

# AFTER THE DEVIL HAS WON

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RICK WOOD



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Rick Wood is a British writer born in Cheltenham.

His love for writing came at an early age, as did his battle with mental health. After defeating his demons, he grew up and became a stand-up comedian, then a drama and English teacher, before giving it all up to become a full-time author.

He now lives in Loughborough, where he divides his time between watching horror, reading horror, and writing horror.



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*This book is dedicated to you, my readers.*

*Thank you for letting me do what I love for a living.*



## AFTER THE DEVIL HAS WON

*The devil has departed  
And you are not alone,  
Take time to rebuild  
Your love in our home,  
Shared time it is slowing  
The pace of our heart,  
But from now to the end  
We won't be apart.*



## CHAPTER ONE

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CIA COULDN'T TELL you how it happened, or why it happened.

It just seemed as if Hell opened up one day and that was that. Instant carnage, liberated monsters, death for all. They rose from somewhere beneath the ground, attacking for no clear reason, and killing until God knows when.

Cia remained calm, which was strange, even for her; but at the time, she was a young child with a wild imagination, and it was as if demons invading the Earth was as expected as homework, or acne, or her dad's nonsensical ramblings about science.

You may ask – well, didn't the humans fight back? Didn't they have somewhere to go? Didn't they try to create someplace where they could hide?

Yes, they did. It was called the Sanctity. A large underground fortress beneath a small dome built with some kind of impenetrable metal that had a really long name Cia had never heard of. So of course, yes, there was a place to go. A place to hide.

At least, there was for some people.

The politicians and the millionaires and the bankers and the royalty with money coming out of their ears – they built their new home and barricaded themselves in. Only problem was, they didn't think kindly of overcrowding, or uncomfortable living conditions, so they had to be picky. And when they were being picky, the politicians and the millionaires and the bankers and the royalty didn't pick a mixed-race bastard child with no money and no worth.

Cia had learnt enough to survive in the four years since the initial attack. She was young, but not really. She was seventeen years old, but she wasn't in the mind of a seventeen-year-old; in terms of maturity and tenacity, she was a twenty-year-old at least. She had the smartness and the survival instincts to rival anyone who tried to oppose her. She wasn't an intimidating sight – petite, with black, bouncy, curly hair, and bright-green eyes that shone with innocence. But, what she lacked in physicality, she made up for in intelligence. Not intelligence in terms of reciting facts or using the Pythagoras theorem or explaining the meaning of one of Shakespeare's sonnets – her intelligence came from her resourcefulness. If you gave her a twig, an elastic band, and a stone, she would fashion an expertly crafted bow. If you gave her a soggy leaf, she would create a work of art. And if you gave her a small amount of time, she would accomplish grand plans and perfect schemes that would help her avoid any of the rampaging monsters.

She knew these monsters and knew them well; which included what they could do, and how to avoid them. Like I said, she didn't know how to recite mundane facts you may get taught in school – but she knew the information that mattered.

The Masketes were the first of the monsters she ever saw, through a news broadcast in the few hours before the BBC stopped broadcasting. Masketes are flying monsters, and they reminded her of pterodactyls – long snouts, veiny wings, large

in size. But they were far scarier than pictures of dinosaurs she'd seen – their fangs were sharper, their claws curved and pointed, and their precision when diving on prey was uncompromising.

The Thorals were the four-legged creatures. They were sturdy on their four legs and quick to pounce, but their most terrifying feature was their appearance; they would leer at you whilst salivating and drooling the blood of their previous victims. They were large enough that their potential reach was deadly – but heavy enough that their thudding announced their presence long before they arrived.

The Liskers were the scariest-looking creatures of them all. With long, snake-like bodies, thicker than a tree trunk, longer than numerous football pitches, and teeth that dripped a poison that paralysed their victim, meaning their food would stay still for their feast. Thankfully, Liskers were the rarest of these creatures, and Cia had never actually seen one in person – but she was always cautious.

Then there were the Wasters. Though they weren't technically monsters – well, not in the way these other creatures were – they were still just as deadly. Wasters used to be people, people who were so desperate to live that they took the cowardly way out, bowing to the monsters and agreeing to be their slaves. The price they paid was their consciousness – they turned from functioning people to feral, cannibalistic creatures without awareness, obediently carrying out the monsters' bidding as mindless, predatory drones.

Those were the four enemies Cia had to look out for. Masketes, Thorals, Liskers, and Wasters.

Cia was always alert. She would always be listening for the sounds, looking for the signs, checking for the best hiding spots, ready for when she needed them.

And that's pretty much all there was to Cia.

Ah, except the most important thing to her in the whole world.

Boy.

His name wasn't Boy, of course. It was James. But Cia didn't know that, and she never wanted to know, and she never really tried to find out. Any wretched survivor who would briefly meet Cia and Boy assumed that they were brother and sister, but they weren't. Though they may as well have been. It just so happened that Cia was alone, in need of someone to care for – and Boy was alone, in need of caring.

Boy – or James, if you want to be fussy about it – was unlike other boys, you see. He didn't find things easy to understand. He didn't like loud noises, he struggled to deal with strangers, and he became easily overwhelmed by situations he couldn't fully comprehend.

She'd met him on a sweltering summer afternoon. She wasn't entirely sure what time it was exactly, as time was a concept that had escaped necessity. Time doesn't exist, after all; it is simply a manmade invention created to keep track of events. But, from the position of the sun in the sky, Cia deduced that it was early afternoon. Cia approached a petrol station, desperately thirsty, hoping there would be something left that would rid her of her dehydration.

That's when she heard the screaming. Mature screaming, a man and a woman. She'd already spotted an abandoned car on her approach, with smashed-out windows and dust particles scattered along its side. She hastily ducked behind it, resting her bare knees on the rough, dead grass below.

As the screams grew closer, she could make out some of what they were saying. They were shouting at someone. Shouting to get inside, or to hide, or something to that effect. It definitely ended with *ide*.

Cia lifted her head upwards, slowly, carefully, and peered past the smashed car window.

The couple looked to be in their forties. The man was grey-haired and wearing a sweater. The woman was slightly overweight, struggling to keep up. The man held tightly onto her hand, refusing to let go.

A screech echoed, and Cia recognised it instantly. It was the sound of a Maskete – high-pitched, long, with a lowering inflexion. Like the sounds the birds outside her bedroom window used to make, except louder and a lot more frightening.

Cia looked to the sky and saw it. Its wings were at its side as it soared downwards from the open blue sky, heading straight for the couple.

Behind this Maskete was more of them. A lot more.

One of them landed on the man's back.

Cia ducked down once more.

Thinking instinctively, she crawled onto her belly and slid beneath the car until she was completely concealed, and all she could do was listen. It was cooler in the shadow.

The man screamed.

The woman screamed.

Cia initially wished she was able to see what was happening, then decided she was grateful for not having to witness the violence.

She closed her eyes and put her hands on the back of her head. She couldn't cover her ears – what if they found her and she had no idea? What if they approached the car, and she didn't know?

But this meant she had to listen.

And that was all she could do. Listen.

Listen as the Masketes tore the poor couple apart.

Their shouts had melded into a barrage of white noise, rising louder and louder. At one point, the woman screamed,

“Help! Help!” and Cia wondered if they were shouting to her, and grew scared they would give away her position.

Then the screaming stopped.

Sounds of slopping mixed with the squawks of the beasts, as if they were fighting over the food. Sounds of tearing persisted, ripping apart like Velcro, mixed with chewing and thudding.

Cia thought of other things. Like the beach her father used to take her to on holiday.

It was in Skegness. Everyone at school made fun of her for going to Skegness on holiday, everyone saying it was a ‘dump’ – but Cia loved it. She loved it because it was just her and Dad. Paddling in the sea. Eating fish and chips with wooden forks. Talking about which subject she liked and which teacher she hated.

Eventually, the noises stopped. The battering of wings grew distant.

Still, she didn’t move.

She had to be safe. Had to wait long enough to be sure they had gone.

The hazy darkness of an early evening was beginning to settle by the time she allowed herself out from beneath the car. Sure enough, the Masketes had left. But their remains left nothing to the imagination.

She could make out a skull, a vertebra, and ribs smashed into pieces. Beside these were more indistinguishable bones and splatters of blood lining the cement floor like a big Rorschach test. She saw a butterfly in one of them, then realised what a morbid thought that was, and willed herself to walk on.

She entered the petrol station, a pointless ding announcing the opening of the door. The shelves were cluttered with dust and absent of items. Behind the counter, the cash register had been emptied and the cigarettes ransacked. Cia wondered why

someone would rob the money – what good would that do them now?

She walked slowly between the shelves, looking from left to right, knowing she would find nothing but was so thirsty, she was going to look anyway. Maybe there'd be something in the back.

Then she heard it. A distant hum.

Her instinct was to be on the offensive, but this wasn't the sound of a Maskete – or a Thorol, Lisker, or Waster. This was a child's voice, like a constant whining, mid-pitched and whirring.

She found the source of the sound in the far corner of the station. In that corner was a boy. Younger than her, maybe about eleven – yet already taller than her, which wasn't a big surprise, as pretty much everyone she'd ever known was taller than her. His hands covered his ears, his fingers resting in his scruffy hair as he rocked his scrawny body back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Cia knelt down before him.

“Hey!” she shouted, trying to get his attention.

His whining continued. His rocking continued. He was oblivious.

“Hey! Hey, knock it off!”

Nothing.

“Oi, I'm talking to you!”

She grabbed hold of the boy's arms and pulled them apart. The boy immediately screamed, staring wide-eyed at Cia, ripping the arm she'd grabbed away from her grasp, out of her reach.

“It's okay,” Cia insisted. “I'm not going to hurt you, it's fine.”

The boy looked at her again, his face shaking, tension widening his eyes, his body wrapped into a ball.

“I'm Cia,” she told him. “What's your name?”

He didn't answer.

“That’s fine. I’ll – I’ll just call you Boy. Where are your parents?”

Boy looked toward the door.

*Ah*, Cia thought. She knew where his parents were.

“Would you like to come with me?” Cia asked.

His eyes remained big, but his shaking slowed, caught between a desire to be helped and an instinct of self-protection.

“It’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you.”

He didn’t move.

She reached an arm out, and he flinched away.

She thought of what to say. What if she sang to him? Like a lullaby, or something?

She didn’t really know any lullabies.

Her dad had been a scientist. When he put her to bed, he didn’t so much sing to her as he did explain complex theories.

Then there was that one poem her father had taught her. Her mum had written it just for him. The only thing she’d ever known of her mum was her pictures and this poem. A beautiful face, skin blacker than hers, an enchanting smile, and a perfect set of words.

She decided to try the poem.

“The devil has departed,” Cia said in a hushed whisper. “And you are not alone.”

Boy’s eyes relaxed slightly, but he retained his look of caution.

“Take time to rebuild, Your love in our home.”

She reached out a hand and placed it on his arm.

He let her.

“Shared time it is slowing, The pace of our heart.”

He leant toward her.

“But from now to the end, We won’t be apart.”

He placed a hand on her face. Let it run down her features.

She did nothing to stop him. In fact, she liked it. It’s strange

how much we object to the touch of other humans – yet, when it's gone, it's something you crave.

She took his hand and stood up. He followed.

She led him out of the store, pausing by the door, not wanting the boy to see the remains of his parents.

She pointed into the distance, away from the discarded features. He looked into the direction she pointed and he followed her into it, not looking back.

She smiled at him.

She had someone to take care of now.

Nothing was more important than that.

And that was how Cia met Boy.



**NOW**



## CHAPTER TWO

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GENTLE RAIN SPRINKLED THE LEAVES, like the sound of a hundred children's bare feet running against pavement. The darkness was coming closer as the evenings grew longer, and Cia could tell that winter was here.

She had no idea what to do or how to prepare both of them for cold, possibly snow, but she didn't worry. She was sure she'd find a way. Somehow.

Boy sat shivering, rocking back and forth beneath an assortment of twigs and branches that Cia had tied together with bamboo. She watched him as she approached from afar, berries nestled in her arms like she was cradling a child, and she wondered what would be going through his mind, what thoughts went through his extraordinary brain that meant he struggled so much to comprehend the world they now lived in.

His body changed as she grew closer, lifting expectantly, and as soon as he saw the berries, he smiled. She placed them on a blanket of leaves he'd dutifully prepared on her request, and he began eating, enjoying each one.

He still shivered.

She removed her hoodie and handed it to him.

He shook his head.

“Wear it,” she instructed.

He shook his head again.

“I’m not going to ask you again.”

With a reluctant sigh, he took the hoodie and put it on. She could see him change, his prickling arms turn warm. She made sure not to rub her own arms, not wanting him to know how cold she now was.

She made a mental note that they should try to find a way out of the forest and find a shopping centre or something, somewhere they could loot for a hoodie or a coat for him, maybe even shelter in. Although, that would be easier said than done – they’d been in this forest for weeks, and she wasn’t sure of the way out.

She sat opposite him, cross-legged. There wasn’t enough room for both of them beneath the shelter she’d hastily made before setting off for food, so she placed herself on the damp soil just outside the fort and faced in.

“Don’t eat too many at once,” she said. “We have to make them last.”

She knew it was hopeless. He was hungry. They both were, and she knew it. It was far easier when the sun lasted long enough for them to walk through fields and search the woods. Now they had so little light, and she wasn’t able guess the time of day that well when the grey clouds obscured the sun. She was going to have to think of how to protect them both as they fought the weather as well as the monsters.

A rumble of thunder growled.

His ears instantly pricked. He stopped eating, staring avidly into the distance.

“It’s okay,” she told him, her voice as soft as she was able. “It’s just thunder. It’s fine. It’s nothing.”

Another rumble, this time longer, louder, closer.

“It’s all right, we have nothing to worry ab—”

A scream. Distant, far away, but shrill enough to cut across the soft hum of rain and distressing enough to indicate danger.

His eyes watered.

Cia had to think fast. Fairly soon, he was going to start whining, and possibly begin one of his meltdowns. If the thunder didn’t do it, the scream would have – she was going to have to calm him before the worst arrived.

The thunder again, with a scream, and another rumble.

A tear dribbled out the corner of one of his eyes. He began to lift his hands to his ears, but she grabbed them.

“You can’t,” she told him.

“No!”

“You can’t. You can’t make that noise, they’ll hear us.”

He struggled against her arms, fought against her strength. He wasn’t strong, but he was stronger than her.

She had always known that Boy wasn’t like other boys – at least, not in what society used to determine as normal. She knew he was autistic, or something along those lines. In truth, she’d never asked, he’d never said, and she’d never cared. It made no difference to the way she felt about him.

But it was here, in life-and-death situations, that her patience had to be as strong as her resolve.

“Please, Boy. Please don’t.”

The moment those hands arrived at his ears he’d be rocking back and forth and whining, and that whining would create too much noise. She hated to call it whining, but that’s what it was, a constant noise of distress that would tell everyone where they were.

A flash of lightning prompted the rain to hit down harder. The soft patter was gone; the heavy bombardment had arrived. This time the thunder wasn’t accompanied by a scream. It was

accompanied by a screech. Cia recognised that screech – it was a Maskete.

Thinking quickly, she pulled herself under the shelter alongside him. There wasn't enough room, but that didn't matter; she squeezed in next to him, pressed against him. She put her arms around him, holding his wrists with each arm – preventing him from putting his hands on his ears while giving him reassuring affection.

It wasn't enough. He began to whine.

“Please, don't. Stop. You have to.”

It made no difference. His whines grew louder.

“Please, they'll hear us,” she whispered in the loudest whisper she could. It went unnoticed.

Another scream, and there was more than one screech, which meant there was more than one Maskete.

She rocked him back and forth. Held onto his wrists, kept her arms locked tightly around him, holding him in the tightest embrace she could manage, secure, close. Rocking him. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Thunder. Screech. Thunder.

The whining grew louder.

“The devil has departed,” she tried, between a soft voice and a whisper. “And you are not alone.”

He stopped whining. Listened. She put her mouth right next to his ear and her voice, smooth, soft, life-changing, recited the poem.

“Take time to rebuild, Your love in our home.”

Screams. Screech.

He listened.

“Shared time it is slowing, The pace of our heart.”

Thunder. Screech. Screech. Screech.

“But from now to the end, We won't be apart.”

Screams. Screech.

The rain began to fall through the shelter she'd made in leaks and dribbles, but she disregarded it. It didn't matter. They could get wet. Whatever.

"The devil has departed," she began again.

Thunder.

Her mother's poem.

She held onto her tears.

"And you are not alone."

He nestled his head into her neck and closed his eyes. By the third time she'd finished the final line, he was asleep.

## CHAPTER THREE

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CIA RECOGNISED the forest she was in. It was the Lake District. She went here once as a child, with her father. There were still wooden poles displaying arrows that once gave ramblers a route. Now, they just pointed to obscurity and pointlessness. What difference did it make whether they followed the route or not? They weren't going anywhere.

Cia held onto Boy's hand, keeping it securely in hers. He hadn't been here before, and when he didn't recognise somewhere, he'd get cautious, and he needed to know she was there.

She found it fascinating how he could tell if he'd been somewhere before. To her, these were just trees, bushes, plants, nettles. To him, they were a map that he continuously logged in his memory, and he could tell the difference between one set of trees and another without even having to consider it.

As she looked him up and down, she noticed how grubby he was. The rainwater from the previous night had fallen through the cracks of the shelter until it disintegrated, until it was just Cia holding him, waiting for the weather to relent and morning to arrive. As a result, he was covered in rain water and mud.

Even his face had somehow become home to brownish stains, and his hair was sticking to his scalp with rain and grease.

“I think you need a wash,” she declared.

“No,” he refuted.

“I think you do. We’ll find a lake. I’ll wash as well, it will be fine.”

She knew it wouldn’t be fine.

Trying to get him into a lake was like trying to get an impudent dog to sit. Still, she couldn’t let him remain in this state.

He was her responsibility. And sometimes that meant having to get him to do things he wouldn’t always appreciate.

After a while walking – Cia guessed at about forty minutes, although she had no way to know this – the rain stopped but the clouds remained, and the sun was nowhere to be found. They came to an opening. A wide lake, with a wooden boat that someone had left floating idly far from the shore.

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

He folded his arms and shook his head – though he didn’t run away, which showed potential that he might change his mind.

“Come on, we’ll do it together.”

He was unmoved.

“Fine, I’ll go in. And maybe you can join me.”

She removed her shoes, her socks, her top, her shorts. She watched him to see if he’d notice, but his head was determinedly pointed away, his bottom lip out and his arms folded. She could dance around naked and he wouldn’t even break his stubbornness to notice.

She removed her bra and her pants and, feeling free, she ran forward and dove into the lake with a splash that licked at his feet. She swam back and forth – then remembered that he couldn’t swim, so stopped, fearing her swimming may put him

off. She just hovered, floating, only her head and arms above water, and began to wash herself, ignoring how cold the water was.

“Are you coming in?”

“I don’t want to!”

She lifted her head back and let her hair trickle about the water. It felt good, washing her hair. Like she used to. The only thing that was missing was hot water and shampoo.

“I think you do!”

“I don’t want to take my clothes off!”

Well, that was progress.

“I won’t look.”

“Turn around!”

With a mischievous smile, she turned around and faced the other way. She couldn’t help but feel a little sense of achievement. Not smugness, per se, but a sense of pride that she’d managed to coerce him into washing.

She closed her eyes and lifted her head back, feeling the water wave her hair back and forth. She never knew how much she’d miss that feeling.

After a while, she still hadn’t heard him jump in.

“Are you ready yet?” she asked.

No reply.

She sighed. Smiled.

“I’m going to turn around, okay?”

No response.

“Okay?”

Nothing.

She turned around.

A pile of clothes was folded and placed next to the scruffy pile she’d dumped.

But no Boy.

“Where are you?” she asked. She told herself not to panic.

She looked around the lake, searching for him. Maybe he was in the water?

“Boy?” she tried once again.

What if he’d already jumped in? What if he’d drowned?

She pulled herself under and, keeping her eyes open, searched beneath the surface of the lake. A complete 360 turn showed her nothing, and she rose above the surface again.

Now she started to panic.

“Boy!” she shouted, then realised she’d need to keep her voice down; she didn’t know who or what was nearby. “Boy, where are you?”

She swam to the side, climbed out. Now, she felt self-conscious. She covered herself up with her arms as she looked around herself.

“Boy! Please, this isn’t funny!”

She meandered forward, looking everywhere.

He wasn’t there.

Had something taken him?

Had he run off?

Had he fallen down somewhere and hurt himself?

“Boy!” Now she shouted. Really shouted. She didn’t care what she attracted, something could come and eat her if it wanted – she *had* to find him. “Please, where are you?”

She ran. Through the trees, between the bushes, searching above, below, around her. She tried doing a circle around the lake, scanning for a glimpse of something, just some kind of sight that would confirm he was there.

Her ribs vibrated against the punch of her heart. Her breath sped until it ceased.

Where could he be?

“Boy!” she screamed.

She heard a sniff.

She turned around.

Nothing.

“Boy?”

Another sniff.

She saw a tuft of hair. She rushed up to it and, sure enough, there he was. Naked, curled into a ball, leant against a tree, his arms tucked around his body so as to cover it.

Every emotion drained out of her. Sank through her arms, through her chest, weighing down her legs that suddenly felt heavy.

“What were you doing?”

He shook his head.

She crouched in front of him, keeping her arms across herself, feeling even more awkward now she was about to tell him off without any clothes on.

“What were you thinking!”

“I – I – I took my clothes off, I was about to jump in, but I felt cold, I looked strange, I – I – I didn’t like it.”

She smiled sweetly at him. All anger went. All love returned.

She placed a hand on the side of his face.

“You silly boy. Don’t you see? We have to stick together, you and me. We can’t lose each other. You are all I’ve got.”

He stared at her, the same absent way he often did – but deep in there, she felt that he understood.

“Now, come on. Shall we go get you washed?”

He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I feel naked,” he said, burying his head under his arm.

“Well,” she went to speak, then decided there was only one thing to it. She stood and proudly lifted her arms apart. “Well, so am I!”

He looked up. He giggled.

“And I don’t feel silly.” Yes, she did. “And I don’t look like a

plonker.” She definitely felt like a plonker. “So why don’t you come join me, huh? We’ll go together?”

That smile returned. He nodded.

“Come on then.”

She took his hand and they ran to the lake.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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CIA FELT fresh and alert like she hadn't for days. It was annoying that they had to put dirty clothes back on, but she was sure they'd find the end of the forest and come across a town at some point – or, at least, what used to be a town.

She finally felt able to let go of Boy's hand for a little while, letting him interact with his surroundings, to experience the Lake District in the way that she had experienced it when she was younger. She loved watching him inspecting flowers, letting a ladybird crawl up his finger, marvelling at the height of the trees and the way the branches towered over him, crossing and interacting and entwining and creating cell bars for the light.

Her smile faded as she felt wind. Fearful of a storm, she looked around and considered where they could rest next. But it wasn't a storm.

"Boy," she said, getting his attention. "I need you to wait here."

He abruptly became alert, replacing his childish joy with a fearful scowl.

"It's okay, I'll only be a few yards away. Honestly, stay right there, and I'll be back before you can count to..." She considered

this carefully, as she knew he would end up counting. “Thirty. Before you can count to thirty.”

He still didn’t look convinced.

“Can you do that for me? One... Two...”

He nodded. “Three. Four.”

She ran ahead. Her trainers hurt her feet – they were old, and had been damp too many times. The ground was bumpy through their holes and it dug into the dead skin of her soles.

Finally, she reached the end of the wooded area and came to an opening.

She couldn’t breathe.

It was unlike anything she’d ever seen.

Trees were torn down and discarded along the width and length of the field, surrounding a sea of yellow grass. Upon this vast area of dead meadow were skeletal remains of those who had been killed upon it. There was no blood left, the rain must have washed that away – what was left were skulls and rib cages and spines and collars and... So many remains covering such a large space, but in no sensical order. It was as if these things had been spat out in random places.

They had no choice. They had to cross it. The wooden signposts had pointed this way, and it could add days to go around it.

How was he going to handle this?

She returned in a brisk walk to find him rocking back and forth.

“Forty-three, forty-four, forty-five,” his voice said, shaking.

“I’m here,” she said, putting an arm around him. “I’m here.”

“You lied!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Rosy, you lied!”

