadly.

“Why? Because you’re ruining it all, Harriet. I don’t mean to sound cocky, but before you arrived I was the queen bee at Keep. Everyone loves me. I’m sweet Vanessa! All I had to do is bat my eyes, serve up some crappy food and everyone would fight tooth and nail for me. But now? Now all they can talk about is you.”

Something clenches in the pit of my stomach, and I find myself taking an active step backward.

“And I didn’t think I was the jealous type,” she presses, “but once I saw how much they all loved you, I knew I was losing them. Maybe I could have lived with that, if I felt like you deserved it. But you’ve not done one single thing to prove yourself. You’ve not given me even one reason to like you.”

“So you took the vaccines...”

“To get rid of you!” she growls, “I mean come on, something vital goes missing? Who are they going to blame? Sweet Vanessa, or the hot-headed newcomer with a grudge for our leadership? It was supposed to be a no brainer. But then that goody-two-shoes Lucas decided to get involved, and before I knew it there was a chance for you to redeem yourself.”

She stares at me, and her hand wanders. It finds its way to the gun in her belt, which she pulls. I tense instinctively and hold up my hands.

“Woah. Careful with that.”

“I can’t let you come back now,” she sighs, “But it’s okay. You were exposed, after all. You agreed with Lucas that you’d be left behind if you showed any symptoms. So really, all I have to do is dispose of you. And once I have, all my problems will be solved.”

She cocks the gun and I step back again, stumbling.

“Wait-wait! I never meant to do any of that stuff. Come on Vanessa, we can figure this out.”

“No,” she says sadly, “I’m afraid that Lucas and Lyons will always trust you completely. If I stop now, you and Lucas will have me captured the second we go back to Keep.”

“We won’t. I won’t even tell him. I won’t breathe a word.”

She falls silent, still staring down the barrel of the gun at me.

“I can let this go,” I tell her softly, “believe me. The stress gets to us all at times, but if you lower the gun now I promise I won’t hold it against you. I’ll forgive and forget.”

“Just like you forgave William?”

I just stare. She’s right – two years later and I’m still holding that over his head. There’s no way that I’m going to just go back to normal after this. But if we go back, who will they believe? Lucas or Vanessa? It could go either way.

“Then let me go,” I say, “just leave me here. I’ll go somewhere else.”

“Fat chance. You came here because you were desperate. You’re still desperate, at least enough to fight to stay. And even if you do leave... I have no way of knowing if you’ll ever come back. I don’t want to make the same mistake that William made with you. I don’t want to let you live through it.”

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I shift a little, trying to move towards her, but her jaw sets. She's through talking.

"Vanessa... please."

"We'll remember you," she says sweetly, "the brave one who fell behind. It's a shame we don't have the vaccines, but I'm sure we can deal with that. But for now, I'll go and meet Lucas. I'll tell him all about how you passed out, and how I was forced to move along. It'll hurt for a while, but I'm sure he'll understand."

She aims the gun at me and smiles.

"Goodbye, Harri."

I plummet from the rooftop, the sound of the shot still echoing in my ears. I strain to open my eyes, and get nothing but the sight of an alleyway before I fall limply into a pile of rubbish.

For a while, I simply lie there, too stunned to do anything but rest. But after what feels like hours I shift, loosening myself from the pile.

I stand upright on wobbling legs and lean against the wall for support. I touch a finger to the side of my face, where a small cut takes pride of place. I stare up at the roof – clearly she meant to kill me, but I think her lack of experience plus shaky hands has somehow spared my life.

But she's long gone now, and so is Lucas. I walk shakily out into the street, and peek through the doors of the hospital. Nothing.

I sit on the kerb and hoist my bag onto my shoulder. As I do so, I notice that my fingers are shivering. But it's not from the cold.

I had forgotten how dangerous people could be. Two years alone had made me so lonely and desperate that I'd trusted Vanessa blindly. But thinking back, she was never trustworthy. She would always give me those strange looks, the expressions I couldn't read but now know to be contempt.

I'd been so obsessed with fitting in and proving myself that I'd failed to register the biggest risk of all – other people. For everyone who's good and honest, like Lucas and Lyons, there's someone like Vanessa. Someone cruel and vindictive.

I reach the wall to Keep just as morning breaks. I listen intently for a moment, but I can't hear anything from inside. None of the regular hustle and bustle. I briefly wonder why, then realise they're probably talking about what happened. How I supposedly collapsed in the street and bravely stayed behind.

How satisfying would it be if I were to head inside there right now? I could march right up to Vanessa and compliment her on her aim. I could thank Lucas, and apologise for making him worry. I have no doubt that he's sad right now. Heck, I'd even apologise to and forgive William.

But as I cup my hands around my mouth to shout up to them, something stops me. I can't say exactly what – maybe it's because I don't want to cause more trouble, maybe it's because I feel ashamed of what happened. I'm not sure. But all of a sudden, the idea of heading back out, alone into the snow, is much more appealing than going back into Keep.

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My chest hurts just at the thought; I may only be young, but it's unlikely that I'll ever find another place like Keep again. If I'm lucky, I might see another human again one day, but this was the last chance I'd had to really be a part of something. Without Keep, I'm just another wanderer.

I sigh. Maybe Vanessa was right. Since coming here, I've thrown everything out of balance. I might get along well with some of them, but they've had to go through a lot for my sake and frankly, I don't want to be the one they expect to cause trouble. I wanted to be an asset to their society, not a liability.

Frankly, if I can't be useful to them, I shouldn't be here.

I turn and take a step away, but then pause.

I can't go back now. But I can leave a sign. Something that Lucas, who comes out here regularly, will recognise. Something he'll see as a sign from me, and that might make him feel a little better. I know that man is going to be miserable if he believes anyone else died, so maybe I could still give him some hope.

I hesitate for a moment, then pull my bag off my shoulder. I place it on the ground and root around in there, pulling out the vaccines. I put them in a small, neat pile on the ground, right where I stood on that first night. This way, at least they'll get the vaccines they need.

Then, I pause. I can feel a familiar weight in my bag – I reach in and pull out Chloe's music box. Despite the cold air chilling me through to the bone, I still reach out and wind it. Then, I place it down next to the vaccines.

The familiar plinking tune floats through the air and I crouch down near it.

"Hush little baby... don't say a word..."

I close my eyes, remembering that day in her house. I sing softly for two verses, until finally...

“If that horse and cart falls down...”

I stand up.

“You’ll still be the sweetest little baby... in town.”

The music comes to its sudden end, and the world is once again filled with wind and snow. I stare at the little gift on the ground for a moment longer, and then smile.

“Chloe, you take good care of them. I mean that. Lucas, Lyons... even Bill. They need it.”

With that, I turn away and start walking. With each step I feel my face growing hotter, and soon it’s all I can do to hold back the tears. But I can’t go back now. It would be wrong.

I look out at the long, winding road ahead of me. I don’t have a goal anymore, but at least now I know about Keep. I know about the people who’ll just keep on trying even when it seems hopeless. I can’t be a part of that, but at least I saw it.

I adjust the strap of my bag, lift my surgical mask over my face, and start walking.