It always felt strange when he called her that. She’d originally told him her full name – Cia Rose. From then on, he

had never used her first name, or her last name properly – it had always been *Rosy*.

“I promise it’ll never happen again.”

He hmphed, but that seemed to settle him. She took his hand.

“I want you to talk to me,” she told him. She had no idea what about, but she knew this was the best way to keep him distracted.

“I don’t want to talk.”

What did he like? What could he talk about?

He could recite square numbers, he could tell you the name of every doctor he’d ever seen, and he could recall every detail of each of the trees he’d passed – but none of it was particularly good for conversation.

“Do you like dinosaurs?” she asked, no idea where it was coming from. Maybe the monsters made her think about more monsters.

“Yeah!” he answered.

That was lucky.

They approached the clearing.

“Do you know what my favourite dinosaur is?” she said.

“What?”

“I love tirianosulus rex.”

“That’s not how you say it!”

This was good.

They were talking.

She held onto his hand as they walked into the middle of the field. She noticed him noticing, looking around himself, and she saw a change in his face. She had to do something quickly; something to make sure his mind didn’t grasp onto his surroundings and overwhelm him.

“How do you say it?” she asked.

“It’s a tyrannosaurus rex.”

“Ooooh! And that’s the one that eats plants, right?”

“No! It doesn’t eat plants!”

“What does it eat?”

He thought carefully about this. She could see his brain working behind those vulnerable eyes.

She could also feel the dust brushing off the bones and tickling her face, caught along an angry draught, remnants of murdered people rubbing against her.

“Animals.”

“What, like bugs?”

“No! Like, birds and stuff.”

“I thought it ate other dinosaurs.”

“It does sometimes.”

She looked over her shoulder. The clearing was long gone now.

“Ow!” She walked straight into a bone, its rough edges scraping her shin.

In the distance, a growl. Possibly a Thoral.

*Dammit.*

“What did you just walk into—”

“And what’s your favourite dinosaur?”

“I like diplodocuses.”

“A diplowhat?”

“Diplodocus!” he responded, so playful, as if she was being silly.

She led him by the hand beneath a large clump of sharp points, forcing them to have to duck.

The growl again.

She peered ahead.

Halfway.

“And what do they eat? Meat?”

“No, they eat plants and stuff.”

“Like a rabbit?”

"It's much bigger than a rabbit."

"Like, what does a dipliothing look like?"

"A diplodocus!"

"Right, a diplodocus."

She turned over her shoulder.

She saw it. In the clearing. Behind her, in the direction from which they'd come.

Drool dripping from its fangs. Four beefy legs. Grisly fur. About the size of the average bungalow.

Its eyes were scanning the remains.

"It's got a long neck."

"Duck down!"

She grabbed hold of him and brought him to the floor. He snatched his hand away and stood tall.

"I don't want to go down on the floor!"

"Please, come on."

"I can't. It's dirty."

She rubbed her hand over her head, through her hair, turned over her shoulder, saw the Thoral's eyes scanning, turning. It was going to find them.

"Please!"

"No!"

Could they make it?

Could they get to the other side before it got to them?

*Fine.*

She stood and put her hands firmly on his shoulders, looking him dead in the eyes.

"What's the fastest dinosaur?" she asked.

"A velociraptor."

"Right, we're going to pretend to be—"

"I don't like pretending."

"Fine, we're going to *be* velociraptors. Okay? We are going

to run like we're velociraptors, to the other side, you see, over there?" She pointed. He looked. "Can we do that?"

"I guess..."

"Okay." She looked nervously to the Thoral. Its eyes were hovering in their direction. "How does a velociraptor run?"

He put his arms by the side of his chest and stuck out two fingers on each. She copied him.

"Okay, are you ready?"

"Yeah!" he replied enthusiastically, suddenly on board with the idea.

"Okay, go!"

She ran. He ran. She felt exceedingly stupid with her hands poking two fingers out beneath her breasts as she was running for their lives, but it seemed to work.

She glanced over her shoulder.

The Thoral jumped from the clearing into the graveyard.

"I bet I'm a faster velociraptor than you!" she shouted, and tried increasing the pace. He laughed as he kept up.

"I'm faster than you, Rosy, I'm faster than you!"

The growl.

"Don't worry, that's just a tyrannosaurus, we best get away."

"Okay!"

She glanced over her shoulder once more. It was prowling forward. Not running. Not chasing. They may have made it.

That was when it did begin to run.

Run in their direction.

They made it out of the open field and into the wooded area and she grabbed his hand and pulled him in deeper, in further, into the cover of the trees.

The ground thudded under the Thoral's steps.

She found a large log with enough room beneath it for them to hide.

“Oh no!” she cried out, trying to keep the genuine fear from her eyes, keeping up the facade. “The tyrannosaurus got me!”

He laughed.

“And it got you too!”

She rolled onto the floor and under the log.

He walked up to her and peered at her peculiarly.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him in close. To her relief, he came, and she lay behind him with both arms wrapped around him.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“Now, we wait,” she told him, listening carefully. “We wait until the bigger dinosaurs have gone, and we wait as quietly as we can.”

And as the next growl trembled the earth, she could smell the foul stench of its breath.

**THEN**



## CHAPTER FIVE

---

SHE CURLED like a perfect circle entwined with her father's shape, her head rested on his shoulder, her smile curving with his.

"Tell me more," she said.

"Okay, well – what about eggs?" he said, pointing to the discarded remains of their scrambled egg on toast, left on a tray that sat out of reach on the floor.

"What about them?"

"Well, have you ever seen an egg in water?"

She grew perplexed. "No, but isn't it still an egg?"

"I don't mean inside the shell, I mean, if you cracked it open."

"It would just, like, disperse."

He chuckled. What kind of twelve-year-old uses the word *disperse*?

Only his.

"No, in fact, it actually spreads out like a jellyfish."

She looked at him, delightfully confused. She tried to picture it – an egg, spreading through water. How weird.

"Could it sting you?" she asked.

“No, no, it’s still just an egg.”

Keeping her head resting on his shoulder, she turned toward him and smiled, feeling the prickles on his chin gently scratching her forehead.

“Another one,” she requested.

He sighed a grateful sigh. He could have had a daughter that was interested in ponies, in Barbies, in sports – but no, he happened to have a daughter who had the same fascination with science that had turned his own childish curiosity into a successful adult career. He wondered if she, too, would someday own a laboratory of her own.

“Okay. What about black holes?”

“Yes, I know all about them, Dad, you’ve done this before.”

“Yes, I have – but what about existence, and what a far away black hole can do to us?”

“How could it affect us? Aren’t they, like, really far away?”

“Yes, but time ripples. Just like if you dropped a stone into water, then that water would ripple. If you smash two black holes together, then existence ripples.”

“How does existence ripple?”

He paused. How could you explain such theories to someone so young?

Then again, maybe he shouldn’t underestimate her understanding. She could evidently comprehend more than other girls her age.

“They collide, even if only at half the speed of light, they still slam together so hard that three whole solar masses are converted into gravitational wave energy.”

He held out his arm and created a wave motion. She sat up and turned to him.

“But wouldn’t we feel it?”

“We did, actually – it happened last week.”

“What? When?”

“On September 14<sup>th</sup>. Every cell in your body was gently squeezed by a black hole.”

She shook her head.

“You’re having me on. I’m not stupid.”

“I would never think you are, my darling.”

“Sure. This coming from the guy who said that eggs look like jellyfish.”

He grinned.

“Fine. I’ll show you.”

He leapt to his feet and marched to the kitchen, and she couldn’t help but follow. By the time she’d caught up with him, he’d already taken a pack of eggs from the fridge and was hurrying up the stairs.

“Dad, wait!” she shouted excitedly.

His wife would never have let him do this. Don’t be mistaken, he missed her more than anything – but they were a team, Cia and him. As they had been for a long time.

He began pouring water in the bath, waiting for it to fill. As he sat there, he looked to Cia, and felt proud. Her excitement was palpable – she was practically giddy, jumping on the spot, looking over his shoulder as the bath filled with water.

Imagine that. A child getting excited about cracking an egg into a bath.

And that’s why they were a team.

The perfect team.

The bath filled, and he turned the water off.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes! Do it!”

He took the first egg, cracked it against the tap, then opened it and allowed the yoke to fall into the water. Sure enough, the large ball of yellow sat in the middle of its transparent protection, floating around the water like a jellyfish.

“It worked!” she yelled. “It actually worked!”

“Of course it did.”

He took another egg, cracked it on the tap, and produced another one.

“Can I have a go? Can I?”

He handed her the packet of eggs. So much for a fry-up in the morning!

She took one, cracked it against the tap, and dropped it into the water.

Sure enough, it happened again. Dropped and bounced like he said it would.

He watched her exhilaration. Her enthusiasm. And he put his arm around her, consolidating his team.

Him and her.

Team Rose.

**NOW**



## CHAPTER SIX

---

LAYING THERE, just listening to the growls, her body shaking with the pounding ground of the Thorals' thudding footsteps, was an experience Cia was getting used to. Being terrified was now like the annoyance that homework used to be, or the disappointed feeling of a Monday morning; constant terror was an irritating part of daily life.

They were hidden, at least – and Boy had somehow managed to fall asleep following the excitement. How he managed it, she had no idea – but at least it meant he was quiet, that he was not going to panic.

She felt its breath behind her. Her hair flickered under a burst of wind, accompanied by a smell like rotting meat and ageing broccoli. They were concealed by the log, but the thought never left her: *if it finds us here, we're as good as dead.*

Her arms remained securely around Boy until it was over. She sat there, praying. Not literally praying – enough had happened to tell her that, if there was a God, he was definitely not listening – but more of a deep, deep hoping that they would survive it.

It growled into her ears and she put her hand around Boy's

mouth, just in case, just to be sure. But he stayed asleep. Peacefully unaware.

A rustle from a far bush caught its interest. It leapt over them, clearing the log, its giant feet causing a rumble that pushed her from the ground.

As it ran she managed to get a clear, unobscured view, up close like she'd never been before. Its paws led to claws bigger than her arm, its eyes narrowed as if its anger gave it focus, its body hard and strong beneath its bristled fur. It was big, bigger than she had realised from seeing them from afar. It could probably swallow her in one gulp.

Boy groaned. She covered his mouth harder.

It pounced on a far bush, and from it withdrew a woman in its jaw. A hiding place discovered. The beast waved its screaming food in the air as its sharp curved teeth sank through her chest and her legs and her face and her arms and everything until he was oozing blood like moisture from a damp cloth.

She watched, feeling bad for this woman, but not that much. She'd seen this kind of violence. She was used to it. And she knew too well that she had only just escaped that woman's fate.

*That could have been me.*

She looked to Boy, still somehow asleep.

*That could have been us.*

The Thoral turned and meandered away, dropping a few limbs as it munched on its late-afternoon snack.

She waited for it to disappear and listened, listened out, listened carefully, reaching out to see if there was anything else near.

After a while, she decided they were safe. Somehow, they remained hidden, and her relief attacked her from all angles. She realised she'd been holding her breath, and she finally allowed herself to let it go.

But they couldn't get complacent. The light was fading, and the day would be over soon.

"Boy," she prompted, softly shaking him. "Wake up."

He stirred and turned to look at her.

"Rosy?" he said, as if confused.

"I'm here. Don't worry, I'm here."

"What happened? I feel cold."

He was shivering.

"Let's go find somewhere warm. Come on."

She stood and took his hand, helping to lift him up.

She decided to take him the opposite direction to the discarded pieces of mutilated corpse. He didn't need to see that.

"Come on," she said, guiding him away.

The air smelt like rain, but none arrived. A cold breeze made her dried sweat hard.

He rubbed his eyes.

She needed to find somewhere for him to rest. But where? And what then? She hadn't thought about it much – but what was their end game? Was it simply survival? Was that it?

Or was there some community somewhere that would let them in? Maybe she'd find one once they left the forest, once they rediscover the remnants of a town. Somewhere that wouldn't discard her as unworthy based on her heritage or financial capabilities or–

A rustle.

She slowed down. Didn't stop, didn't want to alert him, but she'd heard something, she knew she had.

A twig snapped.

She looked over her shoulder.

A shadow ran past, but somewhere far and elusive, somewhere she couldn't be sure was real. It could just have been a trick of the mind, or a movement of the clouds.

A figure ran past a set of trees in the distance.

Now she knew she saw that.

And she realised, in a sudden moment of dreaded clarity, what it was.

*Wasters.*

Things that used to be human. They sacrificed their consciousness to keep their lives at the price of being a slave to the creatures. They sought out offerings and ate whatever flesh they could find. They were feral, mindless, Neanderthal beings, with less awareness than the dumbest of animals, but with hunting skills of the sharpest.

And they always hunted in packs.

She sped up.

“You’re going too fast,” he moaned.

“I know, but we need to hurry.”

“I don’t want to hurry, I’m too tired.”

“I know, but we have to—”

Too late. Ominous silhouettes walked behind her.

Cia and Boy came to a sudden stop.

Directly before them was the face of a Waster. Scarred and vicious, broken yet alive. Its muscular, grazed torso led to a stale hand that gripped a wooden spike. Its yellow teeth oozed discoloured saliva, its scabbed lips curled into a growl, and its eyes boasted nothing but lethal hunger.

And it was stood right in front of them, a few steps away, staring right into her eyes.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

THE WASTER LAUGHED A SLOW, low-pitched, lecherous laugh that made Cia feel disgusting. His beady eyes – she assumed it was a *he* – scanned her up and down and, despite being fully dressed, she had never felt more exposed.

She pushed Boy behind her, keeping him protected, putting herself between them and the vile piece of filth eyeing her up like a juicy steak, done medium rare so the blood still squeezes out when you bite.

“Please don’t hurt us,” she said, and she could hear terror in the wobble of her own voice.

His flaking lips curved, and a dollop of drool slithered down his chin. He looked as little like a human as a human could; his hair greasy, long, and unkempt, its face curled into the snarl of a predator, and its chest heaving like a heavy animal struggling to breathe.

Another rustle. Her head shot to her right.

There were three more of them. All stood, yards away, looking at her with those same prying eyes, like she was a filthy whore or a delicious meal and they could do anything they wanted with her.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to curl up into a solitary ball on the floor and whimper until it all went away. But she knew she couldn't do that. She had to protect herself, and she had to protect Boy.

The Waster closest to her took a step forward and she mirrored the step backwards. She was just waiting, helpless to do anything, cautious yet aware of how little defence she could put up against this cretin.

"Please, we don't have anything you'll want."

He leered, and she regretted saying it as soon as she did. If anything, she knew it just spurred him on further. Hell, she didn't even know if the thing understood her – but it damn well knew what it wanted.

"There's not much of me," she said. "You won't get much meat out of me. I'm sure there's someone else you'd rather have."

She felt so stupid trying to reason with it. Just waiting for it to pounce, hoping it understood her, knowing that even if it did it would make no difference.

She turned her head slightly toward Boy, whispering to him.

"On the count of three, we are going to run."

Boy made his whiny noise, as if he didn't like that request, as if running was something he didn't want to do.

"I know you're tired, but you are just going to have to listen to me."

His whine again.

"Stop it!"

That was the first time she'd ever snapped at him. She knew it would just make things worse. Maybe if she just tried to explain it logically?

"These people are going to hurt us unless we run, do you understand me?"

She just had to do it.

Count. And hope that when she did reach three, he would follow her.

“One,” she said.

The few to her left took a step closer. There was more rustling behind her. In the distance, she saw more of them. At least ten. *At least.*

“Two.”

She held onto Boy’s hand with everything she had. He moaned like it hurt, but she didn’t care, she would drag him if she had to.

“Three.”

She turned and ran.

He stood like a pile of bricks.

“Come on!”

She dragged him, surprising herself with how much strength her adrenaline supplied her with, and gave him no choice.

They ran, sprinting as fast as they could, Cia leading the way so Boy could see which logs she leapt over and which branches she ducked, so he could follow her lead.

Then the noises started.

Noises of savages. Low-pitched growls that rumbled through her body. High-pitched cackling designed to torment. But most disturbing was the sound of their breathing, each one a grunt of mucus; drawn-out, deep, a coughing boom sending vibrations through the trees.

She could hear them running. She could hear the leaves being trampled, the bushes being ripped out of their way. A glance over her shoulder and she saw that some were even in the trees, jumping from one to the other with as much speed as she was running at.

The noise built. It built and built and built into a crescendo, multiplying into a mass of shouts.

That's when Boy stopped.

He stopped running and covered his ears.

Cia halted, knowing they were close behind her.

"We don't have time for this!"

It was too bad. He was making his whining noise and his legs were fixed to the floor like they had roots as deep as the trees around them. He shook his head.

He wasn't moving.

There was no way to get him back from this.

She put her hands on his arms and tried to shake him. Tried saying his name, tried snapping him out of it, tried anything she could.

But it didn't work.

He was stubbornly fixed, and the Wasters were moving in.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

A DITCH TO HER LEFT. A perfect hiding spot.

But they'd know. They'd find her. They would find both of them.

And so she made a decision: she didn't matter.

Her life wasn't important.

She had to save Boy. Had to keep him quiet.

She grabbed his arms away from his ears and looked him in the eye. His face changed; it curled up into panicked rage. He couldn't handle his hands being taken away; this was his safety, and she was removing that from him.

So she started reciting the poem.

"The devil has departed, And you are not alone."

He listened. His face relaxed. His body remained stiff.

"You want to hear the rest of it?"

He nodded.

"Then you have to lay down. Over here, come."

She dragged him, quicker than he was allowing her, to the ditch, and laid him down.

"Now, I need you to stay here, and do not move until I come back."

“No!”

“Keep reciting the poem to yourself. Take time to rebuild,  
Your love in our home.”

She grabbed the nearest leaves and fallen branches and twigs and anything she could find and covered him.

“Shared time it is slowing, The pace of our heart.”

She pulled a large log closer and placed it over him.

“Finish it off for me,” she told him.

“But from now to the end, We won’t be apart.”

“Perfect.” She looked up. Her task now was just to draw the attention away from Boy; she was as good as caught, she knew that. “Now close your eyes and keep whispering it, and don’t stop until I tell you.”

He nodded.

“Go on then!”

He covered his ears, closed his eyes, and began whispering. “The devil has departed, And you are not alone...”

She stood, ran a few yards away, spread her arms out and made her body big so they could all see her, so they couldn’t miss her.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Over here!”

Like she needed to do that.

One jumped out of the tree above and almost landed on her, but she ducked out the way, falling to her feet.

He grabbed hold of her ankle, and she could feel the slime of his sweaty palm as she pulled her leg free.

She got up and ran. And ran. And ran.

More jumped from the trees, more she had to duck, more she had to keep out of reach of.

She sprinted, jumping over obstacles, as far as she could.

She saw a house. A farmhouse. In the distance. It looked dark, abandoned. That was her target. That was where she could hide.

From her right, one ran across her path and barged into her. She went to the ground, rolled, and went back to her feet again. He grabbed hold of her top and ripped it, exposing her navel. His tongue hung out and she ran harder. Faster.

She cleared the mass of trees and made her way into an open field. As she sprinted forward, she turned over her shoulder and saw exactly what she was up against.

They were coming from all angles, a complete semi-circle of them closing in. There must have been at least thirty, forty of them. All primitive, wearing nothing but rags flapping in the wind behind them.

What were they going to do to her if they caught her?

*When* they caught her.

She knew she hadn't much hope. She had to start to come to terms with that. She may have to accept being captured, then figure out what to do after.

But what would she be able to do?

Forty strong, lustful, fatal Neanderthals, hungry and horny, gathered around her.

No, she had to escape.

The house. It was so close.

Maybe she could barricade herself in.

She barged through the door that was thankfully unlocked. A sofa covered in moss and stains sat at an angle in a dusty room that reeked of moisture. She grabbed the end of it and pulled it toward the door, then went to the other end and pushed hard against it.

The windows either side of the door easily smashed, and a bombardment of bodies came through them.

She ran to a set of stairs, but one of them just blocked her path.

She backed away.

They circled around her. Licking their lips, grabbing their crotches, rubbing their hands. Smirking. Ogling. Sneering.

She was nothing. She was food, a rag doll, a harlot.

She may as well take her own life now.

She considered it. Just ending it all before a fate worse than death found her.

Then she remembered: *Boy*.

She couldn't end her life, because he was relying on her. He was waiting, somewhere in that wood, probably still reciting the poem, still with his ears covered, being obedient, waiting for her – not moving until she returned.

Which meant she had to return.

She went to her knees and held her arms out, reluctantly surrendering.

One of them stood over her. She could smell him, the body odour, the breath, the rot of its sweaty groin.

It grabbed the back of her hair in its hand and she refused to scream. It swung her head to the ground and knocked her unconscious.

## CHAPTER NINE

---

HER EYES OPENED TO A ROAD.

She was walking.

She had been walking for a while, but she felt light. Like she could fly at any moment, like her body was empty, void of weight but full of life.

In the distance, the road carried on. Single track, gravel, surrounded by desert. Red hills in the distance.

She wasn't worried.

But she couldn't figure out why.

She was young again. Smaller. A child. The age she was before her dad...

No. Don't think about it. Can't think about it.

It was strange, though. She felt like he was with her. Even though he wasn't next to her, or around her, he was close, and they were going to a place of safety.

She didn't know why she felt so safe, but she did. That constant feel of fight-or-flight she felt in every moment of survival was gone. It had been replaced with pure joy, that she was saved.

The Sanctity.

It had let her in.

But why?

As she looked down, she realised why.

She held her hands out, separated her fingers, looked at hands she'd never seen before. They were white. Pale and untanned. She was wearing a light-purple dress, unlike any she knew.

Cia rarely wore dresses. There was a wedding she went to once, when she was really little, and she wore a dress then. But ever since she could remember, she would go on adventures with Dad wearing a vest and shorts. She would trek through the forest, through the ransacked houses, running from the creatures, in vest and shorts.

So why was she wearing a dress now?

It felt so...*unfamiliar*.

Her hair blew in her face.

That was different too.

It was blond.

Her black, curly frizz had gone. She was now blond.

A Caucasian, blond girl wearing a dress.

This was not her.

And it was as if the realisation broke her from those eyes. She stood back and looked down upon the body she'd previously been inhabiting.

The girl stood before an open road.

The girl turned back and looked at her.

Smiled. Like a Waster's smile. Like a smile you should never see on a little girl.

Cia looked down, and she was herself again. The blend of light and dark in her skin, her clothes correct, her body hers – but she no longer felt weightless.

She no longer felt light, or like she could fly, or full of life.

The girl laughed.

Cia knew this girl was laughing at her.

“Why?” Cia asked.

Inside of her hurt, a deep stabbing, as if it was thrusting up her, further, grappling her insides with fingers made of knives. She bent over and recoiled in pain.

“What is hap—”

Before she could ask any more of her question she fell to her knees, the pain intensifying, surging through her cervix, firing into her womb. So deep, so hard, so violent. An aggressive burning.

The girl just smiled and laughed.

Why was she smiling? Why was she laughing?

The girl shook her head. Mockingly. As if to say, *you really are pathetic.*

Spoilt little rich girl, white and blond, looking back at her, mocking her.

The girl reached out and took a hand. Cia couldn't see who the hand belonged to, but she *knew* who it was. Who *he* was. The kind wrinkles, the tight grip, the authoritative smile.

That kind, meaningful smile.

She missed that smile.

“Dad?” she asked.

But he didn't look at her. Not that she could see him, or that he was actually there, but she could feel him, a familiar presence, a warm omen, a heavy sensitivity.

The girl just kept shaking her head.

“Please, I—”

Cia fell to her front.

The pain was worse, as if prompted by her talking; it was worse, so much worse.

She couldn't take it.

She cried, *please make it stop, why won't it stop, please...*

The girl just took the hand and walked away. Walking

down the single-track road, between the desert, toward the red hills, beneath the red clouds.

The girl was stood at the forefront of the end of the world and she had no worries or qualms about it whatsoever.

Short, young, blond, white, and pretty – she left.

The pain ended. Slowly, like it was dripping out of her, lessening and lessening until she was a mess with indents of gravel on her skin.

That's when her eyes opened for real.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

SHE AWOKE IN THE DARK, exposed. No idea what had happened to her in the past few hours, but with a feeling that she should be grateful that she had been unconscious.

She tried sitting up, and realised she was tied up. Her hands bound with rope, and lots of it, and it was tight, the frays of the coarse surface grating her wrists. Her ankles were tied together, but with a long piece of rope between them, meaning her legs weren't forced together.

She bowed her head.

She had to think of Boy. That's what she had to do. It was the only thing she could do, the only way she could get through this. She had to cling onto the thought of getting back to him and making sure he was safe.

She looked around herself. Her eyes adjusted to the night and she realised she was outside. The rope between her ankles was joined to another rope, and she traced it with her eyes back to a tree, where someone else was also tied. The flicker of flames ten yards or so away told her that the Wasters were nearby.

She watched them. Eating. Holding meat over an open flame then shovelling it into their gobs, opening wide and filling

their cheeks, excess meat dropping down their chins, excess fluid dribbling down their torsos.

“Hey,” Cia whispered, trying to get the attention of the other person attached to the tree. In the darkness, she could just make out her shape. She was laid on her side, her back to Cia.

“Hey,” she tried again, a little louder, but still a whisper, so as not to catch the Wasters’ attention. “Hey, can you hear me?”

She heard sniffing. There was definite sniffing. Like the girl was crying.

“What’s your name? Mine’s Cia.”

The girl lifted her bound arms and buried her face into them. Cia could see on one of her hands that she was missing a few fingers.

She turned and looked at the Wasters eating. One of them was grinding the meat off a finger with his teeth like she did with chicken that time her dad took her to Nando’s.

She wanted to lurch. She looked down at her own fingers, worried about what the Wasters were going to do to them. Was she next? After this girl, were they going to eat her fingers?

“Hey, come on,” Cia tried again. “You want to get out of here, don’t you?”

The girl’s head lifted slightly, still obscured by shadows, and the whimpering seemed to pause.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

The girl didn’t reply.

“Look, we can get out of these ropes, I’m pretty sure, then we can run – if we do it together, we stand a better chance of–”

The girl turned her entire body around.

Cia had to suppress the need to vomit.

This girl wasn’t going to be running anywhere.

Beneath her waist were two stumps, broken bones pointing out, and dribbles of blood seeping out of the space where her legs once were.

“Help... me...” the girl whispered.

Cia looked back to the Wasters and their feast, then back to the girl.

There wasn't much left of their banquet, just like there wasn't much meat left on the girl. Fairly soon she was going to bleed out and die, and the Wasters would be unlikely to choose dead flesh when they could choose...

She looked around herself.

There were no other prisoners.

Just this girl and Cia.

And soon, just Cia.



**THEN**



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

IT WAS INEVITABLE. Someday, Cia was going to ask this question, and he knew it.

He had been prepared for it. Prepared in the sense that he knew it was going to happen, yet he still felt unprepared for how to deal it – yes, he had answers ready, but had no idea the feeling of loss and nostalgia that would combat him.

“Well, Dad?” Cia asked.

He sighed. “What is it, sorry?”

He knew what she’d said. He just needed time to think.

“I want you to tell me about my mum.”

He took his glasses off and placed them on the chair of the sofa. He put a bookmark inside his book and placed it on the coffee table. He brushed a speck off his trousers, sat up, and faced her.

“What would you like to know?”

“What kind of person was she?”

He thought about that. Then he looked back at Cia. Right there, he had the answer.

“She was like you.”

“How?” she asked. She jumped onto the sofa and pushed her way beneath his arm.

“Well, she was headstrong. Lots of tenacity. Lots of passion. She was an incredible woman.” He looked at her eager face. “And I loved her.”

“How did she die?”

That was a difficult one. He was expecting that question to come later.

“Well,” he began, taking a deep breath. “She put you to bed – you were two at the time – and she went to make us both a hot chocolate, and found we were out of milk. Then she left to get some from the corner shop and, well... she never came home.”

“Why?”

“Because someone driving a car hit her. And she died on the road before the paramedics could get to her. They did all they could, but...”

He had to stop.

The memory was becoming too vivid.

Him running out of his house, hearing the commotion, seeing his neighbours leaving their homes. Seeing the car, a man stood with his hands over his mouth, just saying over and over, “I didn’t see her, I didn’t see her, I didn’t see her.”

He’d thought the body would be of some punk kid that hung about the neighbourhood, riding their bike across everyone’s lawn, driving recklessly. He never expected to see his wife laying in a pool of her own blood, her eyes wide open yet not moving.

He’d dove to his knees, he’d grabbed her hand, and he knew straight away.

“Why did he hit her?”

“They charged him with being on his mobile phone whilst driving, but he was found not guilty. But, the last thing she did,”

he said, trying to give the conversation a more positive tone, “was kiss you good night.”

“I wish I could remember her.”

“Me too.”

“Did she love me?”

“Oh, more than anything. And look,” he said, pointing at a picture on the fireplace. “Any time you want to see her, she’s right there.”

Cia peered at the picture. She had black skin, unlike her father who was white, and unlike her, who was neither.

“Why am I not black, like her?”

“Because you’re mixed race. You’re a mixture of both of our colours. And there is nothing wrong with that, and if anyone tells you otherwise, you just put them straight, you hear me?”

Cia continued to stare into the eyes of the picture. Normally the eyes of the pictures followed her around the room and were quite creepy, but not this one. This one had caring, warm, green eyes like hers, which went really well with her peaceful smile.

“Did she like science too?” Cia asked.

“Ah, she pretended to. She listened to my waffle as much as I chose to waffle at her, and she would say she found it interesting, but, honestly, it was her art that she loved.”

“She liked art?”

“Oh, yes. Paintings, galleries, she even did a few herself.”

“Where are they? Can I see them?”

He looked down, regretful.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Why?”

“I threw them away.”

“Why would you throw them away?”

“I really wish I hadn’t, Cia, I really wish I hadn’t. But at the time, I wasn’t thinking straight, and each of those paintings just

reminded me of her spirit, and her love, and her passion, and – well, I couldn't bear to look at them anymore.”

“You could have just put them in the attic.”

“I know. And I wish I had.”

Cia bowed her head, a moment of reflection.

“But there is one thing I kept,” he said, pointing out a framed poem on the wall. “Have you ever wondered where that poem came from?”

She walked toward the poem. It was entitled *After the Devil Has Won*. She read it and instantly loved every word. She read it a second time, then a third.

“Is there anything else you want to know?”

“Yes,” she turned back to at him, those innocent eyes wounded, as if she was about to say something that she wasn't sure how to say.

“What is it?”

“Do...” she tried, but couldn't find the words.

“It's okay, you can ask me anything.”

“Do you,” she tried, “I mean, would you ever leave me, like Mum did?”

“Mum didn't leave you, darling.” He wrapped her in his arms.

“I know it wasn't on purpose. But she's not here. You won't ever, like, be hit by a car, or ever not be here, will you?”

He shrugged his shoulders, unsure how to answer that.

“I – I...”

“Please say you won't.”

“Fine. I won't ever leave you.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“You have to promise.”

She raised her hand and held out her little finger. He entwined his with hers.

“Say it,” she told him.

“I promise.”

“No, you have to say it fully.”

He smiled. What a kid. As stubborn as him, and as imaginative as her mother.

“I promise I will never, ever, ever leave you, Cia.”

She smiled and put her arms around him, squeezing him tightly.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“That’s okay,” he said.

And he meant that promise.

He truly did.



**NOW**



## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

NIGHT TURNED INTO DAY, like it always did. Though, if someone were to say it was still night, there could be little objection – the grey clouds still hovered like an unsettled argument, masking the blue skies with sombre darkness.

Cia had moved herself closer to the girl during the night. The girl seemed to give no reaction to the pain of losing her legs, which either meant that the pain was over, or she was so in shock it hadn't registered yet. Either way, Cia could see the girl was clearly dying, her eyes liting and opening and dropping in and out of consciousness at regular intervals. In all honesty, it was amazing that she had lasted this long – but the last thing Cia wanted to see was a poor, suffering, innocent girl slowly dying alone. So she moved next to the girl and, although she couldn't release an arm to put around her, she still managed to push her body close so the girl knew that someone was still there.

A sudden commotion distracted Cia, and she watched with caution at the Wasters dancing and jumping and hollering and generally acting like something spectacular was about to happen. She was worried this meant they were coming for her,

that her time had finally arrived, but no – one of them led a creature in, rope around its neck.

Cia couldn't believe what she was seeing.

It was a Maskete, except smaller. A baby. From the size of the adults, Cia assumed the small size of this creature meant that it had just hatched. The Wasters all rushed around it, encircling it like a ritual, dancing and shouting and making those horrible guttural noises. The creature itself cried and shouted, but to no avail – no one seemed to be coming to its aid.

How on earth did they manage to catch this beast?

As if reading her mind, the girl answered her question.

"It's a runt," she said.

"Pardon?" Cia responded, surprised by the girl's talking, and her awareness.

"That's why they have it. It was an offering."

"An offering?"

"Look at its foot."

Cia looked at the baby Maskete's foot and, sure enough, it was limping on something that hadn't fully grown. Its claws hadn't developed, its foot was half the size of the other one, and in the commotion of trying to run its slanted walk became apparent.

"So what, the parents didn't want it?"

"No... They don't want a runt, so they give it as an offering... For their service..."

"A Maskete gave the Wasters this thing? One of their own?"

No response.

Cia turned back to the girl, and the girl's eyes were closed once again. Cia wasn't surprised. That brief conversation was the most movement she'd seen in the girl, and it must have taken some energy.

She watched the Wasters and the baby Maskete carefully, watching how they treated it. They teased it at first, tormenting

it, prodding it from behind, then rushing behind it when it turned. It seemed as if the Maskete was unable to tell when something was behind it.

One of them ran in with what looked like a machete and hacked its good foot off.

The thing fell to the ground and screamed out, a long, high-pitched, painful screech that hurt her ears. The Wasters just laughed, jumped on each other. If they had enough awareness about them, Cia imagined they'd be giving each other high fives and chest bumps, but as it was, diving over each other and making delighted croaky screams was the best they could manage.

Cia never imagined she'd feel sorry for a Maskete. Or any of these creatures, for that matter. But she did.

They hacked off its other leg and it fell to the ground where it writhed and wriggled and squirmed and cried. It even tried to flap its wings, but they evidently didn't work, as they got it nowhere.

One of them snuck up behind it once more, grabbed the back of its infantile head, and sliced their machete-like weapon across its throat. It squawked and squealed for a minute, then stopped. Cia then watched as they dragged its body, tied rope around its bloody neck, and hoisted it atop a tree branch. They danced around the crying creature as it faded to a carcass, screaming and celebrating.

A few of them climbed up and removed the Maskete's claws, tucking them into their rags for use as a weapon.

"That's horrible," Cia said, turning to the girl.

The girl didn't respond.

In fact, the girl didn't move at all.

The chest that had previously risen was now still. There was no breath from the girl's mouth against Cia's bare arm, no

tiny wriggles in the girl's body, and no moans in her unconsciousness. She was finally free.

One of the Wasters ran up to them on all fours with that same deep-throated cackle. Cia backed away as it grabbed what it came for – the girl. They dragged the corpse – what was left of it, that is – away by the hair.

Cia watched as they ate the final parts and went to sleep.

She comforted herself that the girl was at least dead before the last supper. Any thought that meant she didn't have to ruminate on what they might be having for tea the next day.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

SOMEHOW, Cia slept. She couldn't tell whether it was mental exhaustion or being physically drained that caused such lethal fatigue, she just found herself helplessly slipping into an unwanted slumber. She had hoped she wouldn't fall asleep, wishing to stay alert, but sleep took her without warning and made her its prisoner.

Her own screaming woke her up. The first thing she noticed was a hand pressing over her mouth to suppress and muffle her shouts.

She looked up. A Waster. It was still dark. He'd mounted her. He stank of ageing fish. His saliva dropped onto her face in gulps. He was unlike the muscular Wasters that had chased her earlier – he was thin, scrawny, gangly; his skin was stretched over his prominent ribs.

A jolt of excruciating agony hit her.

He had something in his mouth. Something he was chewing.

The pain. Her hand.

She twisted her head to the right.

Half the skin from the back of her hand was missing.

She looked back to him. He swallowed. Spat out a small piece of bone.

She screamed again, but he muffled it once more. He took a piece of rope leftover from the dead girl's bondage and wrapped it around the lower part of her face, tight enough that the rope went into her mouth and wedged between her teeth.

The pain was intense, yes, it soared up and down her hand – but the part that caused her the most pain was the sight of it. What it looked like to see a mess of bloody scrapes and exposed muscle.

She came to terms with it quickly. She had to. She figured, *at least I'm left-handed*. She hated herself for the poor humour, but she was going to lose more if she didn't adjust herself accordingly.

She looked around herself, expecting to see a gang of them waiting. They weren't. They were still gathered around the lessening fire, all of them asleep.

She quickly understood why this Waster didn't want her making noise.

He wanted her all to himself.

The Waster grinned and ripped off the rags around his waist, discarding them, his penis flapping about like a dying fish.

She turned over and tried wriggling away. He grabbed her hair and lifted her head back, and she could feel him close to her, hard, against her buttocks.

She tried to scream, then decided it wasn't a good idea to wake the rest of them. She had far better chances against just one.

She turned over again so she was facing him, and she tried to punch him, throwing both of her bound hands toward his face, but she only managed to brush his chin, feeling the grease against her fingertips, her hand leaving a splodge of her own blood against his lip.

He licked it away, his greying tongue poking out, flicking like a snake's tail and wiping away its leftovers.

She swung her head, hoping to headbutt him, but he just moved his head back and chuckled. He was enjoying it, she could see that. All of her struggle, it was just exciting him further.

He used both of his hands to try separating her legs and she took the opportunity to squirm out of his reach, climbing to her knees, attempting to crawl away.

He grabbed her once again but in an unexpected, instinctive movement, she leapt behind him and dove upon his back.

He tried to shake her off. Too late. She'd tucked the rope between her wrists around his throat.

He stood, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Being pressed up against his rough, perverted flesh repulsed her but she had to keep going, had to hold on, keep strangling him. It was her only hope. The only way.

The best chance she had of getting back to Boy.

She clasped her fingers together behind his head, stretching the rope across his gullet. He tried to shout out, but the pressure of the rope was tight enough that he couldn't make a sound; his voice was trapped, lost with his breath. He reached out for the rags that he'd thrown from his waist, a loose Maskete claw attached to them, curved and sharp. But it was too far away. And she was squeezing too tight.

How long did she have to stay like this?

How long would it take?

She'd heard that people go unconscious after fifteen seconds, but that was turning out to be a lie. This had been far longer than that, and the Waster was still thrashing and twisting and twirling, trying to shake her off.

She held on tighter. Her thighs squeezed against his waist, his coarse skin scratching her crotch, her hand bleeding. Now

she'd looked at the wound it stung even more, but she ignored it, pretended it didn't exist, it wasn't there, it was just a graze, just a prick, she had to keep strangling, had to keep—

The man jumped onto his back, collapsing on her. This winded her and, for a fleeting moment, her grip loosened, but she tightened it again, tightened it before he could have any more oxygen.

She'd never wondered what it would be like to kill a man. She'd wondered what it would be like to kill a Maskete, or a Thoral, or a Lisker, even though she knew that she'd never have the ability.

But a man?

Then again, was a Waster still a man?

She suppressed all guilt, all reservations, all hesitations — she couldn't face such ethical dilemmas now. She couldn't.

She had to kill this man.

No, she had to kill this Waster.

She *had* to.

Or Boy would...

Would Boy even still be there?

Would he still be where she left him, two nights later, still whispering the poem?

Would he even have survived?

Would he even still be—

No.

*Stop it.*

Can't think about it now.

*Focus.*

The Waster was now on his knees, clutching onto her arms, trying to rip them away, but his grip was softer, lessening, his strength fading.

Was this it?

Was she nearly there?

A final croak and splutter and the body fell limp. A dead weight, suddenly far heavier than it had been before.

She didn't let go yet.

What if this was a trick?

She knew it wasn't, but what if it was?

She tightened, kept strangling, kept restricting the throat of this obvious corpse.

She needn't have.

And, once she realised that, she let the body drop and it thudded to the ground like a bag of weights.

She glanced to the sleeping Wasters. All of them snoring, spluttering, vile noises of their abhorrent sleep.

She searched the Waster for something, anything, a weapon or a sharp point that would help her out of her bindings. The man had nowhere to hide anything, there was nothing covered.

Then she remembered. In his discarded rags there was a Maskete claw.

She rushed toward them, grabbed the claw, and positioned it so she could work through the rope. It hurt her wrist, having to move with such energy in such a difficult direction, but she broke through the rope, freeing her arms, then did the same with her ankles.

She looked back at the group of Wasters. They were all asleep. She could go back and slit the throat of every one of them.

But what if one of them stirred?

What if they caught her?

And what if she couldn't do it?

That's when she realised what she had done. She looked at the body, laid on his front. No longer moving. Or twitching. Or grinning.

She shouldn't feel bad, especially with what this thing was trying to do – but this Waster was once a real man. He'd

probably had a job, a wife, some kids. He'd probably had everything, but sold his soul to the creatures to save himself.

He'd made his choice.

Then again, she'd never had to make a choice like that. Could he have known what life would be like after he gave up his soul?

Did he even know what he'd become? Was there a memory of his former self?

She pushed the body over so she could see his face. His absent face, so recently sneering, his wandering hands so recently searching. His face, whilst obscured with the mask of wrathful servitude, could have been friendly once. He could have been a friendly neighbour, or a crazy uncle.

And she ended that.

And those words hit her like an aching jaw around her heart.

*I killed a man.*

No, don't dwell on it. Time to go. Time to escape.

But she couldn't.

The thought had paralysed her.

And she couldn't run. She couldn't turn. Couldn't move.

That's when the first Waster woke up.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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A SILENT NIGHT, disturbed by a disgruntled Waster, waking from a disturbed slumber.

Cia stood over the body of a man she had just asphyxiated to death.

*No, not a man.*

A Waster.

She had to stop calling him a man.

No, she had to stop calling *it* a man.

As far as she was concerned, she'd just killed one of the monsters. She'd just acted in self-defence to save her own life.

So why was it she couldn't move?

The Waster stood, looking around the mass of sleeping cannibals as if wondering why he was awake. He looked to the fire, which was now just a few sparse flickers of amber over burnt logs.

*Move, dammit!*

She had to. She had to move, do something, because in a moment he would look, he would see something had changed and, even though the darkness would conceal the change for the

immediate moment, he'd investigate, and he'd find her, and he'd give her a fate worse than death.

She dropped to the floor.

What else could she do?

She still gripped the claw she'd used to free herself, its point sharp and threatening.

She crawled along the rough grass to the tree she had previously been bound to without moving her eyes from the Waster.

He saw the commotion. She looked right at him, but the amber remains were lighting his face, nothing was lighting hers, so she was safe; for the moment, she was safe.

She moved to a crouch behind the tree.

Empty shadows barely visible moved, and the crunch of a dead leaf under foot grew closer.

She clutched the claw. Squeezed it. Held it tight to her chest, hoping she didn't have to use it.

No, hoping she didn't have to *try* to use it – if this Waster saw her, he'd easily grab her arm and throw her to the ground.

This wasn't a thin, scrawny one like the anomaly who mounted her. This one's arms were thick, its chest defined, and its footsteps heavy.

She watched as he appeared beside the body of the dead Waster, as his feral mind deduced what had happened. The broken rope, the dead body, and the lack of prisoner.

He stood, his eyebrows narrowed, his fists balled, his toes curling inward, his breathing erratic.

He lifted his head back, opened his wide mouth and let out a manic wail.

A breathless glance behind the tree displayed the sight of the other Wasters beginning to wake.

She had no choice. She ran out from behind the tree and lunged the claw at the Waster's throat. As if sensing her, as if

feeling her tiny frame coming closer, he turned and grabbed her claw hand. He squeezed so tightly tears accumulated, and she was forced to open her palm wide, meaning she dropped the claw.

She looked into the Waster's eyes and saw nothing of weakness. Yes, everything about the human condition had been stripped away, but there was an animal in there – one that was ready to hunt its prey and take its place high up on the food chain.

The other Wasters began to rise. Began to look at her.  
And the shouting started.

She looked to them. Twenty of them, at least. No, more than thirty. More awoke. Probably forty.

She looked to the Waster grabbing her wrist and applying pressure to the scraped indent of her hand, back to the rest of them standing and approaching, back to the Waster holding her still.

Through the agony, she decided she would have to rely on instinct too. She opened her mouth, plunged her head to his fist, and clamped her canines around his wrist as hard as she possibly could.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

THE WASTER DROPPED HER, and her legs were already running as they hit the ground.

No more reservations about killing one of them.

It was them or her. And they'd made their choice. They chose to be empty, mindless creatures to save their own backs.

Well, she made a choice too.

She chose to live.

She didn't look back to see if they were chasing her, she knew that they were. She just ran, no idea where she was, where she was going, how she was going to get there, she just went, and she went quickly.

The farther she went, the more she faced the remnants of the Wasters. Bones left to rot littered the edge of their site. Cia jumped over them. It didn't matter what they were, or who they once were.

Running was all that mattered.

Surviving, for Boy, was all that mattered.

After a few leaps, she'd cleared the field of bones and found herself re-entering the forest. She could still feel them behind her, the ground thudding beneath their footsteps. Their shouts

continued, and she thought she'd have become immune to them by now, but she hadn't. They still prompted terror, still made her knees wobble, and she couldn't let them, because she needed her knees, she needed them to be sturdy, she needed them to carry her.

The surroundings became familiar. If only she had Boy with her, he'd be able to say if they'd been there before. But she hadn't, so she made an educated guess. The patterns in which the trees clustered... The indents of the path she trod over... Was this near the lake? The one she'd washed in?

She peered upwards at the trees, downwards at the path, onwards at the twists her route took, trying to be certain. Trees and paths tend to look similar, but she was sure this was it.

Listening carefully, listening beyond the demented howls and persistent footsteps, she heard a gentle but definite movement of water. That must be the lake. It *must* be.

That felt vital.

Maybe it could be her escape.

Could they swim? If she dove in and swam, would she escape them?

No, they'd wade toward her and grab her before she got away, surely?

With a gasp, she remembered. There was a wooden boat, left discarded to float in the middle of the lake.

That was it.

That could be her salvation.

She just had to remember the way...

Their growls went right through her. They never stopped shouting and growling. Why wouldn't they stop?

As she worried she'd never figure out the way to go, she heard it grow stronger: water. Gentle, rushing water.

She twisted to her right and changed direction. One of the Wasters snatched at the back of her top and she wriggled free of

them. Another dove on her, but she dropped to the floor, rolled, and carried on.

Her thighs were burning. Unsure whether it was the stress, or the weight of her tiredness, or a combination of anxiety, fatigue, and desperation, she realised her legs were beginning to slow her down. She had to persevere, but soon even that wouldn't be possible – she was running on pure adrenaline, as she had been for days.

She reached the opening and rushed into the water. The water slowed her down, and she felt them all gather behind her.

She didn't look back.

Splashes followed her, painting the back of her neck. Their breathing was loud, so loud, panting, vile, predatory panting.

She dove onto her front and swam. Her legs wouldn't run any longer, but they would kick, and her arms could stroke.

The boat was so close. And it was still there.

One of them went for her foot, but she cleared their reach and kept swimming, swimming, just kept swimming.

She reached the boat.

She paused. Looked back at them.

They all stood in the lake, yards away, water up to their collar bones – they would go no further. The water was her saviour.

She tried climbing into the boat, and almost upturned it. She let it settle back and tried again, reaching her arms into the base of the boat to keep it steady, and threw her body in.

They kept shouting, but it meant nothing now.

A rope was fastened around a loop in the end of the boat, held onto something heavy in the water. Luckily for her, it had kept the boat in place – unluckily, it was delaying her getaway. She loosened the knot, set the boat free, and began to drift along the waves. She watched the Wasters grow smaller as she left them.

Then, and only then, did she allow the tension to trickle out of her body and her muscles to relax, and her frantic mind to numb itself of worry. She lay on her back, watching the clouds. The blue haze of morning had arrived, but she hadn't noticed it among the commotion.

She let her left hand creep down to her right wrist, where she found her friendship bracelet. She ran her fingers around its circumference, a gentle caress that gave her a world of comfort.

She had escaped.

Now she just had to find Boy.



**THEN**



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

CIA HELD the friendship bracelet with such pride. She was beaming, anticipating the moment she gave it to her dad, when she saw his grateful smile, and he made her feel so very special.

She'd gone to Hobby Craft with her pocket money and spent it all, selecting the biggest variety of colours she could: she had blue, green, orange, red, as well as more fancy-named colours that she only knew a few of, like violet, turquoise, and salmon. And it wasn't cheap thread, either – it was the best quality they had. She wanted this bracelet to last forever. She wanted her dad to be able to treasure it and wear it for as long as he knew her.

Then again, would her dad really want a friendship bracelet?

Was it too girly? Too childish? Would all his scientist friends make fun of him? Would he think it's stupid, or foolish, or would he feign happiness, feign surprise, and pretend to like it but accidentally lose it the first moment he had a chance?

She needed to stop overthinking it. She'd gone to all this effort, and she knew that if she went to all this effort, her dad would love her for it.

She finished the final knot and cut away the excess thread. She considered adding some beads, but that would be too much. It was fine as it was.

She leapt from her chair, out of her room, and bounced down the stairs. She kept the bracelet hidden behind her back, concealed for the surprise, as she entered the living room.

“Dad, I—”

“One moment please, darling.”

He lifted a hand up and she came to an abrupt halt. She was a bit put out. She’d made all this effort for him – but as she realised he was engrossed in something on the news, she decided that it was best to let him finish what he was doing so he could give her his undivided attention.

Something on the news caught her attention, however. The face of the man talking looked pale, looked cold and stiff, like he was scared of something. Beneath his face was a large sign saying *BREAKING NEWS*, and a box in the top corner were the words *UNDER ATTACK*.

“...And no one knows where these creatures have come from, but reports are coming in that they have crawled out of the ground. In Italy, a few tourists reported seeing them climb out of the dormant Mount Vesuvius. A mass of sinkholes have occurred, with reports of some being as wide as three acres, with this news coming from countries in Europe, in Africa, in the Middle East, in America, South America – in fact, it seems like there is nowhere that is unaffected.”

“Dad, what’s happening?”

“One moment, please,” he replied, lifting a finger, not moving his eyes from the screen.

“The government’s top scientists are being called in, and no country’s leader has yet come forward to offer an explanation. The United Nations have arranged an emergency meeting for this afternoon, whilst ISIS and Russia have already confirmed

that it was not them. Religious fundamentalists are claiming that it is the opening of Hell itself...”

The landline rang and Cia watched, dumbfounded, as her father rushed to it and answered.

“Yeah?” was his curt reply – which she found strange, as he always answered with a polite and joyous, “Hello.”

He listened, looking at his daughter, and she saw something in his eyes she’d never seen before.

“Yeah, I’ve just been watching it on the news... God, how would I have any idea? ... Yeah, I was expecting the call, where do they want me... What about Cia? What should I do with Cia? ... Okay... Okay...”

Cia turned her attention from her dad to the television, where a man with a big beard holding a picket sign was shouting about something.

“We warned you!” he said in a mixture of unpleasant accents. “We warned you, didn’t we warn you, it’s coming, the rapture is coming, you fell short of praising the lord and now we will face his wrath, oh lord, we will face his wrath!”

Her dad hung up and rushed over to her, cupping her face and trying to look calm and caring whilst obviously terrified.

“Listen to me,” he said.

“Dad, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know, Cia, I really don’t know. There seems to have been some attacks from creatures that nobody recognises, and it’s happening all over the world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Me neither, darling, but look, someone’s coming to get us, because they need me, they need me to go to work, do you understand?”

“Go to work? You mean, you’re not going to take care of me?”

“Of course I am, Cia, of course I am. It’s just that the

government have asked me to help study one of the creatures, they want my perspective, and I have to help them, I have to, I—”

He stopped talking. His voice dropped away. His head bowed.

“And what’s going to happen to me while you’re doing that?” she asked.

“There’s something called the Sanctity. A place. Somewhere they are having built, and it’s nearly done. I think they knew this was going to happen, I think they were prepared, and, well – there’s protection.”

“So everyone’s going to be saved?”

He smiled a non-smile. “Not everyone, darling. Not everyone.”

A group of vehicles pulled up on the drive.

“This is them now,” he said. He grabbed hold of her hand and led her out of the front door, onto the drive.

“I’m here!” he announced, as what looked like an army general stood out of one of many green army vehicles

“Good, we need to get you on—”

The soldier never finished his sentence. A large creature flew down, scooped his head in its mouth, ripped it clean off and flew away, leaving his body to drop.

Then more of them came. More of them, battering against the vehicles, smashing the windows and trying to drag the army men out.

Cia couldn’t believe what she’d just seen.

She didn’t have time to think about it.

Her dad grabbed her hand, rushed her back inside and locked the door.

She looked to him, hoping he’d have the answers.

Hell, he didn’t even know the questions.

**NOW**



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

CIA'S BODY had never ached like this before.

Living in this world had forced her to build stamina – if one didn't, they wouldn't survive. Barely a day went past without a confrontation with a Maskete or a Thoral or a Lisker or a Waster.

But that stamina had never been tested as much as this.

This wasn't a stitch, or a mild weight in her legs, or a fatigued weariness. This was her muscles giving up. This was her bones clicking and grinding on every movement of her joints. This was the accumulation of tension, a constant state of terror, a psychological battering, that was now manifesting itself upon her body.

But she couldn't rest yet. She couldn't.

She had to find Boy. She had to make her way back.

The clouds parted for a moment and allowed a distant haze from the sun. It wasn't sunny, but it was lighter than it had been for days; though Cia knew it wouldn't last.

She sat up, allowing the boat to drift further downstream, and peered into the distance of the forest. She appeared to be out of sight and out of reach of the Wasters. Either way, if she

wanted to get back to Boy, she needed to get out before she lost track of where she was.

She waved her hands in the water either side of the boat, directing it toward the embankment. The drift still carried her downstream, but she managed to make mild progress toward the bank.

But not enough.

She knelt, looked into the discoloured lake, the dirty remains of an ungrateful human race, and put all her weight into falling to her right and splashing into the water. The boat toppled over with her, but it didn't matter. She stopped herself from sinking to the depths of the water by pushing her arms and kicking her legs, each swipe or thrash another strenuous activity wearing on her body.

She reached the surface and fought her way to the embankment. It didn't take long until she was able to stand, and she waded through the last few steps. She reached solid ground and collapsed on it.

And there she lay, her arms spread out, her eyelids drooping, just watching the sky trickle past.

How could she do this?

How could she walk any longer?

Her body wasn't letting her. It was giving up on her, crying out for rest; but her tender muscles were still throbbing with tension and she knew that it wouldn't go away until she found him.

He was all that mattered. Without her, how would he survive? How would he take care of himself?

Not that he was completely inept, but he needed her.

And she needed him.

Without him, she'd be alone.

Completely, utterly, incontrovertibly alone.

She rolled onto her front and pushed herself to her knees.

With a large huff, she threw her first leg forward, then the second, then used a nearby tree to drag herself up. She strode between the trees, using them as support, every step like she was dragging a bag of weights attached to her ankles.

She reached an opening that led to the mass graveyard of skulls and bones she'd previously soldiered across as a dinosaur. The length of the field looked far longer than it had before.

But he was at the other end of it.

Right at the other end.

That's where she'd left him. She'd told him not to move. She'd told him that she'd come back, he just needed to stay there, and that's where he needed to stay, to be, there, where she wasn't, where she would come back to, where she...

Her thoughts grew elusive, scattered around her mind, each sentence like pieces of a puzzle.

She needed water.

Why didn't she drink at the lake?

Her forehead throbbed with each pulse. Her brain hammered against the prison of her skull. A migraine like a drill hammer vibrating against her cranium settled into her head.

*Come on...*

She urged herself to move.

*Just across this field...*

She took the first step and stumbled.

*He's just there... Boy, just there... All alone... He's waiting for me... He's relying on me to come back...*

That last thought spun until it was dizzy.

*He's relying on me to come back.*

*He's relying on me to come back.*

*He's relying on me...*

She allowed herself to roll down the small slope into the field. The grass was as dead as the field's contents, and it felt

rough and harsh against her skin. She lifted her arm to see a scratch mark.

She winced at the pain, then realised it was nothing compared to the other wounds she'd picked up.

She trudged forward, sometimes falling and using her hands to push her onward. She used the larger bones and larger skeletons to drag her forward. She knew what they were, what they used to be, what violence had created them – but she couldn't afford to spend time dwelling on it. Her balance was gone. She faltered to the left, then back to the right, and the only thing keeping her upright were the leftovers of the dead.

She looked back at the opening. Still so close. She'd barely made any progress.

Turning back around threw her off balance again and she fell to her knees.

She wanted to scream out. Shout for Boy. Shout for frustration. But what if they heard her?

You never know what's nearby.

She pulled herself back up again. She had to keep going, surging onwards, fighting the fatigue, fighting the headache, punching it away, punching it out, telling it *no*, it will not take her, it will not, it will not...

Her mind left. She absently strode onwards, as if led by her weight, like she was constantly falling forward but never hitting the floor.

When she reached the end of the field, she had nothing left. But she had to find something.

She crawled. Unable to stand anymore, she crawled, using her arms where her legs were failing her.

"Boy!" she gently shouted. She was close enough now, he'd hear her.

No response. Maybe he was still covering his ears. Maybe

he was still reciting the poem. Maybe that's why he didn't hear her.

Or maybe he was dead.

The thought sped her up. Against the desperate weariness, she dragged her drowsy body to the log where she'd left him.

She hoisted the log upwards, and looked down at—

*Nothing.*

There was nothing there.

Nothing but the indent of where an eleven-year-old boy had previously been laying.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

“I SAW her stumbling across the wasteland,” Lucy declared, rushing through the woods with the eagerness only a child’s legs could provide. For a seven-year-old, she was spritely – but for all she had in terms of energy and enthusiasm, she severely lacked in intelligence.

“Where?” asked Troy, striding behind her, his large paces keeping up with her many little ones. His long hair waved behind him in the breeze, his broad shoulders effortlessly carrying his strong body forward.

“Here!” Lucy said, pointing ahead.

Sure enough, there she was. Laid over a log, her eyes closed.

“Is she breathing?” Troy asked.

Lucy moved her face as close as she possibly could to the girl’s without touching it.

“Hello!” she shouted. “Are you breathing?”

“Shut up,” Troy commanded. “Don’t shout, you don’t know what you’ll attract.”

He looked behind him and scanned the surroundings.

“We seem to be safe for now,” he decided, then knelt beside the girl.

She was black, but not. Maybe mixed race. Black, curly hair. Small. Petite. Maybe a teenager, late teens, still a child. Old enough to bear a baby, at least.

She was laid strangely, however. Draped over the log as if she'd fallen on it and ended up unconscious. Or died – she didn't particularly look full of life.

He lifted her hair to scan her neck, then her top to scan her body. No bites. A few scratches, a few scars, maybe a few wounds, but nothing that showed evidence of an attack. And if she was dead, she was very fresh.

He turned her over so she was facing upward and put his hand over her chest. Sure enough, her heart was beating, although softly. Her belly rose and sank, but at sparse intervals. She was struggling to stay alive, for whatever reason.

“Go back,” Troy told Lucy. “Tell the bearers to prepare her a room. A nice one, with a bed and duvet and all that.”

“Okay!”

“Oh, and Lucy.”

“Yeah?”

“Don't make any fucking noise.”

“Okay!”

She turned and ran, sprinting through the fields, jumping over logs, ducking under branches. Troy huffed. She had good coordination, but her thick mind was inscrutable. He imagined, if the world was still as it once was, she wouldn't have survived the kind of high-end education he'd had.

Still, she wouldn't have to worry about that anymore. They had a new purpose now.

Troy grabbed the girl's chin and shook it, seeing if she'd come to. A small huff pushed warm breath against his arm, but her eyes remained closed.

She looked developed enough. She had breasts. Small ones, yes, but she was a small girl. She could definitely be one of

them. Without a doubt, she could help them with their mission.

“Oi,” Troy said, seeing if he could provoke her.

Nothing.

He shook her body harder.

“Oi!”

She didn’t wake.

He brought his hand back and slapped her hard across the face.

Her eyes briefly opened and focussed on him. Green. Piercing. Beautiful.

She was perfect.

“Wha...” she mumbled, then fell back under.

Without any wounds, it was likely that she was just tired. Maybe she’d been in a chase and narrowly escaped, or had been hiding and the stress had gotten to her.

Either way, she was easily recoupable.

He hoisted her over his shoulder into a fireman’s lift. He carried her without a grunt or stutter through the forest, combing the blockages out the way. It was five miles back to home, but he did it by nightfall.

He approached a building that used to be a church, and the guardsman opened the door for him without hesitation. Troy nodded at him in appreciation and carried the girl through.

Everyone looked amazed.

All the people sleeping or sitting or reading at the pews turned their heads, marvelling at his find.

A woman.

A girl-woman.

Young, but old enough.

She was perfect.

“Did Lucy find you?” Troy barked at a man standing outside a far door.

“Yes, right up the stairs,” the man told Troy.

Troy carried the girl up a set of stone, spiralling steps and into a bedroom, where a bed had been made for her. The fresh smell of the sheets, the soft glow of the lamp, the springs of the mattress – it was something they all craved, but only the bearers received.

That was the honour for being a bearer.

For now, she was their guest.

He lay her down and let her sleep. He told Lucy to keep watch and let him know the minute the girl woke up.



**THEN**



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

CIA DID NOT LET GO of her dad's hand. She ran behind him, clutching, grasping onto him. She knew it was silly, but as long as her hand was in his hand she knew she would be safe. Nothing could harm her because her dad was there, and he would take care of her no matter what.

*No matter what.*

“Come on,” he urged her, moving faster, and her tiny legs rattled forward as quickly as they could.

They were among a crowd of people, bustling through the city streets. Some were in the midst of looting shops that had been deserted hours ago. She knew what they were doing was wrong, but it didn't really matter – it wasn't like the shop owners were going to be back for their stuff anytime soon. All around her, houses were emptying, people were running, and she couldn't move a few steps without being barged into by someone too tall and too ignorant to notice her. People were throwing things out of their window to people below, mostly bags, probably full of supplies, giving them what they needed for their journey.

But their journey to where?

At least Cia and her dad had an idea where they were going. There was a target in mind, even though it was top secret, and she was not to tell anyone about it, not even her friends from school, not even her best friend, not even her *boyfriend*.

Where were these people going exactly?

Cia tried to listen, tried to distinguish words amidst the mass of panicked ramblings that came at her in wave after wave.

“...our holiday home...”

“...your sister in the countryside...”

“...he owns a farmhouse...”

People seemed to be wanting to leave the cities, to head for the country. Why? How would they be safer there?

The countryside is a large, open area. At least in the city there'd be lots of buildings and lots of places to hide.

When Cia got in trouble at school a few weeks ago for stealing Bradley's pencil, she said that she didn't do it at first. That's when she learnt about *denial*. Mrs Longley explained that *denial* is something you're in when you refuse to face the truth. When you refuse to admit what you actually know.

And that's where all these people were.

In *denial*.

“This way,” Cia's dad said, directing her down an alleyway.

They came to an abrupt stop. Cia didn't understand why, until she saw it.

At the far side of the alleyway. Something was there. Something big. The building beside it was missing a big chunk of bricks. It had four legs and red stuff around its jaw like someone had knocked a paint pot over it by accident. Then she realised it wasn't paint, because there was a person in its mouth, their legs dangling out of its jaw, floppy, like a rag doll, or like the unused thread that wouldn't fit in the friendship bracelet she'd made for Dad because she'd bought too much.

“Don’t mo—”

Too late. Cia screamed. She couldn’t help it. She hadn’t ever seen anything like it. Not the creature, nor the bloody corpse betwixt its teeth.

He wasted no time. He pulled her out of the alleyway and ran back into the crowd. It was callous, maybe, but it was mostly instinctive – put as many other people between him, her, and it; give the monster more people to go through before they reached him and Cia.

He barged through more and more people and they were all too tall for Cia to see, so even though she looked behind her, she couldn’t see it – but she heard it. Screams, just like hers. Ringing around the crowd.

Something flew over her, like an arm, or something like that, she couldn’t tell, and honestly, she didn’t want to know.

The crowd started pushing against her. Everyone was running now, and it was squashing her, and she couldn’t stand it because she couldn’t breathe.

“Dad!” she shouted.

He looked down at her and saw that she couldn’t keep up with the mass of people trying to flee, so he picked her up, put her on his shoulders, and ran, and that’s when she turned, and that’s when she saw it.

So many of them. It just charged through so many of them. Took them all down, scraping its large, curved teeth through them as it went, with so much blood, spraying everywhere, so many body parts, limbs, just flying, and it was awful, just terrible, just awful.

She looked forward and covered her eyes. She didn’t want to see it, she couldn’t see it, she felt sick, like she was going to be sick, but she couldn’t because then it would go on her dad, so she swallowed it and tried to think of nice thoughts.

Thought of her mum.

Her paintings.

Her art.

Her poem.

Cia would never get to see say any of the memories stored in the attic in their old house. Somehow, Cia knew they'd never be able to go back there.

She tried something else.

Her and Dad. Safe. In a cabin, on holiday, log fire, after doing a hike, she loved hikes, especially with Dad, loved them, so much fun, they sang songs had snacks held hands and – and – and –

She couldn't think.

The screaming was too much.

Her dad ran up to a car. He went to open the door, but this large, tattooed man came to his side, pushing him, and said, "Don't you even fucking thing about it!"

Cia thought the man was very rude, but when she saw his children in the back of the car, she understood it. He was just trying to protect his kids. Just like her dad.

He tried another car, but so did the rest of the mob. People were diving on it, smashing the window, dragging the family out from in the car. She was sure she saw someone with a blade.

A large screech came closer, followed by another one.

Everyone ducked.

A bird, no, a dinosaur; no it couldn't be a dinosaur, some kind of monster, something – larger than a car – no, larger than three – came swooping down.

Everyone ducked.

It just sailed over them, but she watched as, behind her, the flying thing took a person in its mouth and two in its feet and flew away. It dropped one, and then dropped a piece of the next, but the last one never came back.

“Dad, where are we going?”

“It’s a long way away, darling, but we’ll get there,” he reassured her. “We’ll get there.”



**NOW**



## CHAPTER TWENTY

---

THE SUNLIGHT ROSE before Cia did. Her mind didn't make sense of anything, at first; it formed words in droves, but those words had no coherent sentences to form.

Eventually, her vision returned and a room came into focus. Walls made of large stones, a gap in the wall filled with stained glass to make a window. A patter of bare feet echoed around the chamber, and she sat up in bed.

Bed.

She was in a bed.

She looked down. A duvet snuggled over her, a big pillow beneath her head, a mattress she could bounce off of and hit the roof.

Was this real?

"Get Troy, she's awake!" came a child's voice from outside the slightly open door. A young girl ran in and went scuttling up to Cia's bedside.

"Hi, I'm Lucy, what's your name?" the girl blurted out, shouting it at her like someone had pulled a string on her back and she was reciting her stock recorded phrase.

"What?" Cia asked, groggy, rubbing her face.

"I said, hi, I'm Lucy, what's your name?"

Cia looked up and down this girl called Lucy. She was stood very upright, a strange smile, and an eagerness that didn't fit with Cia's tired state.

"My – my name is Cia," she answered.

"Hi, Cia!"

A large, burly man strode in, his face cemented in seriousness. He was big – not in terms of tall or fat, but in terms of muscles. In fact, he was huge. His arms were easily the width of her head, and his clothes didn't leave much of his torso to the imagination.

She quickly thought of something. Her friendship bracelet. Her sore hand swiped to her wrist and felt for it.

It was still there.

"Her name is Cia," Lucy declared.

"Hello, Cia," Troy's strong, deep voice boomed, his serious face set in stone. "Lucy, why don't you go run a bath."

"Okay!" she said, and skipped out the door.

"Strange kid," Cia said.

"Yes," Troy concurred, but without the element of humour Cia was hoping for. He made his way to Cia's side. "How are you?"

"Confused. Where am I?"

"You are in The Church of the Bearers."

"The what?"

"We found you in the woods. You were passed out over a log. You've been out for nearly two days, but I hope you are well-rested now."

"I am. Thanks, I guess. For finding me."

"You're welcome."

She tried to remember what had happened. Where she'd been. The log. Draped over it.

The log where Boy had been.

Where he wasn't.

With an abrupt inhalation of air, she sat up straighter.

*Boy.*

She looked down and saw that she was dressed in silk pyjamas. What the hell was this place?

"Where are my clothes?" she hastily demanded. "I need to go."

"Go?"

"Yes, I've lost my – my friend. Brother. Kid. Whatever he is, I've lost him, and he needs to – I need to – I don't where he is. I have to look."

"Please, relax." Troy placed a grand hand on her shoulder.

"You don't understand. He's only eleven, he's autistic, he can't cope with this world, he'd die without me."

"How long has he been missing?"

"I don't know. Days. Four, five maybe."

"Then he is probably dead."

That was not what she wanted to hear.

She stood, wobbling on unused legs, and charged for the door.

"And how do you plan to find him?" Troy asked.

She paused. "I don't know. Just go out there and look, I guess."

"Why don't you let me help? We have a bath ready for you, we have food, water. You look malnourished. Why don't you let us give you the energy, and I will send men out to look for him?"

"You'd do that?"

"Yes." Lucy reappeared at the doorway. "Go with Lucy now, and I will instruct a group of men to search for him."

"He – I told him to wait at the log. Where you found me. That would be a good starting point."

"Then that is where we will start."

He smiled at her. His first one. It reassured her somehow,

calmed her, told her that it would be okay for her to regather herself before she left. After all, his men were likely to be a lot stronger and far more trained than she, and it made sense for them to search.

And she needed to be at her best to look for him.

"I'm leaving before the day is through," Cia said, still not wanting to completely relinquish control.

Troy said nothing.

"Your bath is ready, Cia," said Lucy. With an uneasy glance back at Troy, she led her away.

Troy spoke quietly to a guardsman standing outside the room.

"Do not let her leave," Troy instructed.

The guardsman nodded and followed her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

A TUB OF HOT WATER. Such a simple thing, yet it made a world of difference to her state of mind. Cia's thoughts still remained on Boy, and she would not let herself forget her task for a moment – but, in the reassurance that there were better people out there looking for him, she allowed herself to enjoy the bath.

Once Cia had finished, Lucy gave her a soft, woolly dressing gown that caressed her skin with softness, and even smelled clean. Lucy led her to a bedroom a few doors down and offered her the choice from a selection of clothes.

Cia couldn't help but notice that, wherever she went, there was always a guardsman nearby, or a beefy bloke with a grim expression.

She wondered why they were all guarding her.

And she wondered where the women were.

There was a large array of clothes. So many of them Cia wished she could wear. There were dresses, long shirts she could wear with tights, flowing skirts that would billow gracefully in the wind behind her.

But she had to be practical. She was going to have to run and fight if she was to survive, and if she was to find Boy.

In the end, she disregarded all the elegant items she craved wearing and selected a white vest and a pair of denim shorts. She found some trainers, white ones with the Nike brand on the side – not that she imagined they'd stay white for long, but they fit well, were comfortable, and would be good for running.

Troy appeared in the doorway.

“Any luck?” Cia asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Any luck in finding Boy?”

“Ah, Boy. Is that your friend's name?”

“Yes. Well, its my name for him.”

“I see. We haven't heard anything yet, but my men are yet to return. Once they have, I assure you, I will let you know.”

Cia nodded. Troy didn't leave. He stood there and stared. Looking her up and down. Even though his expression didn't change, he still looked like he was annoyed about something.

“What?” Cia prompted.

“I just thought you would wear something prettier. Something more radiant, that would bring out your beauty.”

Cia didn't know what to say. Why did that matter? Why would this guy care whether she looked pretty or not?

“I don't think a Maskete or a Thoral or Lisker, or even a Waster, for that matter, is going to care whether or not I look pretty,” she said. “But I am going to need to run. Especially if I am to find Boy.”

He stayed silent for a moment. In contemplation. She would love to know what he was thinking.

“I see,” he said, then turned to Lucy. “Take her to see the Bearers. That's where she can stay.”

Lucy nodded, and Troy left.

The Bearers?

What the hell was that?

“Follow me please,” Lucy said, and went bouncing out the room.

Cia followed, walking down a spiralling stone staircase until they came out into the open room of a church. Across the pews were men laying down, sleeping, some were eating, some playing cards, some even arm wrestling. Sleeping bags were scattered across the benches and solid floor, and Cia wondered why they slept in such poor conditions.

Lucy led Cia through this room and, as she walked through, Cia found every head lifting and looking at her. Every card game paused, every arm wrestle stopped, even those asleep sat up to see. Their expressions all stayed blank, but behind their eyes there was something that made Cia feel uncomfortable, feel dirty, much like she did with the Wasters.

They arrived at a large door that led to a large hall. Lucy opened the door and stepped aside for Cia to enter, shutting the door behind her.

This was where the women were.

Across the room were beds, vastly more comfortable than the hard surfaces the men were made to sleep on. A mass of women lay on these beds, or read, or potted around, going about their business.

The woman closest to Cia turned and smiled at her. Cia noticed that she was pregnant. Heavily pregnant, like she would burst at any minute. The smile was warm, genuine, a comforting greeting that should make Cia relax, but she felt that something was wrong.

She walked forward, between the beds, looked to her left, to her right. They smiled at her. Some of their smiles were lovely, some of them forced, but all of them at least attempted to appear happy.

She noticed another pregnant woman laid on a bed.

Another one stood, and she was pregnant.

And another.

And another.

Cia abruptly felt the need to leave.

Every woman here was pregnant.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

CIA CHARGED THROUGH THE CHURCH. Lucy ran up to her and grabbed her hand but she shoved her off, refusing to be deterred.

As she marched between the pews, all the men sat up and watched her, like lecherous meerkats, each of them voyeurs to her escape.

She made it to the doors, ready to kick them open and leave this place, whatever the hell it was, until two guardsmen moved in her way.

“Move,” she demanded. She didn’t care that they were carrying guns. She wasn’t prepared to stick around to find out what they might force her to do.

They remained unaltered. Expressions dead. Bodies immobile

“I said move.”

Nothing.

“Where are you going?” came Troy’s voice, and she turned to find him casually meandering toward her. Behind him, every man was looking, so many of them, eyes on her, everyone peering to see what she was going to do.

Why were they all staring at her?

Why were they so desperate for her to stay?

*What do they want to do to me?*

“I’m leaving.”

“Why?”

She huffed. She was fed up with this.

“I’m going to find Boy.”

“I told you, I have men searching for—”

“I don’t care! I do not care that you are looking for him, if you actually are. I *want to leave.*”

Troy smiled. One of few smiles he seemed to show, and it was a cocky one, one that showed that he was in charge.

“Why would you want to leave? Look around. You have everything you ever wanted. A bath. Clean clothes. Companionship.”

“Companionship?”

“Out there is cold. Out there you are constantly hunted. Out there, you don’t stand a chance.”

She looked around again. She felt far more hunted in here than she ever did out there.

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Why?”

“I’ve survived this long.”

“Just.”

“Why are you so adamant about me staying? What is it you want from me?”

She regretted the questions as soon as she asked them. She turned back to the two beefy men stood in front of the door, holding their guns across their chests and barged into them, put her hands out trying to break them apart, but it was useless. It was like a mouse trying to push a brick. She stood no chance.

She turned back to Troy. Her confident demeanour was disintegrating. Now she felt scared. Now she felt alone.

“Let me leave. Please.”

Troy shook his head. “I cannot do that.”

“Why? Please, just tell me why.”

“Because you are important, Cia. Far more important than you realise. You have an amazing chance here, a great chance to do something historic, to do something that will help this world begin again.”

“What? Get pregnant?”

Troy raised his eyebrows, as if her guess was close, but she still needed a little pushing.

“What you can do is far more than that.”

She shook her head.

“We are repopulating the Earth,” Troy explained, his voice reaching out to her, suddenly so passionate. “We are replenishing the diminishing human population. And when we are done, we will have an army, and we can fight again, we can reclaim this Earth.”

“I’m seventeen. Did you know that? I am seventeen years old.”

He shrugged. “You’re old enough to bear a child.”

Cia glanced at Lucy, who was stood across the room, amongst the men still staring at her.

“And if I say no?”

Troy looked over his shoulder at the others, then turned back.

“I am willing to grant you a choice of who you will bear with. I haven’t given this to any other Bearer, but I will do it for you. If you wish—”

“I get to choose?” She threw her arms into the air. “Wonderful! Absolutely wonderful! You are a charmer, you know that? You drive a hard bargain.”

“Look at what you get in return, Cia.”

“I’d rather be eaten.”

She turned back to the two guardsmen and beseeched them with her eyes.

“Please. Please let me go.”

“If you do not cooperate—”

“No! I will not cooperate! There are monsters out there, but there are worse monsters in here. At least those out there are doing it for survival.”

“This is for survival.”

She shook her head.

“Please. Please, I beg you. Just let me go. Let me find Boy, let me go back to the life I was living. I want nothing from you.”

Troy stepped forward. Cia took a step back, only to find herself walking into one of the guardsmen. She felt his horrible body against hers and she flinched away from him.

“You have the option of a comfortable bed, or a prison cell. The choice is yours.”

She shook her head. She felt tears now. She couldn’t control them, they were just there, one of them trickling down her cheek.

“That isn’t a choice,” she said, but it was barely a whisper, and it was barely enough.

Troy nodded at the guardsmen and they took her away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

THE CELL WAS A FAR WORSE alternative to the bed, but Cia did not regret it. She had no intention of cooperating. As far as she was concerned, these people were worse than the Wasters.

Strange, how monsters can rise up from Hell and the world can descend into chaos – yet it's still humans who end up being the biggest arseholes.

The floor of the cell was mossy and bumpy. She couldn't sit anywhere without being discomfited by the scratch of green life or the uneven surface of the stones or cracks between broken pieces of floor. The wall she leant against was just as bad, prodding the back of her head with uneven bumps.

She closed her eyes. Tried to ignore the uneasiness of the surface and focus on Boy. On how she was going to get out of there. On how she was going to save him.

*If she was going to save him.*

For starters, she had no idea where he could be.

She had no idea whether he was still alive.

And she had no optimism that she would ever be able to leave this place and escape back into the world of the monsters.

Now, she just had to wait.

For what?

For someone to come along and...

She couldn't let herself think it. She couldn't let her mind complete the sentence. This was abhorrent. Humiliating. Degrading. And there was no way she—

“Hi,” whispered a voice.

She opened her eyes. Looked around.

“Over here,” the voice said.

Across from the bars of her cell was another cell, where a person sat in the shadows. The person crawled forward into a small layer of light, revealing another girl, possibly about Cia's age, but in far worse condition. Her clothes were useless rags that didn't cover anything precious, but instead boasted the wounds and bruises that covered her skin. Her ribs prominently announced themselves against her stretched skin, and her legs were so thin they barely curved. Her hair looked like it used to be blond, but now it was so engrained with dirt it was empty of colour.

“Hi,” Cia said.

“What's your name?” the girl asked.

“Cia. What's yours?”

“Harriet.”

Cia wanted to help this woman, but she felt too despondent to engage. She wanted to lift her head back and sleep. This girl, however, looked like she needed help – even if the only help Cia could give was the comfort of brief conversation.

“Are you new?” Harriet asked.

“Yes. Aren't you?”

“No, I've been here a long time.”

“Did you refuse as well?”

“No. Well, at first. But that's not why I'm down here.”

Cia grew intrigued. She crawled forward from her corner.

“Why are you here?”

Harriet shrugged. "Not good enough, I guess."

"Not good enough for what?"

Harriet looked to Cia with a wounded expression of burdened knowledge. "Do you not know why you are here?"

"Yes. I do. I think so. But I'm not giving in to them without a fight."

"There's no point in fighting."

"There has to be."

"They get you every day, and they try every day until you..."

Cia started to understand why Harriet was in the cell opposite hers.

"How many times?"

Harriet turned to the wall where she had scratched a mass of lines. She looked over them and quickly counted, ten at a time.

"Four hundred and sixty-five."

Cia's head dropped. She wanted to cry for this girl. She desperately wanted to do something to help her, to make her see that this wasn't okay.

"Are you telling me they've tried that many times?"

"Yes. And I know it's me, because they tried different... And I still..."

Cia's hands wrapped around the bars. She shook them, feeling for weaknesses. They rattled slightly, but remained firmly in place.

"Cia..." Harriet said, quietly, as if she was about to confess her deepest, darkest secret.

"What?"

Harriet's head lifted, her pained eyes gazing at Cia's, and Cia truly saw in that moment what these people had done to her.

"I don't think I want to try anymore."

"You don't?"

“No. I don’t think I do.”

“And have you told them that?”

She nodded, then paused, then shook her head.

“I tried to. I tried, but—”

The battering of a door against a wall and the creak of its hinges announced itself. Harriet immediately scuttled back into the shadows of her cell. Cia sat back a little but remained strong, defiant in the face of what was to come.

But they weren’t coming for her.

A man, grubby and large, unlocked Harriet’s cell.

“No, please, I don’t want to—”

The man grabbed hold of Harriet’s hair in a large clump and ignored her screaming as he dragged her away. Cia listened as Harriet’s sporadic footsteps marked the stone floor with her struggle, until finally the door slammed behind her.

Cia sat alone in her silence. Listening intently. Even the sound of the rain belting against the stone wall was muted. For a moment, she wondered if she was still breathing, as she couldn’t hear it.

But she was breathing. She felt it.

At least she had that. Her breath. Her life.

Harriet returned much later on, shoved back into the corner of her cell. She promptly crawled into the corner, facing away from Cia, curling up into a ball as small as she could manage.

Cia watched the burly guardsmen leave and noticed that they didn’t take the keys with them. They left them on a hook on the wall at the far end of the corridor. For a moment this gave her hope. The keys were unguarded, left there for her to...

No. She was kidding herself.

She was locked in a cell with sturdy bars and no way out.

The sudden hope left as she realised she was stuck here.

She turned to Harriet, who was still curled up, facing the

wall. Cia knew she was crying. She could hear it. Harriet's body was convulsing with tears.

"Hey," Cia said. "Hey, you okay?"

She didn't reply.

"Harriet, are you—"

Then Cia saw it. On Harriet's exposed back. A large, red slash, like a whip mark. And, lower down, a pool of blood trickling across her inner thigh.

Cia closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep. She couldn't bare to stay conscious any longer.



**THEN**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

---

CIA HAD no idea what was happening; but she did know, in no uncertain terms, that she was in danger. She had never seen her dad have such a short temper. Every question she asked was either ignored, rebuffed, or urged to keep for later.

She was being led by his hand through a crowd of people so tightly pressed together that she couldn't see anything but bodies. She couldn't even see her dad, she could only see the end of his arm trailing behind him; and that was because both of her hands were clinging to it. She wanted to be sick, and she wanted to be able to stretch her arms out – but most of all, she wanted to be able to see her dad's face, or at least the back of his head. No one cared about bumping into her or suffocating her; to everyone else, her survival was irrelevant. She was a child, but that afforded her no sympathy; it was about instinct. To these people it was her or them, and they chose *them*.

She could hear an engine. Over the shouts and chatter and nervous words exchanged, she heard it. Chugging, but with a consistent pitch that suggested whatever the engine belonged to was stationary.

The closer she became, the louder the shouts were. She

could see a cloud of black smoke trickling into the air from the nearby vehicle, rising above all the torsos and faces surrounding her.

The closer she was to the engine sound, the more of the shouts she could make out.

“So you’re just going to leave *us* here to *die!*”

“What gives *you* the right to live!”

“We are humans too!”

She wondered what these people could be feeling so angry about, and what could be making them say such things. Wasn’t there a transport here? Weren’t they getting on it?

The wading back and forth of the crowd grew stronger. Her cousin had once told her about a heavy metal concert he went to and how he was in something called a *mosh pit*, and this was exactly how that sounded.

They reached a fence and she finally saw her dad, who looked up at a man stood on the platform. She didn’t get a good look, but he was wearing some kind of uniform, and her dad was shouting something to him. Everyone was shouting. She was shouting. The fence was pressing into her belly, her chest, her neck, everyone behind her was pushing so hard.

“My name is Daniel Rose, I – what is it?” He diverted his attention from the man to her. He noticed that she was pressed up against the fence, so he lifted her up and stood her on it, holding her and keeping her steady.

She could see behind her now. The mass of people shouting angry things, everyone’s face red and cross. On the platform behind the fence was a train, and along the platform were people – she recognised the uniform now; they were from the army. They had guns. Some of them stood still with guns across their chest, but most of them were aiming the guns into the crowd, a lot of them shouting stuff like, “Get back!” “Don’t even think about it!” “I will shoot!”

But that didn't seem to stop the people shouting back at them.

"You elitist pig!"

"How are you gonna sleep tonight!"

"You rich ignorant pricks!"

Cia had never heard a lot of these words and she wondered what they meant.

She turned back to her dad, who had managed to grab something from his pocket, some sort of identification, and he was pushing it toward the soldier stood above him.

"See, identification, my name is Daniel Rose! I'm a scientist for the government, I've been asked!"

The soldier paused for a moment, looking judgementally at them both, then turned to a list he had. He scanned it, then turned back to Cia and her dad.

"You're on it. She isn't."

"She's my daughter!" he said in a voice that Cia had only heard when she was in trouble.

"I can't guarantee that she'll be allowed—"

"Like I said, soldier, she is my daughter."

The soldier hesitated, looked at her dad, then nodded. He lifted Cia up first, then held a hand out for her dad.

She looked out into the faces. There were so many of them. They had now started shouting at her, saying words she didn't know and, by the sounds of it, didn't want to know. One of them even tried to spit at her, but her dad dragged her away and onto the train.

"Count your money, you bastard!"

"You're as good as a murderer!"

"Put that gun down and we'll see who wins the fucking fight!"

Cia sat on the train. There was so much space. So many empty seats.

She smiled at her dad sitting next to her, and he looked anxiously back down at her.

“Dad?” she said, curiously.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, though she could tell he wasn’t listening very well.

“Why can’t we let any more of those people on the train? They’d fit.”

He glanced out the window at the crowds, then at Cia, then turned his focus back to a blank space on the far wall.

“Because some of us have jobs to do, honey.”

“Don’t they have jobs? I’m sure some of them do.”

“It’s just the way it is, Cia, okay? It’s just the way it is.”

Cia turned her head back to the window and watched them. Their faces contorted into anger, their mouths wide, still shouting, even though she could no longer tell what they were saying. There was a woman amongst them, holding her child aloft. He looked a lot younger than Cia, and she could tell what she was saying by reading her lips.

*Please take my child.*

*Please save him.*

*Somebody.*

*Take him.*

*Please!*

Cia wanted to take him, but she had a feeling that her dad wouldn’t let her. She didn’t even bother asking, because he didn’t really look like he wanted to give her much attention at the moment.

But she still looked. Still watched this woman. Still watched the angry people.

Everyone looked so...desperate.

And here she was, on an empty train.

And, no matter how hard she tried to understand it, she couldn’t. Why were they outside, and her in there?

**NOW**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

---

CIA WASN'T sure if she slept. She may have done. She tried to, at least. She kept her eyes closed, rested them, but she couldn't remember ever actually drifting off or waking up. The hours went by and she just lay there, her eyes closed, thinking about Boy.

Wondering where he was.

What he was doing.

Whether he was okay.

She tried not to be honest with herself. If she was being honest, she would have to conclude that there was no way he could have survived. No way he could manage so many days on his own. He couldn't cope, he couldn't fight, he couldn't even collect food. Maybe she was being harsh on him, maybe it was her mothering ways that meant that he wasn't capable and should he be forced to, he'd find a way – but her instinct told her this wasn't the case.

Her instinct told her that there was no way he could be alive.

And that was why she was not being honest with herself.

“Hey, Harriet?” Cia said, craving some kind of interaction to dull the constant unease rioting in her mind.

There was no answer.

Cia went to her knees and crawled to the bars, trying to look for her. In the far shadows of her tiny cell was a figure in silhouette, still with a back to Cia, still not moving. Still wrapped up in a ball, the foetal position, the position we all use to find comfort.

Cia wished that she could reach out to Harriet. That she could just place a hand on her back, give her some skin contact, whisper something nice to her, somehow make Harriet feel better.

Then again, how could Harriet feel better, considering all that had been done to her? Considering the injuries she came back with, the worth that was given to her for her infertility, the way she was used day by day and made to think it was normal.

It wasn't normal.

But then again, what was normal?

Normal was gone. Normal didn't exist anymore. Now, it was survival. And that's what these people thought they were doing. The most sickening realisation of all of this was that these people thought they were justified. They considered themselves to be doing what it took to ensure the survival of the species.

In all honesty, Cia wasn't sure whether her species deserved survival. Maybe this was how it was meant to be. If this is what humans, with a moral conscience and an ability to decide between right and wrong, thought was right – should humans be allowed any survival at all?

“Harriet?” Cia tried again. “Harriet, can you hear me?”

Nothing. Not a flinch. Not a move.

“Are you awake?”

A sniff. That was it. Nothing else.

“I know you are. I know you can hear me. I just want to help, I just want to...”

She stopped talking.

What? What was it she wanted to do? What could her words possibly do to restore anything good to Harriet’s life?

No. She was better off just shutting up.

But she needed it. Even if it was selfish, she needed it to keep sane.

She leant against the wall and wondered what to do, what to say. Then it came to her.

“Do you know any poems?” she asked.

There was no reply, but of course, Cia didn’t expect one.

“There’s one that my mother wrote. I read it after she died. Well, my dad showed it to me... I tell it to Boy, when he needs it. To help him.”

Harriet wouldn’t know who Boy was, but that didn’t matter. Cia just needed to talk, whether Harriet was listening or not.

“The devil has departed,” Cia began, “And you are not alone.”

She dropped her head to her shoulder and watched Harriet.

“Take time to rebuild, Your love in our home.”

She went to carry on, then stopped.

Honestly, why did it matter?

That poem could die with her if it had to.

That’s when Harriet spoke. When Cia heard it.

“Shared time it is slowing,” came Harriet’s voice, so soft, so broken. “The pace of our heart.”

Cia smiled. Harriet knew it.

*Wait...*

She became abruptly alert.

How does she know it?

There were only two of them that knew it.

Her.

And Boy.

“But from now to the end,” Harriet finished, “We won’t be apart.”

“Harriet, how do you know that poem?”

Cia was up against the bars, grabbing them, getting as close as she could. Her whole body was caught somewhere between tension and excitement.

Did this mean Boy was still alive?

“Harriet, how do you—”

A large clang and a thud. A shaft of light cast visibility into the space between their cells.

“Harriet, please, how do—”

“Shut up,” came the gruff voice of a guardsman. There were two of them. They stood outside Cia’s cell, guns pointed at her.

Cia looked from them, to Harriet, from them, to Harriet.

She had to know.

“Harriet, where did you hear it?”

Harriet didn’t move. Didn’t do anything. Just remained, as she was, unperturbed.

“Stand up,” one of the guardsmen commanded.

Cia just peered desperately into Harriet’s cell.

“Harriet?”

One guardsman opened the cell, and the other charged in, whacking her in the face with the butt of his gun.

“I didn’t say speak, I said stand up.”

Cia did as she was told.

“Harriet...” she quietly pled. “Please...”

“Move,” the other guardsman told her.

“Where am I going?”

The guardsman smirked.

“To become a Bearer,” he said. “Now move.”

“What if I say no? What if I—”

One of the guardsmen turned their gun toward Harriet. That was her answer.

“No, don’t!” Cia yelped. She didn’t want to see Harriet die, but mostly, she didn’t want to lose the only person who may know of Boy’s whereabouts. “Fine. I’ll go.”

With one final glance at the back of Harriet’s head, Cia walked where she was instructed, obscenely aware of what was to come.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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THEY LED Cia down a corridor as if she was heading for the gallows – at least that’s how it felt. Every step was another step toward depravity, humiliation, a fate worse than death.

She made the decision, right there and then, to numb herself. Whatever happened to her, she wouldn’t feel it. Not mentally or physically. She would take it and switch herself off. Think about holidays with Dad, conversations with Boy, and memories given to her about her mother. She would do whatever it took to get through it and get back to Harriet – the one person who may offer her salvation.

The guardsmen stopped by a door and turned to Cia.

“You are to go in here,” one told her, “And not leave until you are instructed.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“If you cause any fuss, we will be out here. So don’t even try it.”

She nodded, this time remaining silent. They opened the door and ushered her in, closing it behind her. She heard the door lock and bolt from the outside and knew there would be no way out.

The room itself was not what she expected. It was a large, lavish room, with various multicoloured rugs, and bowls of fruit adorning architecturally impressive cupboards. There was a bed against the far wall beneath a window that shone a beam of light directly upon satin sheets. Beside the bed was a table with two glasses of water.

“Hello,” came a voice, quiet, but not timid. She turned and noticed a man emerging from a smaller room, possibly a bathroom, doing up the belt on his robe.

To say *man* would be an exaggeration – this was a boy. Possibly a young man. Likely to be around her age. Not bad-looking. Chances are, if they were at school together, she’d have had a crush on him. Would have blushed when he said hello in the corridor or turned her face away when he sat by her in maths.

As it was, he was simply there for a singular purpose. To provide the world with spawn, extra life, no matter how young they were.

“They tell me your name is Cia,” he said, and she noticed again how confident he was. His voice was soft but assertive. His hair was neatly parted, his skin unblemished, his posture upright.

“This would be when you say yes, it is.”

Cia knew she was meant to say something. Yet, however charming a man this was, she didn’t want to make it seem like she was willing.

She nodded, faintly.

“And does Cia have a voice?”

She flinched at the sound of her name being used in third person.

“Don’t worry, my mum and dad have promised me that nothing will happen to you, so long as you cooperate. And I’m fairly certain you are going to cooperate, aren’t you?”

*His mum and dad?*

And that's when it occurred to her – mentally, he really was still just a child. A handsome, well-spoken one at that, but a child. Protected from the outside. Probably rich. Probably never had to deal with those monsters. Both of his parents were still alive, probably his siblings, too – hell, maybe even his cat had been granted permission to come along.

His parents probably had a lot of authority for him to be in this position, and she wondered who they were before all this began. How esteemed they would be, and in what way.

Then she realised it didn't matter.

“So, are you going to cooperate?”

“Depends what you mean by cooperate,” she blankly retorted.

“Oh, wow, she speaks.” So patronising. She wanted to punch him. “Well, by cooperate, I mean whether you are going to do this without being restrained.”

“I don't plan to struggle, if that's what you're saying.”

“Then what is it you do plan to do, Cia who talks?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

And she meant it. If they were going to do this, fine, but she was going to play no active part in facilitating it.

“Fine. Would you at least take your clothes off?”

“No,” she stated very blankly.

“Okay. I see. Well, what about lying on the bed? Would you be willing to do that?”

She looked at the bed. Red, satin sheets. As if this was romantic. As if this was something special.

“There's fruit if you like it, and your own glass of water. I'd like for you to be comfortable, even if not willing.”

“Is this your first time?” Cia asked, very directly, very ruthlessly – but unsure why she was asking it.

He grinned at the question, as if it was silly but he'd answer it anyway.

"No. No, it's not," he told her. "Is it yours?"

She shot him a look of disdain. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? The opportunity to pop my cherry?" She almost spat the words *pop* and *cherry*, wanting to pack as much venom into them as she could.

"Yes. Indeed. Well, look, I need to ask so I know whether to call in one of the guardsmen – are you going to lay down on the bed or not?"

She looked at the bed. Huffed. Slowly, she made the steps toward it. She perched on the end. Took the glass of water. Sniffed it. Wondered if there was something in it. Took a sip, figuring, what the hell, didn't really matter if there was.

She shifted herself along the bed and lay down, like a plank, awkward and rigid.

"Okay," he said, looking over her, as if he'd just been given a puzzle that was supposed to be really difficult to crack but had figured it out without sparing a thought.

He removed his robe and she tried not to look. She could still see him, out the corner of her eye, parading around the room. He took a few pieces of fruit, displaying his sculpted arse cheeks beside her head as if intentionally teasing her. He turned around and looked at her and she flinched.

She felt her shoe slowly slide off.

Then her sock.

Then her other shoe.

Then her sock.

So tediously slow, as if to infuriate her, to just make the whole ordeal worse.

"Fine, I'll do it!" she decided, fed up of him purposefully taunting her.

She sat up, undid the belt of her shorts, went to slide them down, then – paused.

This was it.

She suppressed her tears.

“Well,” he prompted, laid on his side, his body spread out upon the sheets.

She stood and pushed her shorts off, refusing to look at him pouting his lip at her body, as if to say *yeah, that’ll do*.

She took her top off next, then stood there, in her underwear, uncompromisingly awkward.

“You’re nearly there...” his annoying voice sang, and as she turned her head slightly, she realised he was touching himself. She flinched away.

“What’s the matter, this bothering you?”

She didn’t answer.

“I’m afraid there’s a certain state a guy’s got to be in, and seeing as you won’t help, kinda got to do it myself. Got to warm it up.”

She shook her head, keeping her snarl pointed away from him, unsure why she was hiding her detest but doing it anyway.

“Your underwear too, please.”

Her lip curled. She felt herself surge with anger.

“Wow, you really are a prude, aren’t you?”

*Let’s just get this over with.*

She undid her bra. Dropped it to the floor. Slid off her underwear. Reluctantly turned, and–

With the spare hand he wasn’t using to *warm it up*, as he’d so elegantly put it, he took a bottle and poured what looked like vodka into a glass. Beside that glass was a small bucket of ice.

In it, an ice pick.

Her eyes focussed in on that ice pick.

“You want some?” he asked, assuming she was staring at the beverage.

“No,” she said, turning to him.

Her stance changed as an idea formed.

“Get your hand off,” she instructed him.

“Well, I’m not quite there yet.”

“I’ll do it.”

His eyebrows raised, as if impressed. “Well, okay then. Let’s do this.”

Forgetting about how much she hated him, how much she wanted to hurt him, she climbed over him on all fours. She ran her hand up his shin, down the inside of his thigh, tickling him with her dirty fingernails, then took the whole of him in her hand. She felt it grow bigger the instant she took it.

She looked back at the ice pick again.

Then back to him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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SHE BENT her head over his so they were trapped in her hair, their faces hidden from the room. She went down to kiss him, then didn't, and he laughed, enjoyed being teased, it turned him on, so she leant down again, but this time bit his lip.

She leant up, looking down at him, all smiles and happiness.

“You warm enough yet?”

“Hell, yeah,” he exclaimed, that same grin, that same fucking grin.

She mounted him, grabbing hold. She tried placing him inside of her, but couldn't figure out how, so he did it, with a look of smugness she wanted to claw at. He began thrusting, slowly and tamely, until she sped up and took over – at which point, he simply lay there adorned with a smile of pleasant surprise. She was dry and it felt rough, but he didn't care, which meant she didn't care; so long as he was enjoying himself it didn't matter.

And he needed to enjoy himself.

He had to reach heaven while he was with her.

She rode him, grinding back and forth, moving her hips and

nothing else, circling him, looking down at his face, showing him nothing but mutual pleasure.

She painted her face with playful naughtiness. She painted it with brushes of ecstasy, a pastel of sexual lust, a canvas of pure joy. He saw it and he believed it, and she let him.

He shifted, went to move, went to put himself on top, but she wasn't having it. She grabbed his wrists and pinned his arms down and he loved it, he took it, he relished it. She felt him quiver, and he joined in with the heavy thrusting, and it went in far, and it hurt her, scraped her insides, thrustured her around, and she wanted to cry out in pain but she played it as pleasure, her cries of despair the same as her cries of climax.

It's what he needed to believe.

"You ready yet?" she asked him.

"Already?"

"Yeah!" she said, letting her tongue out of her mouth, sticking it out, licking her lips.

She ran her hands down her body, down the outside of her tiny, perky breasts, down her hips, and felt disgusting for how much she was getting into it, how much she was letting him *think* she was getting into it. But she was playing the part. Like the school play when she was Wendy, and she had to pretend to like Peter Pan, and she had to kiss him on the cheek after he lost his shadow and pretend like it wasn't disgusting.

It was like that, but worse.

And he was just a child.

A child who had no idea of what the outside world was like.

A child who had no idea of what the outside world did to people like her.

A child who had no idea of what she was willing to do to get back to Boy. To get back to Harriet and find out where she heard that poem, so she could find him, the one person she

would do this for. He'd never know, but if he was still alive, it wouldn't matter.

That was all that mattered.

She felt him throb. His screams became less coherent. His hands grabbed the sides of the bedsheets.

She dropped her head down again, trapping them both in her hair once more, obscuring his vision, putting their faces in a prison of their own.

She punched her lips against his, did it so hard it hurt, and his body pulsated.

His face was hidden.

His eyes were closed.

His body busy.

All giving the perfect opportunity for her to reach her hand out to the table, to the ice bucket, to the ice pick, and take it in her hand, wrap her fingers around it, it was so cold, so cold, but it didn't matter.

He screamed.

She lifted her body up, raising the ice pick in both her hands, hoping he didn't open his eyes.

He did. But it was too late.

She brought the ice pick down to his throat and stuck it in before his hands could get to her wrists.

She covered his mouth.

She retracted the ice pick and shoved it into his throat again, and again; he was too disorientated to fight, having to finish his orgasm and fight death simultaneously.

She lifted the ice pick back and stuck it in his neck once more, this time wobbling it in the hole she'd made and dragging it, sticking it further in as she did.

She kept his mouth covered with her hand. Couldn't let the guardsmen hear him shout. She didn't need to hear screams to gauge his reaction; she could see everything she needed to in his

eyes. Wide, scared, angry, every emotion she expected him to feel. The predictable, scummy, perverted piece of shit.

He flopped inside of her as she grabbed the pillow and placed it over his face. She pushed down with all her body. She moved off of him, finally, wanting to gag at the thought of it, but not, not doing anything but putting her whole body on top of that pillow, pushing down with her knee, her elbows, her hands, her chest, every part of her naked, used, violated body putting weight upon that damn pillow.

The gagging from the neck wound, the suffocation from the pillow, it didn't take long to affect his body. He spasmed, he seized, his body thrashing just like it was before, but different – this time his thrashing was bigger, more satisfying.

Then his whole body flopped. Every piece of it.

She took the pillow away. His eyes still stared back up at her, his mouth open with shock for what she'd done, but there was nothing left.

He'd known nothing of this world.

Just a child. A good-looking child who hadn't a clue about the monsters, both outside of that door and inside of it.

In his eyes she found a reminder of a dream from days ago – it felt so long since she'd had it, but then again, it hadn't been long at all. In this dream, the face of a girl. Young, carefree, innocent – taking the hand of a man she loved. Blond, white, free. Privileged. Wandering down an open road with the security of safety. She had no idea why she saw that girl's eyes in his – but it was only for a moment, then the recollection was gone. Left to fester in her subconscious with the rest of her memories.

She stood.

Panting.

Catching her breath.

She looked at what she'd done.

She gagged. She tried to get to the toilet, but she couldn't. She hurled the contents of her stomach onto the pristine satin sheets. It was mostly blood and acid, and she realised how hungry she'd been, but it didn't matter now.

She fell to her knees. She was sweating, bringing up more vomit, spewing everything she had over the bed.

She allowed herself to cry, but only for a second. Only whilst the last lurch came. After that, she stood. She wanted to clean herself. She wanted to use the shower to get him off of her, every part of him, his death, his life, she wanted every piece of him gone – but every second that went by was another second Boy could not be alive.

And if she didn't get to him, then this despicable, revolting, vile, abhorrent, infesting experience was for nothing.

She put her shorts back on. And her top. She wasn't going to bother with her shoes, but she knew they'd help her run faster if she made it outside.

*When* she made it outside.

When she was ready, she looked to the door.

Two strong guardsmen with loaded guns on the other side. They weren't children. They wouldn't be fooled.

And she had to get past them first.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

---

THE GUARDSMEN HAD HAD stranger jobs. Before all of this started, one of them was a ‘sandwich artist’ – which is another way of saying he worked in Subway. The other guardsman had worked in a gym, where he was able to use the facilities for free after he’d finished cleaning the toilets.

Neither of them had ever had a job that required them to stand outside a door, holding large guns, whilst listening to the screams of an eighteen-year-old douchebag having more sex than they ever had. There seemed to have been an element of selectiveness on who was asked to be a Breeder, and they bemoaned the unfairness of some little squirt having such fun due to youthful good looks whilst their ugly faces were made to stand guard, looking grim, trying to focus their thoughts on something other than the manic screeches of an adolescent’s orgasm.

But then there was the cause.

Now *that* they did believe in.

Troy had been monumental. Revolutionary. A future thinker, someone with his mind not in the *now*, but in the *someday*; not in meaningless ethics, but in survival. They all

truly believed that he was their best hope for defeating the creatures, and, after biding their time, they would have a large army of soldiers, ready to fight, ready to stand strong against the monsters they heard shouting at night.

So they waited. Reminding themselves of the cause. Reminding themselves of why they did this, why they would take a life if they had to, why they would bring a young woman to a room and give her no choice. Because it was the only way. They couldn't think about feelings, about what it may do to a person, about what it was they were doing – because it *had* to be done.

Without it, people would die, and with them the history and their memories of the entire human race. Buildings would stand and fall with no one around to say why they stood in the first place. Books would be burnt without any context to the words that were set aflame. If there was no woman to breed for their species, then there was no future for the accumulated knowledge of many, many thousands of years. It would die with them, and that just could not happen.

And so they wouldn't let it.

They realised – it had been quiet in that room for a while now. They had evidently finished; unless he was going again, and that was generally discouraged. Your sperm is far less fertile the second time, and there is no function to releasing it again in such a short time frame.

As if answering them, a gentle knock came from the other side of the door, followed by a small voice.

“He's finished. Take me back now.”

They unbolted the door, unlocked it, and opened it. Before it could open wide, the girl caught the door and slithered through the small gap and out again, closing the door behind her – something that perturbed them. It was not her job to close the door.

One of them went to open the door again, but she placed a light hand on his chest, and as pathetic as he knew it was, the guardsman couldn't help but feel a slight tingle from the touch of a woman.

"He's in the bathroom. He doesn't wish to be disturbed."

The guardsmen looked at each other. This was irregular. The Bearer would not normally come out of their own accord; it would be their job to go in and get her. Usually, the Bearer would be laid on the bed either crying, staring into the abyss, or having some kind of meltdown. For her to stroll nonchalantly out of the room and say her Breeder didn't wish to be bothered was strange, and something about it felt off.

As if sensing their hesitance, watching them glance at each other, she spoke up once more.

"Honestly, it's done, he's finished. I just want to go back to the cell."

"You don't go back to the cell," one of the guardsmen said. Bloody newbies who don't know the routine – he'd almost forgotten how irritating that is.

"Oh?"

"You can't be filthy for tomorrow," the guardsman said, as if she was stupid. "We need to go hose you down."

He saw a flicker in her face, like she was momentarily on the verge of crying. This gave him a surge of anger. Does she not know what an honour she has? To be part of the activists? Part of those bringing the world back to what it once was?

No. She was an insolent fool with no idea of the world she was in. How she'd survived this long, they didn't know. She'd far rather revolt in a dank cell than sit with the other Bearers on comfortable beds, simply because the cause was lost on her.

"Please, can I just go back to the cell?" she repeated. She looked anxious. The cells were disgusting. Why would she be so keen to go back?

The guardsmen looked at each other. This wasn't right.

"Let's go have a look at the Breeder," one guardsman decided. He wasn't about to have this little girl screw him over.

"Honestly, he just said he—"

"Shut up."

The guardsman put a hand over her mouth and nodded to the other. They opened the door and looked inside the room.

There was no noise from the bathroom.

Everything looked perfectly out of place.

Warily, they entered the room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

---

CIA'S BODY flooded with adrenaline, but she did what she could to hide it. She forced her shaking hands not to shake, willed her quivering knees not to buckle, pleaded to her desperate face not to falter or cry.

She watched as the guardsmen entered the room, standing in the doorway, poised between running and attacking.

What would she do if she were found out?

One of the guardsmen walked over to the bed. Moments ago, she had folded half of the bedsheets under the other to conceal the blood, hoping that it just looked like post-coitus mess.

Her only worry was herself, her façade; should she seem more traumatised? She was, but she was trying to be strong – would someone who had just experienced this be more hysterical? Maybe that's what was making the guardsmen cautious – that she wasn't crying or weeping or pleading or begging to be released. From the way she was dragged here beforehand, it would look strange for her to then be as willing as she may seem.

It suddenly dawned on her that she'd played this whole situation wrong.

One of the guardsmen walked up to the closed bathroom door.

*Please don't open it.*

*Please don't open it.*

*Please don't open it.*

The guardsman glanced to Cia, and she knew she had just given the game away. Her face was masked with fear, obscured with vulnerability, in a way that could only show she was hiding guilt.

The guardsman gently rattled his knuckles on the door.

"Hello?" he called out.

No answer.

*Please do not go behind that door.*

Cia glanced into the corridor. Could she run? Could she get far?

But what then?

She couldn't escape. Not yet. She needed Harriet. She knew the poem, she must have met Boy. She *must* have.

"Oi," the other guardsman investigating the bed said, noticing her peering down the corridor. "Don't even think about it."

He pointed his gun at her and walked closer. Still inside the room, but a few paces away from her, ready to shoot, poised, finger tracing the trigger.

She looked again to the guardsman tapping on the door.

She'd given it all away in her expression. She knew she had. There was no way out now.

"Hello, is anyone in there?"

*Please do not open it, please, please just leave him.*

The guardsman wasn't about to leave him.

He placed his hand on the handle.

“Hey, answer me, or I’m coming in.”

She looked at the exit. The door had a keyhole, but for a key she didn’t have. But there was a bolt as well. A bolt on the outside of the door. If she needed to, she could bolt it. It wouldn’t hold them for long. The door was wooden and could easily be shot apart or shot down. Besides, they probably had a radio or some way to communicate outside the room.

If she was going to make a move, whatever she was going to do, she was going to have to be quick.

The guardsman pressed down on the door handle.

“Okay, I’m coming in.”

*No... Please...*

The guardsman pushed down on the door handle and opened it, but only slightly.

It nudged something, but only Cia knew what.

“Hey, you there?” the guardsman asked.

Cia looked to the bolt. Readied herself.

This was it.

Time to act.

Quick as she could.

The guardsman opened the door fully.

And, in that brief moment of shock, of horror, where they both witnessed the bloody remains of a young man’s body, she stepped backwards and went to shut the door; closing it against the image of the guardsman running toward it.

Before she could shut it fully, one of them managed to wedge his fist through the gap, and she shut it on his arm.

She pulled the door back and slammed it, back and slammed it, back and slammed it, punching his arm with its weight, doing all she could, but his arm would not go, it just would not go.

She reached into the back of her trousers and took out the ice pick. Feeling grateful that she’d decided to keep it, she thrust

it into the guardsman's hand with all she had, then took it away, leaving a scrape of red. The guardsman instinctively withdrew his hand and allowed her to shut the door fully.

She bolted it.

It continued to pound, continued to shake, faltering under their strength.

Gunshots were fired, and the door shook once more.

Cia looked down another corridor. She could see people coming, people hearing a commotion.

She ran. As fast as she could, she ran, almost falling around the corners of the corridor.

She could leave. She could jump out of the nearby window and leave. Get away from this.

But she had to get Harriet.

Harriet was her only chance.

So down the steep, narrow steps to the dungeon she went, knowing there was only one way in or out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

---

CIA COULD HEAR the commotion above her, feet thudding back and forth, shrieks of hysteria, people gossiping in their rooms.

They knew. Somehow, they all knew.

Which meant that they would all be looking for her.

But, surely – the dungeons were the last place they'd think she'd return to, right?

She stopped at Harriet's cell. Harriet was still curled up in a ball, away from her, in the corner.

"Harriet!" Cia shouted.

She was asleep.

Cia glanced over her shoulder, not wanting to shout too loud, but needing to urgently wake her up.

"Harriet!" she shouted again. Harriet groaned. "Harriet, come on!"

Eventually, Harriet stirred and her head lifted. She glanced absently over her shoulder, probably thinking she was still dreaming.

"Harriet, it's me, look here!"

Her tired eyes tried to make sense of Cia's face.

"How are you there?" Harriet asked.

“Listen, I don’t have much time. That poem you recited, it—”

She heard some commotion and for a moment, thought someone was coming down the stairs. She shot a wide-eyed look in that direction, to find no one.

She couldn’t do this here. She just had to get them out.

But how?

Then she remembered. The keys. Hung on the far wall.

She ran to the hook, collected them, ran back. Searched for a key that would fit the lock, shoved it in, turned, and creaked open her cell.

“Come on!” Cia said.

Harriet looked cautious. Full of trepidation. Torn between staying and going. As if she didn’t know what to do.

“What are you waiting for?” Cia said. “We have to go – *now!*”

Harriet shook her head.

“You want to stay?” Cia asked, bemused. Why would she want to stay?

“I have a purpose here.”

Cia stepped forward and took Harriet’s hand.

“Harriet, you don’t have a purpose here. Look what they’ve done to you. They are killing you. If you stay, you won’t be helping to repopulate the Earth, you’ll be dying.”

Harriet looked to the steps leading away from the dungeon, back to Cia.

“Harriet, please.”

“But I—”

“You’re infertile,” Cia pointed out, trying a different approach. “You have no use here. And they are just going to hurt you. The only way is if you come with me, but it has to be now.”

Feeble conflict spread across Harriet’s frown. Cia didn’t give

her any more choice. Taking this moment of thought, she seized Harriet's hand and stood her up. Harriet wobbled as she stood, and Cia noticed just how thin her legs were. Cia dragged her forward, but she stumbled.

"You go," Harriet said, her voice so quiet. "I'll hold you up."

"You are coming," Cia said, no qualms or reluctance in her voice. "That's the only way."

Cia dragged her forward, feeling some resistance as Harriet struggled to keep up; but she was so light it didn't take much to pull her.

Cia took Harriet up the stairs and paused at the top, looking down the corridor.

Two guardsmen approached. One of them spoke into a radio.

"Yep, we're checking the dungeons now."

Cia backed up, edging down a few steps and turning to Harriet.

"Stay here," Cia told her, and turned to go around the corner.

Then didn't.

She halted.

They had guns. She had an ice pick. How was she supposed to win this fight?

She turned to Harriet.

"Listen to me," she instructed. "And do everything I am about to tell you to do."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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CIA RAN out from her cover, sprinting toward the two guardsmen, using their immediate surprise to gain ground. Just as they raised their guns, she withdrew the ice pick and went for the closest one.

He ducked out of the way, but she'd expected that and she jumped onto him, straddling his back. He stumbled around, firing his gun into the air, forcing a puff of smoke and a tumble of stones to collapse from the ceiling. The other guardsman leapt out of the way. Cia plunged the ice pick into the man's throat.

As he went to the ground, suffocating, grabbing at his neck, blood trickling between his fingers, she picked up his gun.

She'd never handled a gun before. It was heavy. Not what she expected. She pointed it at the other guardsman and fired, but such was the kick of the gun that she missed, and the bullets flew into the wall behind him.

Footsteps came from the distance.

She refocused her gun on the guardsman pointing his back at her.

The other guardsman bled out, his body twitching the last remnants of his life.

Cia stood in a standoff with this guard.

The footsteps grew louder, probably responding to the bullets.

Harriet slowly inched out from behind the door, covering her mouth in shock at the dead body beneath Cia.

“You did that!” she gasped.

“Harriet, please do not move. Just stay there.”

The guardsman smiled.

Footsteps pounded. They were coming, and they were coming for her.

Soon, this one guardsman would be more.

“Okay, Harriet, now’s the time,” Cia said. “There’s another gun in this guy’s pocket.” She kicked the corpse beside her feet. “Grab it, do it now.”

Harriet walked cautiously toward the body, her eyes remaining on the gun-wielding guardsman. She couldn’t look at the corpse as she felt for the gun, but she still found it, a smaller one this time, on his belt. She picked it up and backed away.

“Okay, now remember what I said,” Cia said, as calmly as she could, aware that a dead body beside her feet could easily freak out Harriet’s fragile disposition and ruin everything. “Now’s the time, Harriet. Now’s the time.”

Harriet raised the gun. Looked at the guardsman, who glanced cautiously in her direction.

“No,” Harriet stated, and pointed the gun at Cia. “No, it’s not the time. You need to put the gun down.”

“What the hell are you doing, Harriet?”

Her gun clattered between her shaking palms. The guardsman grinned, his arrogance entwined with triumph. Look at how well they had brainwashed her. They locked her up, tortured her, and still she’s their pet.

“I’m not doing what you said. You need to put the gun down. Put it down, or I’ll shoot.”

Shadows of the guardsman’s backup hit the far wall.

“Do it now, Cia.”

Cia began to lower her gun. She had no choice.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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CIA HAD KNOWN Harriet would break.

But she also knew that, beneath the wounds, Harriet was strong. She had to be – she'd survived this long. Daily violence, subjected to the cruellest of treatment and, yes, she did cry – but who wouldn't? If anything, that showed her strength. That she wasn't numb, that she still felt her emotions, and she still knew they were there.

That's why Cia knew that Harriet would not let her down.

"Listen to me," Cia had said, just before leaping out to face the oncoming guards. "And do everything I am about to tell you to do."

Harriet had looked back at her, eyes full of fear.

"You can do this," Cia said, sensing the need to reassure her. "You can, I promise, this is all going to be fine. If you do this, no one will hurt you. But you have to do exactly as I say. Can you do that?"

Harriet didn't reply. Her face was smacked with vulnerability. Her lip curled, and she looked like she was about to cry once more.

"Stop it!" Cia demanded, grabbing Harriet and shaking her.

“You are going to survive, and you are going to get out of here. You won’t ever have to do these horrible things again, you understand? I just need you to do one big, brave thing for me first.”

She didn’t move.

Then she nodded.

And there they were, Cia lowering her gun, backup arriving around the corner. Three of them. With guns. Ready.

“You idiot,” the guardsman said as Cia’s gun fell to her side. “You think she’d help you?”

Cia looked at Harriet, holding the gun, still shaking, still pointed at her.

“Harriet...” Cia said.

The other guardsmen arrived at the end of the corridor.

Cia kept her finger over the trigger of the gun held at her side.

“Get on your knees,” the guardsman instructed.

Cia did as she was told. The guardsman stood over her. Crotch in her face. Smug look beaming downwards.

“I should do the worse things imaginable to you right now,” he said. And she could smell him. Sweaty and filthy. Pressed up against her cheek.

“You think there’s anything more you could do to me?”

The guardsman let out a strong guffaw. “This is day one! You have no idea.”

The three new guardsmen laughed along. Their hold on their weapons was casual, like they didn’t need to hold tight, like there was no need to keep their guns trained on her. They had her, after all.

Cia turned to Harriet. Met her terrified eyes.

Cia smiled. Gave a slight nod.

She turned back to the guardsman, opened her mouth and bit down hard. He screamed, but she didn’t let go; she just

clamped her choppers down on what little there was to work with.

Harriet shot her gun – but not at Cia. As per the plan, she shot the guardsman standing over Cia in the face.

Before the other three guardsmen regathered themselves, Cia had released her teeth, turned, and sprayed her gun from side to side, to side, to side, to side. Back and forth she sprayed them with bullets and saw them jolt and jump and fall into a messy pile on the stone floor.

Harriet began to weep. Cia ran up to her, cupped her face, looked directly into her eyes. She was struggling with this, Cia could tell, but she'd done so well – so, so well.

“You were brilliant!” Cia claimed.

“I... I killed him...”

“It was him or us, Harriet. It was him or us.”

“I... I can't believe I did that...”

“Come on,” Cia said, knowing she was going to have to compensate for the weight of Harriet's conscience. She took hold of her hand and dragged her through the corridors, from corner to corner.

A few guardsmen appeared at the end of a corridor and Cia didn't hesitate. She dropped Harriet's hand, gripped her gun in both hands and sprayed bullets in their direction until they dropped.

The gun ran out of ammunition. She looked at it, no idea what to do next. She hadn't been particularly experienced with automatic weapons, and refilling ammunition wasn't a practice she was accustomed to.

It didn't matter. They were close now. She dropped the gun; she could do without it

She clutched Harriet's hand and ran through the corridor, to a set of steps, and up to a door.

Then she stopped.

Behind that door was the exit. But, between that exit and them, was the main part of the church.

And she remembered walking through this large room the first time. Filled with men. Sleeping, arm wrestling, gambling, whatever – she just remembered the way they stared, the way they looked at her like an innocent victim who required nurturing and discipline.

She looked back at Harriet.

Commotion sounded in a distant corridor behind them.

There was only one way out, and it was through that room – and, by the sounds of it, they were going to have to embrace that task quickly.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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“THERE IS ONLY one way we are going to do this,” Cia told Harriet, her voice confident, her face serious. “And that is if we run.”

“What?”

“Between us and the door is a room of men. Most of them are sleeping, or doing other things, so we have the element of surprise – that’s all. And we have to get past them before they realise.”

“I – I don’t think I can.”

Cia shook her head with a wry smile.

“Don’t think you can?” she echoed. “Look at what you’ve done so far. Look how far you’ve come, how close we are. Don’t think you can? Harriet, you were born for this.”

Harriet smiled. Couldn’t help it.

That, and the sound of shouts from down the corridor, prompted time for action.

Cia opened the door very slightly, enough to look through the crack. Her breath caught as she saw how many men there were and, for a brief punch of worry, she wasn’t sure if she could make it.

Her reassurance: they were all distracted. They weren't armed fighters, guardsmen, or anything like that. They were all simply sleeping or relaxing or talking. These were not their warriors, these were their Breeders, and that gave her the advantage.

"Don't look at anyone," Cia told her. "Don't look at how many there are. Just focus on that door on the far side, and on keeping up with me. You understand?"

Harriet nodded, as confidently as Cia had seen her nod so far.

Good enough for her.

"Okay. Let's go."

Cia burst the door open and ran. No one looked at first, as if they were used to random noises. Then the door slammed shut behind them with a thud that echoed around the church, and almost everyone's attention was pricked.

Cia looked over her shoulder to see Harriet running with her, her face a mess, contorted with anxiety, but sprinting nonetheless.

People sat up from their resting places, turned from their games with sets of cards poised in their hands, ceasing conversations to stand and look.

Cia didn't let it get to her. Just looked at the door, in the distance, between the pews.

"Oi!" one man shouted, evidently starting to understand what was happening.

Cia tried to run faster. Everything in her ached under the strain, a stitch stabbed her side, but it didn't matter. She just had to run, and that was what she did.

"Stop them!" another shouted, standing up.

People began to stand, slowly, just to see what was happening.

Another glance over her shoulder told Cia that Harriet was

still there – but, far behind Harriet were a set of guardsmen exiting the corridor they had fled from.

She turned back to the door. Halfway there.

“Block that exit!” one of the guardsmen shouted.

A few of the men got up and ran to the exit.

“Move!” Cia shouted.

The men looked to each other, perplexed, unsure what to do. Do they block the exit, or do they not?

It didn’t matter.

Cia reached the exit and ducked the swipe of their arms, bursting out.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw one of them grab Harriet’s ankle. Harriet tripped up, halfway over the threshold.

The guardsmen were gaining on them.

Cia took out the ice pick and shoved it in the arm of the man holding onto Harriet. With a yelp, he let go, and Harriet ran out.

Looking back at the ice pick still jammed in the man’s forearm, she decided to leave it. Relinquish the weapon, it didn’t matter anymore.

They ran across a gravel path, past a single-lane country road, and into the safety of the nearby trees.

A screech boomed across the atmosphere. A monster – one of the non-human ones – was nearby.

Harriet began to slow down, began to stop.

Behind her, the guardsmen aimed their guns.

Cia grabbed hold of Harriet’s waist and took her to the floor, allowing the bullets to fire over their heads.

“Keep low, move fast,” Cia said, using as few words as possible.

“I can’t,” Harriet said, grabbing her side.

“You’re going to be in pain, it doesn’t matter, you have to move.”

Keeping hold of Harriet, Cia dragged her onwards, running around the trees, in and out of them.

Another screech. Cia glanced overhead and saw it. A Maskete, soaring overhead, circling.

More bullets, scraping bark off a tree.

“Come on!” Cia urged Harriet.

The Masketes overhead grew lower, circling faster.

The guardsmen shot, more bullets, more close calls.

Harriet fell again, landing on an upright twig that scraped her side as she fell. She clutched it, writhing, rolling.

Cia sat over her.

“Harriet, come on, please,” she urged.

It was no good.

The Maskete’s screech grew closer.

The guardsmen stopped running and paced forward, taking a more accurate aim with their guns.

Cia looked to Harriet, who was frantically immobile. To the sky, where the creatures were circling. To the guardsmen, with their guns pointed.

Cia raised her arms.

She was caught.

*All of this for nothing.*

And, just as the realisation settled on her brain, fighting her denial – just as she accepted it – her salvation swooped down in the form of a group of Masketes.

Cia ducked, covering Harriet and taking them to the cover of a bush. She watched as the first Maskete took the nearest guardsman’s head clean off. The other guardsmen scattered, but it was no good. The second was torn in two, the third was forced to the floor by a claw in his chest, and the fourth was grabbed in the claws of a Maskete and taken away.

Cia kept low, covering Harriet, waiting, hoping they hadn’t been noticed.

The screeches grew fainter, and fainter still.

Cia looked to the headless body of the nearest guardsman and suppressed the need to gag.

“Okay, Harriet, get up,” Cia said, lifting her up, helping her limp.

“Can you run? Just a little bit?”

Harriet attempted, and managed a light jog.

“That’s fine, we can do that. That’s fine.”

They carried on like that until night came, until enough distance was put between them and the church that Cia’s heart could finally slow its rapid succession of punches against her ribs.



**THEN**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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CIA WONDERED how something so big had been built so quickly. Then again, maybe she was being naïve to think that no one had known about the attack before it happened.

After getting off the train, they had been directed through a forest, unable to tell where they were going. They arrived at a small metal dome, rising up to about the size of a bungalow. Despite its small exterior appearance, Cia had been reassured that it went miles and miles underground, with enough space to fit nearly a thousand people. Cia tried to imagine what was underground, what could be there, what resources there were.

She imagined if all those people on the train station knew about this, they would be even more angry. She wondered why, if this was available, they weren't all being saved as well.

But, as her dad had explained on the train, "They can't save everyone, darling. Some people have no choice but to be saved. I'm a scientist, the government needs my knowledge, that's why I'm saved."

"Well, who else gets to be saved?"

"Well, I imagine government officials. People with lots of money – leading businessmen, for example. Maybe celebrities."

“How come having money means that they get to go, and those without don’t? It doesn’t seem fair.”

He’d sighed, rubbed his sinus, appeared disgruntled, despairing at the question.

“Because that’s just the way it is, I’m afraid. Just consider yourself lucky that we’re in the few that get in.”

She had decided not to probe further. She didn’t understand, and she imagined she probably wouldn’t – and her dad either didn’t know, or wasn’t willing to share the real answer.

“What is this place, Dad?” she asked as they approached the entrance to the structure – a door to a box that stuck out from the dome. Possibly a lift.

“This is a place that the government and the rich people made. That’s why they get to live in it.”

“It just looks like a small metal circle.”

“It may do, but it is actually one of the biggest buildings ever created, it’s just that all of it is beneath the surface. It has everything we’ll need.”

A screech overhead and a roar in the distance made him speed up, grabbing her hand and joining a small queue. People ahead of them showed papers to a man by the door. The man was holding a gun. In fact, there were quite a few of them holding guns, and they all looked to be soldiers, and spaced out across the line. Behind the line was a man sat on a giant gun fastened to the floor, but she imagined that wasn’t meant for people, and it reassured her that, if one of the monsters came, she would be safe.

As they reached the door, her dad took out his identification and showed it. The man looked him up and down, then turned to Cia. She was sure his lip curled up in a sneer, as if he looked revolted by the sight of her, and he turned to a list, scanning it.

“Yeah, you’re on here,” the man said, and she could see her dad breathe a big sigh of relief.

“Oh, brilliant.”

“But she’s not.”

He paused. Looked from Cia to the man, to Cia, back to the man again.

“There must be some mistake,” he insisted.

“Afraid not, and we can only let people in off the list.”

“That’s ridiculous—”

“If you want to dispute it, there’s a man with a gun over there who will answer your questions.” He nodded his head at an angry-looking soldier. “Then you can either piss off with the kid, or you can come in alone. Those are your options.”

Cia’s dad looked to her with a long gaze, holding her tired eyes, her young eyes, in his, aware that she had no idea what was going on.

“But – she’s my daughter,” he insisted.

The man snorted. “Your daughter? How? What is she, black?”

“She is mixed race. Her mother was black.”

“I’ll be fucked if I care. Look, you coming in or what, because I got a line to get to.”

“I’m sorry, but how can I—”

“It’s you alone, or not at all. Make your decision.”

He turned to Cia. Looked at her long and hard. Bowed his head. Closed his eyes to think, and held them closed for a while.

“Dad?” Cia asked, unsure whether he’d gone to sleep.

He took her to the side, crouched down to her, and placed his hands on her arms.

“Listen to me, Cia,” he said. “I’m going to need you to be a big girl for me, now. No, a woman. I’m going to need you to be a strong woman, you hear me?”

“Why, Dad?”

He bowed his head and sighed. Something was wrong, she couldn't figure it out, because they were there, they were at their new home, a place of sanctuary, and yet he looked distressed.

"They are not letting you in," he finally said.

"What? Where are we going to go?"

He sighed again. He was struggling with something.

"Dad?" she repeated, wondering why he was so quiet.

"Where are we going to go?"

"I..." he went to say, then stopped.

"Dad?"

He composed himself. Wiped his eyes on the back of his sleeve.

"I'm going in," he said. "It's just – you're not."

"I don't understand."

"They won't let you in, so I'm going to go inside, and I'm going to find out why, and what I can do about it. Okay?"

"You're not leaving me alone, are you?"

"Not for long, sweetheart. Not for long. I'm just – I'm going to go in and I'll do what I can. You wait here. You'll be safe here. Okay?"

"Please don't go, Dad."

He dropped his head again, another long sigh, another wipe of his sleeve.

"Please, Cia," he said. "Please don't make this any harder than it has to be."

"What am I making harder, Dad? You're not explaining—"

"I have explained, you're just not listening," he snapped.

"Dad?" she said weakly. He'd never spoken to her like that before.

He looked her in the eyes. Held her gaze. Held it, then said three final words.

"I love you."

He ripped himself away, walked up to the man, and entered that door without looking back.

Then that door closed.

Cia ran up to the door, beating her hands against it, screaming, furiously crying.

“Dad! Dad! Come back! What are you doing?”

“Can someone sort this out?” requested the man at the door.

A soldier with a gun came up to her and grabbed hold of her arm.

She refused to move. She kept banging and screaming.

“Dad! Dad!”

The soldier pulled her away with more force, throwing her to the ground.

She looked up at his face, mean and twisted.

“Go away,” he grunted.

“But, my dad’s in there—”

“So?”

“I have to wait for him!”

The soldier chuckled. “He ain’t coming back. Now piss off before I shoot you.”

She looked back at the soldier, stumped, unable to understand. Not coming back? He obviously didn’t know her dad.

He wouldn’t leave her.

He’d never leave her.

Would he?

“I’m going to wait here,” she insisted.

“No. You. Ain’t. Piss off!”

“But—”

The soldier shot his gun at the space beside her feet and she flinched, running back.

“Piss off I said!” the soldier screamed.

Cia turned and ran into the forest, terrified he was going to shoot her for real.

Eventually, she stopped running, and realised she was lost. She had no way to get back.

What if her dad couldn't find her? What if he went looking and found that she wasn't there?

No, she would wait right where she was. If he looked for her, and she became even more lost, it would make things worse. So she'd wait. She wouldn't move from that spot.

And she didn't, for days. Until she desperately needed to eat, and the rainwater wasn't enough to hydrate her.

That's when she decided she should try to find her way back to the bunker, to her father.

Only, her father wasn't trying to find his way back to her.

**NOW**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

---

ROSY HAD SAID she was coming back for him.

She had promised.

Had she lied?

Had she never actually cared about him?

The moon had gone up and down more times than Boy could count. Another night descended, and another round of fear kicked in.

He stayed small.

Out of the way.

Rosy had always taught him to shrink, to stay out of sight, to put cover between him and those monsters.

But every time he heard one, all thoughts left. Every screech, every growl, every hiss, he just covered his ears and shouted, blocking it out, if he couldn't see them maybe they couldn't hurt him *please don't hurt me please don't hurt me please don't hurt me*.

That's when he saw them, hidden behind the trees.

People. Wearing the same outfit. Sort of camouflage, but not. Dark green.

They were talking, but he couldn't understand what they

were talking about, though it was with such confidence that it made him want to shrink and scream again.

Rosy had always told him that—

No.

She'd left.

Stop thinking about her.

*Rosy left me.*

He wiped away a tear as he hid behind a tree. His footstep cracked a leaf and the people immediately stopped talking, turned their guns and pointed them at him.

He moaned. Shrunk, closed his eyes, covered his ears, shook his head.

*Leave me alone.*

*Leave me alone.*

*Leave me alone.*

They had guns. Big guns.

Why did they have such big guns?

Something grabbed his arm and so he opened his eyes and there they were. Crouched in front of him. Their guns aimed at the ground.

“Hey, pal,” one of them said. “What’s your name?”

He stared back at them. He wished they’d go away. He wished they’d leave him alone.

“It’s all right. My name is Dalton, and this is my mate, Joe—”

Before Dalton could introduce his friend, Boy covered his ears and began moaning again. Dalton shoved his hands off his ears and held them tightly in his grip. Boy turned his face away and closed his eyes as tightly as he could.

“Hey,” Dalton tried, but Boy didn’t respond.

He scrunched his eyes closed tighter. Wishing they’d go away.

“Hey, I’m not going to hurt you,” Dalton insisted.

Boy shook his head.

“I said I’m not going to hurt you.”

The boy began whispering to himself. “The devil has departed, And you are not alone. The devil has departed, And you are not alone. The devil has departed, And you are not alone.”

Dalton looked to his comrade and back again.

“What is that?” Joe asked.

Boy just continued. “The devil has departed, And you are not alone. The devil has departed, And you are not alone.”

“Where do I know that from?” Dalton mused. Then he remembered. From Daniel Rose. It was framed on his desk.

“Do you know Daniel?” Dalton asked.

Boy didn’t answer. “The devil has departed, And you are not alone. The devil has—”

Dalton grabbed Boy’s chin and turned his face. Boy stared back at Dalton, wide-eyed, fighting the fear, his whole body alert.

“Shut up,” Dalton demanded. “Where did you hear that poem?”

Boy said nothing.

“Right, we’re taking him in,” Dalton told his friend, and they stood.

Boy tried to run, but Dalton wrapped his arms around him and held him securely. That’s when he noticed the boy’s t-shirt sticking to his shoulder via a patch of dried blood.

The boy was hurt.

“It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be fine. You don’t need to be afraid.”

But Boy was afraid.

He was very afraid.

And he was right to be.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

---

CIA WANTED to let Harriet gather herself; to recuperate, feed, wash. She didn't want to hurry her, as that would be counterproductive.

But she couldn't help feeling on edge, and she knew, until she had her answers, she would just be waiting anxiously to ask the questions.

They passed a row of bushes bearing ripe, juicy berries. They each had a few, though Cia let Harriet have more – she needed them. Cia was petite, but Harriet was fading away. It was only now, in the light, that Cia truly saw how thin this poor girl was; ribs pushed against her skin like her skin was cellophane, her thighs as thin as her calves, skin wrapped tightly around the meek bone structure of her face.

A pool of rainwater was enough for Harriet to dive to her knees and begin scooping, cupping her hands and bringing it to her mouth. Cia watched, thankful she hadn't yet become so desperate that she required muddy rainwater to quench her thirst – though she had come very close.

After Harriet had taken on all the berries and water she

could, Cia put a hand on her back and guided her through the forest.

Finally, Cia decided Harriet was in well enough state to answer her questions.

“Harriet,” she announced. “We need to talk.”

Harriet looked to her full of confusion and worry.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing bad. I just need to know something.”

“What do you need to know?”

“That poem – the one you were saying to yourself. Where did you hear it?”

“What poem?”

Cia sighed. Forced patience.

“After the Devil Has Won.”

“Erm...” Harriet tried to remember.

“You were facing the wall of your cell, in a ball, and you were saying it. Clear, every word of it.”

“I don’t recall...”

“The devil has departed, And you are not alone,” Cia tried. “Take time to rebuild, Your love in our home.”

Harriet stopped walking, as if she needed to stay still to think. Her face twisted with recognition.

“Yes...” she said. “I do know it...”

“Where did you hear it, Harriet? I need to know.”

Harriet looked to Cia, opened her mouth and tried to answer – but no answer produced itself.

“Please, Harriet. Think.”

“It’s just a poem I know.”

“It’s not just a poem. My mum wrote it, and she died when I was very little. She never published it or anything, and I use it to comfort my friend when he is worried. And now that friend is missing.”

“Your friend?”

“Yes, my friend. And that poem is one we both know, no one else.”

Harriet sat down on a large stone.

“I heard it from my Breeder.”

“Okay.” Cia nodded. This wasn’t helpful, but they were getting somewhere. “And where did he hear it from?”

Harriet went to speak, but shrugged.

“Think, Harriet. Please.”

Harriet cast her mind back, as much as she could, to the memories she didn’t want to keep. In a room with her Breeder, cowering in the floor as his heaving, sweaty body stood over her.

“Get up,” he demanded.

She shook her head, covering her face. She’d had enough. She couldn’t take any more. Nothing was happening to her body, it just stayed the same, and she couldn’t take it.

“I said, get up.”

She shook her head – not defiantly, or with strength, but more with denial and terror. If she refused, maybe he’d be kind.

But he wouldn’t.

He never was.

“Tell you what,” her Breeder said, taking a different approach. “How’s about a nice poem?”

He crouched down before her. She looked up, as if she believed that he was suddenly going to be nice and all the nastiness could stop.

“Would you like that?” he repeated.

She shrugged, drying tears from her eyes.

“Here’s one I heard from a bunch of asshole soldiers who stole my food.”

Harriet broke the memory, snapping out of the thought, and abruptly stood.

Cia stood, seeing the excitement on Harriet’s face, as if she remembered.

“What? What is it?” Cia prompted.

“I remember where he said he heard it.”

“Yeah?”

A dozen screeches scorched the air. Cia looked up and saw movement in the sky.

“I remember!” Harriet continued to shout, becoming giddy.

Cia grew cautious. Something was coming. More and more screeches were getting closer.

“Harriet, stop shouting.”

“But I remember!” she said, even louder, grabbing Cia’s arms, completely oblivious.

Cia kept looking at the sky.

They were circling them. They’d been spotted, and there was a group of Masketes readying themselves to dive down.

“Harriet, stop shouting—”

“But I can tell you now!”

The ominous shadows cast them in silhouette.

“Harriet, get down!”

Cia ducked to the floor and slid under a nearby bush.

Harriet looked at her, perplexed, still stood.

“What are you doing?” Harriet asked.

“Get down!” Cia pleaded.

“But I know where he heard it!” she insisted. “It was when he—”

Cia saw it coming before Harriet did. She witnessed one last glance of vulnerability on Harriet’s face before she disappeared.

“Harriet!” Cia screamed, leaping up to pull Harriet down.

She was too late.

Her fingers could only brush Harriet’s feet as the Maskete took her in its claws.

Harriet’s screams quickly grew faint. Within seconds, she was just a figure thrashing in the distance.

“No, Harriet!”

She ran after her, but it was no good.

She did all she could to see where Harriet was taken. Peering into the sky, watching as the figure of the Maskete grew smaller, toward a hill.

It seemed to stop at this hill. But it wasn't alone. There looked to be a mass of them. So many of them, all at the top of this hill.

Sensing another was about to swoop down, Cia dropped to the floor once more and slid back under the bush.

She waited for the screeches to end. Until she knew they were gone.

Taking in a big, deep breath, she closed her eyes and mentally prepared herself for a hefty climb, and the fight that would follow.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

---

THE MORE TIRED Cia's legs grew, the steeper the hill became. Every step felt like she was wading through water, the top of the hill never arriving, the ascent always persisting.

She paused, falling to her knees to rest. She wouldn't let herself sit down properly for fear she wouldn't get back up again. If she rested, her legs would grow more weary, and it would be all the harder to get going again. Besides, she couldn't afford to rest; for all she knew, Harriet had been torn up and eaten by now.

So she poised, her knees on the ground, her palms flat out on the muddy grass. What did it matter if she became filthy anymore?

After everything that had happened, a little mud didn't bother her.

She turned over her shoulder. Looked at the slope, peered down the hill at how far she'd come. It looked so far, like she should already be at the top – yet, when she twisted her neck to look upwards, she couldn't even see the top.

What if she stopped?

What if she just let herself roll back down that hill? Hide

out, get some food, nourish herself. Move on. Get on with her life.

It was tempting – then again, it wasn't. The thought was there, but it was never an option.

There was one thing driving her forward, one thing telling her to propel through her mounting fatigue, to confront this nest of Masketes, to risk her life for everything:

*Boy.*

Harriet knew the poem. Her Breeder must have heard it from somewhere, and it must have been between the time Cia lost Boy and the time she saw Harriet get dragged away – that meant that she had a day, if that, since that poem had been heard.

She had no idea how he could have survived. But that poem was her mum's, and only three people knew it: her, Boy, and her dad.

Then again, what if it was her dad they'd heard it from?

What if her dad was still alive, being a scientist somewhere, and that's where they'd heard it, and she was just chasing her dad's shadow?

What a disappointment that would be. To seek out Boy and find *him*.

The man who never went back for her.

She stayed in that forest for days, hanging around that area, waiting for him to come out and get her.

He never did.

He stayed in his perfect sanctum, did his life's work, protected from all the evil outside of his underground world.

He never came back for her.

She was damn well going to go back for Boy.

With a surge of determination, a strike of stubborn energy, she pulled herself upwards. Unable to stand upright, she

dragged herself upwards by the hands, clawing into the ground and pulling, taking her closer.

She could hear the screeches. Lots of them. Getting louder.

She was almost there.

Ahead were more Masketes. She could see more than she could hear – but from what she could see, this was clearly where they had made their home.

But no sign of Harriet.

As she continued to climb, the noise continued to grow. The slope lessened as the multiple screeches bombarded her ears. Someone may as well have reached inside of her mind and dug their fingernails into her brain, such was the churning the noise was causing.

She was getting closer.

And, as she crawled even further, she could start to see more of them, except not as big. Most of them were smaller Masketes, about the size of an average person. Babies. They still made her shiver with fear, but compared to the adults, they were less intimidating.

She crouched, edged toward them, hoping to go unnoticed as she scanned the nests for Harriet – but before she could get a good look, a screech in her ear killed her hearing and she was wrapped in its claws and gliding through the air. She'd been dropped and landed on her back before she'd known what was happening.

Twigs dug into her spine, into her side, scraping her ankle.

She sat up.

It was a nest. She was in a nest. And around her were more nests, full of babies – hungry Maskete babies.

Then she saw it, at an adjacent nest.

Hair draped over the side. A feeble body. Limp.

“Harriet!” Cia shouted.

Harriet didn't react.

Cia didn't understand why, at first.

She looked down at the gap between the nest she was on and the one she needed to get to. A twig went tumbling into the abyss below, prompting her legs to wobble under the horror of the height.

But if she was going to get to Harriet, she couldn't be fearful of such trivialities. Without overthinking it, she leapt to the next nest, landing on her knees, and crawled to Harriet's side.

Harriet's eyes were wide open, unblinking. They were staring back at her with nothing behind them.

"Harriet?" Cia asked. Harriet didn't move, but Cia still tried, though she knew it was pointless.

She shook Harriet's body. Shook it with venomous hope. In doing so, she unveiled something sticking out of her back. She turned Harriet over to find her inside out, her bones sticking in obscure directions like they were branches on an ageing tree.

"No..."

She wiped her eyes on the back of her arm.

She shook her again, then wept at her own stupidity.

She fought reality. Denial seemed more pleasant, seemed a better alternative. But, looking down at the violence decorating Harriet's back, there was no way that denial would be able to win.

Harriet was dead.

Gone.

And with her, any possible hope of finding Boy.

The thought repeated around her mind like a box of scorpions, climbing over one another to poison her hope.

*Harriet's dead. Boy's gone.*

*Harriet is dead. Boy is gone.*

*Harriet is dead.*

*Boy is gone.*

*Boy is gone.*

*Boy.*

*He's...*

*Gone.*

A screech from behind her told her she wasn't alone. She stood and turned, looking in the eye of a baby Maskete in the nest with her, come to see what its mummy had brought for it.

Cia considered whether to fight. Whether to even bother trying to escape this thing.

What if she let it devour her?

She could let it eat her alive and it would make no difference whatsoever. No one in this world would care if she was killed. There was no one alive who would be changed or affected by her life ending.

No one who would mourn her.

No one who would even know.

Everything was lost.

She would never find Boy now.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

---

SHE LOOKED INTO ITS EYES. Contemplating surrender.

She wouldn't be much of a meal. There wasn't much meat on her. She was a petite girl, always had been. The Maskete wouldn't gain much satisfaction in consuming her body. In fact, it was about the same size as her. It must have just been hatched – it was scary, yes, but nothing like the huge flying villains she'd run from before. This one was young. Different.

“Go on then,” she spat. “Go on. Take it.”

She held her arms open wide. Stood still, waiting, inviting it.

“Isn't this what you want?” she asked.

It looked back at her, as if it was confused – which was nonsense, it was an animal. No, a monster. It didn't feel confusion, only hunger. Its instinct was to survive, nothing else.

*Not so different to me, really.*

That's all she'd be doing from here on. Surviving.

And what would be the point of that?

Boy wouldn't be there.

He was probably dead by now, anyway.

Or worse.

He could be sat alone somewhere, afraid, thinking that she had deserted him, like her father had deserted her.

And in that moment of clarity, she blamed her father entirely. Blamed him for deserting her, blamed him for losing Boy, blamed him for the Breeders, blamed him for having to succumb to a scummy boy's lust to survive. And, most of all, she blamed him for the Maskete that stood before her.

The Maskete that was making no move to eat her.

Just watching her.

As if it was trying to figure her out. Which it wasn't, of course – but she simply couldn't understand.

Why was it just stood there?

It was the final kick in the teeth; she loses everything, then discovers she isn't even appetising enough to be eaten alive by one of these godforsaken creatures.

"Well?" she prompted. "I'm standing here."

She heard tears in her voice. She wasn't aware that she was crying, but she was.

She looked down. Beneath the nest. At the drop below. She was sure it ended in water. Somewhere below was a blur that looked blue.

The Maskete screeched a tame screech.

Yet, it still did not move toward her.

She met its eyes with hers. She held them, as if searching the monster for a soul, searching it for a reason.

"Why aren't you eating me?" she asked.

She knew it wasn't going to give her an answer, but that was what it had come to – the only meaningful conversation she'd had in years, and it was with a Maskete.

She stepped toward it.

Why she stepped toward it, she didn't know. But she did.

It twisted its head to look at her.

Slowly, her hand lifted out and directed itself toward its

face. It didn't snap at her hand, it didn't flinch away, it just stayed. Still. Watching her.

Her hand landed on its chin. Its skin was coarse and rough.

"I know why you're not hurting me..." she decided. "It's because you're a baby."

She smiled.

"You don't know you're meant to kill me."

The thing almost looked sweet.

"Don't worry. You just haven't learnt yet. You've just been born, and you're given food and here it stands crying in front of you, and you think you should know you're supposed to eat it. But you don't."

She stepped toward it again. Placed her other hand on its face.

Screeches from far off caught her attention. It was a far bigger Maskete, probably its mum. Or its dad. Possibly telling it off. Asking why it hasn't eaten her yet. Why it's taking so long. Why it's being so uncooperative.

"I was like you once," Cia said. "I thought the world could be perfect. That I should listen to my dad. That things could be okay, that you didn't have to kill, that you didn't have to do these things to survive."

The bigger Maskete screeched with pure aggression, coming closer, badgering the smaller Maskete with its anger.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay. I know what you have to do."

She stood back. Placed her arms open wide.

The baby Maskete in front of her growled. It was a timid growl, but that was okay – it was its first.

It walked toward her.

It knew now. It knew it was supposed to eat her.

It had learnt what this world was.

She smiled at it, as if that meant it was okay – as if this baby

eating her would be okay, because that was just the way it had to be.

She closed her eyes.

And, before the snap of its mouth could reach its meal, she fell backwards.

Wind rushed through her fingers, her hair, giving her no resistance in her accelerating descent.

There was water below.

If she was unfortunate enough to survive the fall, maybe she'd drown instead.

It didn't matter.

She'd failed.

She'd failed, and now it was over.

And if these things had crawled out of Hell, then that meant there must be a Heaven.

And if there was a Heaven, then maybe she'd meet Boy there.

*I'll meet you there...*

And with that final thought, she fell unconscious and was unable to feel the impact.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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WHY DOES an open road seem so discomfoting?

Metaphorically, an open road should be a good thing. It implies a vast, grand space where possibilities are endless. There is no visible end, the future is awaiting, and it is coming soon. You can walk for as long as you need until you find the place in which you are meant to be.

But when Cia returned to her open road, it wasn't the endless possibilities, nor was it an awaiting future or fateful location.

It was the girl.

That same girl again.

Young. Blond. Pretty.

An age Cia once was.

"I've seen you before," Cia said.

Last time she saw the girl, Cia had been captured by the Wasters. Cia had been laying in her unconscious state whilst God knows what was happening to her, and she was just here, watching this girl. Watching her holding the hand of a man who once meant everything to Cia.

"Who are you?" Cia asked.

The girl sat on the floor, cross-legged. She began to hum, to pick up stones then drop them again, trickling gravel through her fingers like pieces of meteorite thudding to Earth.

“Do you know who you are?” Cia asked.

The girl’s eyes remained set upon the pieces of earth she dirtied her hands with. Despite her avoidance of looking at Cia, she graced her with a gentle, non-committal shrug.

“I saw you. Last time. Just before I...”

She wasn’t quite sure how to finish that sentence.

*Just before what?*

Before I almost died?

Was attacked by a gang of Wasters?

Violated herself to be free of a deluded cult?

Watched her only hope of finding Boy be torn open and eaten?

Dropped to her potential death to avoid being ripped apart by a nest of Masketes?

Cia shook her head.

Was this just a dream? A delusion?

Or, God forbid, was this Heaven?

If those beasts came from Hell, then it could be a possibility. But if this was what Heaven turned out to be then she was to have serious words with God.

“Are you an omen?”

Maybe that was it.

This girl appeared just before previous horrific acts of malice, before Cia endured actions and incidents that tested her to the limits of her mental capacity.

Was this girl in her subconscious again because more torment was on its way?

“Speak to me!” Cia growled, surprising herself with her anger.

All of a sudden, this girl incensed her. Infuriated her. She

just sat there, ignoring Cia's questions, just messing about in the dirt.

Being a child.

And maybe that's what she hated most about this girl.

That this girl *was* a child and *was* acting as such.

Cia hadn't been allowed to be a child for years.

"Would you please just—"

Cia stepped forward, prompting the girl to abruptly stand.

Cia halted, the girl staring back cautiously.

Cia took another step forward, and the girl mirrored Cia in backward movement.

"Why are you here? To taunt me?"

The girl's face remained an empty space. A vacant expression of nonchalance.

Cia shook her head. She felt herself crying.

The girl lifted her hand and placed it in a warm hand above her.

That warm hand Cia craved so much.

She couldn't see the arm that led to the hand, but she felt his presence, felt the company of a man who had taught her right from wrong.

Albeit, a man who had failed to teach himself the same lessons.

"I hate you," Cia muttered. "My God, I hate you."

The girl smiled.

"Stop it! Stop smiling!"

Cia stepped forward and the girl backed away again, keeping a tight grip on the hand.

"Stop moving away from me!" Cia screamed, feeling her voice break.

She collapsed to her knees.

"What is it you want from me? Why are you here?"

The girl still just smiled.

That *damn* smile.

Cia's anger subsided, fading to a calm wave of reflection. A realisation settled upon her, as if she knew who this girl was, and why her mind was presenting this girl to her in such trying circumstances.

And she hated knowing this almost as much as the knowledge itself.

"I wish I was you..." Cia whispered.

This girl nodded. Her long, blond hair, her pure, white skin, her radiant smile. Confirmation.

This girl had Cia's father by her side because this girl was not Cia and was nothing like her.

If Cia had been this girl, then she wouldn't have had to face the hell she had.

If Cia had been this girl, she would never have been denied entry.

If Cia had been this girl, she would still be with him now.

"I hate him," Cia told the girl. "I *hate* him."

The girl nodded. Not a nod of confirmation, but a nod that seemed to indicate that Cia was on the right track.

"I hate him, and I wish I could see him so I could tell him."

The girl nodded, a little more eagerly.

"And I wish I could see him, so I could tell him, as I watch him *die*."

The girl nodded conclusively.

Then the girl went.

The road went, the thoughts went, and Cia was left to her vacant coma.

Left to eventually open her eyes and find her own open road.

*An open road.*

The metaphor for a vast, grand space where possibilities are endless. To a future awaiting. To the place you are meant to be.

And although Cia's eyes were tightly closed and her brain was emptying, her *open road* had never been so clear.

## CHAPTER FORTY

---

DALTON AND JOE often complained about being the expeditors – but in all honesty, Dalton loved the thrill of the chase. Joe, not so much, but that didn't matter. The trust between them was such that Joe could relax around Dalton. Despite their protestations, their only source of excitement came from their explorations of the woods nearby – having been adrenaline junkies before the world had gone to hell, they relished the death-defying searches.

What they were actually searching for wasn't clear.

They were told to *check out a radius and report back on any creature activity.*

So, basically, look, then go back and say whether any nasty monsters are nearby. Or survivors, for that matter.

Dalton always thought – *the day we don't come back is the day you'll know there are creatures nearby!*

Still, they were trained for this. Their weapons were off safety, ready, and their minds were alert.

The pushing water of a steady stream nearby prompted a glance at each other. They were thirsty, and this stream was normally their drinking spot. It was time for a break.

In silent agreement, they changed course to head for the lake, a ten-minute detour if that.

But, when they arrived, they found far more than they expected.

“What is this?” Dalton exclaimed.

Joe poised his finger over the trigger, ready for danger. But, as soon as he discovered what Dalton had discovered, his gun dropped.

“Well, well, well!” Joe exclaimed.

Both of them looked down at a sight they rarely saw where they came from. A beautiful young woman. Her eyes were closed like Sleeping Beauty, her curly hair spread out across the shore, and she was drenched.

Dalton checked the surroundings, then threw his gun over his back.

“Stay on point,” he instructed Joe.

Dalton crouched beside her and smacked her face – gently, but assertively. The girl choked, spewing water over his knee, but her eyes remained closed.

She mumbled something, but he couldn’t make out what it was.

“We have to take her back,” Dalton decided, hiding his excitement at an attractive young woman.

“They won’t have it.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because – well, look at her. She looks different from everyone in there.”

“How so?”

“Come on, man, do you want to make me say it?”

“Yes. Say it.”

Joe huffed. Looked around.

“She’s black. You see many other black people where we come from?”

“A few.”

“Yeah. And they’ve had to be extra, extra rich for *that* privilege. They’ll laugh you off.”

“I refuse to believe they won’t accept a survivor because she’s – well, she’s not even black. FYI, mate, she’s mixed race.”

“I’m just saying it’s pointless, is all.”

Dalton sighed. It was true. Unfortunately, the prime minister in charge of their underground fortress had liaised with a president who was unmistakably opposed to immigration. Not that immigration was a thing now, but he still seemed to hate anything that involved letting in what he termed as ‘outsiders.’

She mumbled something again, but he couldn’t make it out. Her eyes remained closed.

Regretfully, he stood.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “Unfortunately, we’re ruled by a dick.”

“Dicks are the ones who survive, mate. Because dicks have the money.”

“We survived.”

“Yeah, but we serve a purpose. What purpose would she serve? How could you possibly sell this to them?”

Dalton shrugged. They turned and began trudging away.

She mumbled something again.

Dalton halted. Listened intently. Turned back to Joe.

“Did you hear that?” Dalton asked.

“Hear what?”

“Her?”

“Yeah, she said something, people do it when they’re out.”

“No, it was more than that.”

He walked back toward her, listened intently. She mumbled again.

“There! You hear it?”

“What?”

“Just listen.”

They both listened intently, focussed, trying to hear. They had to wait another minute but, paying close attention, they both managed to make out the words of her mumble.

“The devil has departed...”

Joe recognised it instantly. Dalton hadn't shut up about it since they found that kid.

“The poem,” Dalton confirmed.

Joe didn't know what to say.

“We have no choice. *We have* to take her back now.”

Without argument, Joe helped Dalton hoist her over his shoulder.

As they stepped carefully, so they could hear her, they could just about make out the other words in her mumbles.

“From now to the end... We won't be apart...”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

---

CIA WOKE UP, placid and dormant, a flickering light above her head. She realised she was inside, somewhere she'd never been, but excitement for her safety didn't register. She felt empty. Drained. Completely void of life and emotion. As if every part of her good will and positivity had been sucked out and removed and replaced with a blankness, a servitude to nothingness, numb in her mind and numb in her heart.

She realised a man was sat next to her. White laboratory coat. Glasses. Stethoscope. Older, sitting on a swivelling stool that only a doctor could truly balance on.

"Hello," he said. "And how are you?"

His voice had too much bounce for her. She instantly hated it. Days ago, she would have relished it, thrilled to find someone who could match the enthusiasm she had still somehow retained for life – now, she wanted to jump up, bite his throat, and spit his skin back at him.

She didn't answer.

"My name is Doctor Myers, but you can call me Ethan. I've been administering your rehabilitation, and it seems you've been through quite an ordeal, doesn't it?"

*Quite an ordeal? Is this guy for real?*

“You’re safe now. This is an underground facility, set up by the government of the United Kingdom and the president of the United States. Together we created this place, and it is completely safe.”

Underground bunker?

Set up by the government?

She realised where she was.

And she wondered who might still be here.

“Just so you know, this is the fifth day you’ve been here. It appears this is the most lucid and awake you’ve been. You’ve come in and out, babbling, saying words of some strange poem – which I will get to in a moment, by the way – and here you are, awake and well.”

She looked down at herself with as little amount of head movement as she could. She was wearing a hospital gown, pads on her arms connected to a machine, and a drip attached to her.

She felt for her friendship bracelet, feeling its security still wrapped around her wrist. At least she hadn’t lost that.

“Would you care to tell me what has happened to you?”

Ethan poised his pen over a sheet of paper attached to a clipboard with *Government Property* embossed on it.

She shook her head. The biggest reaction she’d given yet. She had been trapped outside of this place trying to survive, and here they were spending frivolous money having their clipboards embossed with a shitty logo?

She felt sickened by this place. Repulsed. Furious.

“You want to know what happened to me?” she said, her voice coming out in a croak she didn’t expect.

“Yes please,” he said, his pen still ready.

She locked her weak eyes with the doctor.

“Well. I have rescued an autistic boy from a set of Masketes

that ate his parents alive, I had to watch an anorexic girl be eaten by a group of Wasters while I waited to be next and they did God knows what to me as I was unconscious. Then, I took a *lovely* trip to a place where they raped women to repopulate the Earth, where I was forced to *fuck* a man in order to kill him and make my escape. I was then forced to climb a ridiculously steep hill in order to reach a Maskete nest, where I witnessed the final moments of a newfound friend's life before fighting off a baby Maskete and leaping into a lake, hoping I don't die."

The doctor remained silent.

"Ah," he finally muttered, the most he could verbalise.

"But that's just me. I don't want to be all selfish and keep the focus on what *I've* been up to. What have *you* been doing?"

"Well—"

"I hope that while you've been here, your food hasn't ever come out cold, or that your coffee burnt your mouth. I hope your friends didn't ever fall out with you after post-work beers, and I hope your wife never had to have sex with another man in order to ensure her survival." She locked eyes with him and gave him the dirtiest look possible. "I *do* hope you've been comfortable."

Ethan stood, dropping the clipboard to his side.

"I think that's all for today," he decided.

"No, Ethan – Doctor Myers – you said something about the poem I was rambling."

"Ah, yes."

"Could you be ever so kind enough to tell me why this poem matters to you?"

"Well, there is only one man I know of who is aware of that poem, and it is framed in a picture in his office."

"Daniel Rose," Cia stated.

"Yes. How did you know?"

Cia considered that question.

"I used to know him," she answered. "A long time ago."

She was hoping that the poem had been recognised because Boy had said it, that they somehow knew where he was. As it was, she was probably going to have to leave again to go searching for him.

"And there was another..." the doctor said.

Cia grew alert. She woke up, her whole body tensing.

"Yes?"

"It was a boy. Young, maybe eleven, twelve."

"He's eleven."

"You – you know of this boy?"

"Where is he?"

Ethan didn't answer.

"Where is he?" Cia demanded, louder. She could see Ethan growing more and more intimidated, but she didn't care. She liked that he was afraid of her.

He *should* be afraid of her.

"He's safe," replied the quiet voice of the doctor.

"Safe? As in he's here?"

"... Yes."

"I want to see him."

"I'm not sure if that's—"

"I want to see him!"

Ethan gulped.

"I'll see what I can do."

He scuttled like a beetle out of the room, and she heard the pathetic patter of his footsteps grow fainter down the corridor.

She sat up and had a proper look around her room. It was spacious. Comfortable seats at the side of the bed. A life of luxury compared to what she'd fought for.

It wasn't right.

That those like her were outside these walls fighting, and others had this, mostly based on what they were born into.

It wasn't right.

And she intended to fix it.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

---

CIA WAS GIVEN clothes and food and water. From a selection of clothes, she chose khaki shorts that went down to her knee, a black vest, and a pair of Adidas trainers – all the better for running. For food, she had fried eggs, sausages, and beans, followed by a slice of vanilla cheesecake. For water, she had a bottle of Evian, taken from a walk-in fridge that was full of them.

As grateful as she was, and as luxurious as these things were, she hated herself for having them. And she hated this place more for having the resources to not only give them to her, but to give her a choice.

She hadn't had a choice so far.

A man called Dalton, dressed in army gear and armed with a gun – apparently the man who found her and Boy, though she didn't remember – led her down a well-lit corridor. With cream walls and a circular light every few paces, the corridor looked clinical. The further they walked, the more the place changed from a luxurious resource of leisure to something more closely resembling a base, where science and army training took place.

Dalton took her to a door displaying the numbers 346. She

made a mental note of the room number. As far as she could tell, the top floor was floor 1, and the numbers increased as they descended lower. This meant that room 316 must mean floor 3, room 16, and be near the surface.

“It’s Cia, right?” Dalton asked.

She nodded.

“I need to give you a few warnings before we go in.”

She didn’t reply, but simply looked at him expectantly. He smiled at her.

“You are not to act out in any way once you are in there. You are to remain calm, or I have been instructed to escort you away.”

“Why would I need to remain calm?” she asked.

“If you refuse to cooperate, I do have authorisation to shoot you.”

“Why would I need to remain calm?” she repeated. “And why would you need to shoot me? What the hell are you doing here?”

Dalton gave her a limp shrug, as if to say, *not my problem, just following orders*. He knocked on the door, and a man in a laboratory coat peered out. His glasses were too large for his face and his balding head made him look even more awkward.

“Have you given her the warnings?” the man asked.

“Yep,” Dalton replied.

The man looked Cia up and down.

“Fine,” he said, and walked back in.

Cia went to enter, but Dalton put a hand in front of her and stopped her.

“Just remember – it has taken a lot of coercing to let you in here. This is a privilege.”

“Get your hand off me,” she demanded.

He let her go and allowed her to walk in.

She slowed down, her jaw dropping, her body tensing in shock. Whatever she had expected, it wasn't this.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded of no one in particular.

"I told you," the man in the laboratory coat said to Dalton.

Cia walked up to the one-way window.

Her shock built up to anger.

She punched the window.

"I warned you, Cia."

"What the *hell* are you doing!"

Behind that window sat Boy, on a chair like he was being executed. Connected to machines. His head lolling, groggy, not all there.

"Why is he like that?" she demanded, and punched the window again.

"Please stop—" the man in the laboratory coat tried.

Two men in full hazard suits entered the room with Boy – one with a gun focussed on Boy, one with a tray of surgical equipment. The second man crouched beside him and began preparing his utensils.

"What is he doing!" Cia demanded. "What is he going to do to him!"

"Cia—" Dalton tried.

Cia turned back to them, her palms hurting from the digging of her nails, her lip curling, fire racing through her blood, ready to pounce, ready to fight.

These people think they know what she is? What she can do?

They have no idea.

They had not witnessed what she had. Done what she had. Killed like she had.

And she was ready to do it all over again.

"Cia—" Dalton tried once more.

“There better be a damn good explanation,” she growled. “Or I’m going to rip all of you apart. I don’t care where you point that gun, I mean it.”

“Cia, look—”

“Explain. Now.”

Dalton sighed.

“Cia, I keep trying to say. Look at his neck.”

“What?”

“His neck. Look at it.”

She turned around. Looked closer.

On Boy’s neck was a large, vacant lump, where bloody muscle and thin bone were visible.

“What have you done to him!”

Dalton stepped forward, tried to keep his voice low and reassuring.

“We haven’t done anything, Cia. That was a Lisker bite.”

Liskers. Snakes the length of multiple football pitches. Bodies thicker than houses. Fangs poisonous and sharp. She hadn’t ever actually seen one in person, and for that she was grateful.

“It didn’t go deep,” the laboratory man explained. “But it did get him, and in all honesty, we saved his life. But we’re not clear yet.”

“Not clear?” Cia repeated, poised between wrath and gratefulness.

“He has to be quarantined. We don’t know enough about these creatures to know if exposure to them—”

“Exposure does nothing. Trust me.”

“Yes, that’s all well and good, but there is poison in that bite – we don’t know if—”

“Let him out. I don’t care.”

“Cia—” Dalton tried.

“Stop saying my name! You’re not trying to bring him back

to life – you’re experimenting on him. Aren’t you? That isn’t you trying to help him, that’s you trying to find out more.”

“He is the only subject that–”

“He is *not* a subject! He is a *boy!*”

She realised she was panting. Her chest hurt from the weight of her rapid succession of breaths. She willed herself to calm down, but couldn’t.

“I think it’s time to go,” Dalton decided.

“No,” Cia refuted.

“We have to. There is one more person you need to see.”

She looked back at Dalton, puzzled. Who on earth could be here that she’d want to see?

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

---

DALTON LED Cia through the corridor, down the lift, then into another corridor, around a corner, until they reached a door.

Upon that door was a sign reading: *Doctor Daniel Rose*.

She thought she'd feel something more. Anger, relief, confusion. But, honestly, she felt nothing. She was numb to the sight.

She wanted to feel more. She wanted to be furious to know he was still alive, or grateful to see him.

But she was full of such conflicting emotions, her body shut those emotions down, and she felt empty. Devoid of complexity, full of impartiality.

"I'm not going in with you this time," Dalton said. "Now, you're on your own."

"Is he expecting me?" she asked.

Dalton nodded. "He is."

She reached her hand out to the doorknob, but didn't turn it. She waited. What was she expecting to find behind this door?

Happiness? Love? Remorse?

Or just that same guy who abandoned her all those years ago?

She closed her eyes, resting her head against the barrier between her and him.

“Go on,” Dalton gently encouraged. “I think he’s been waiting for this ever since he heard you were back.”

Waiting for this?

He had been waiting for this?

*How long have I waited?*

In truth, she’d rarely thought about him. She had never built up this moment in her mind. He left her life, and he left her thoughts, and that was the way it had to be.

She had Boy. She had someone else in her life. Someone better than him. Someone *she* could care for, in a way he never had.

With a deep inward breath of confidence, she turned the doorknob, opened the door, and closed it behind her.

There, sat at a desk, beneath a lamp light, in front of a giant window, sat a man she recognised. He had more grey hairs than she recalled. More wrinkles around his mouth. But it was the same kind face, the same body that gave such good hugs.

It was the same, but different. Same man, but different person.

“Oh my God,” he gasped, looking up to see her. “I can’t – I can’t believe it’s really you.”

She stood still. Said nothing.

What could she say?

No. She just looked at him, not realising it was a glare. Not realising that a thousand poisonous thoughts were swimming against her subconscious as she stood frantically static in front of her father.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “My God, I can’t believe you’re here. Cia, I’m so sorry.”

He rushed over to her, as if he was going to embrace her, but

stopped, thinking better of it. Instead, he knelt, grabbing the side of her arms, clutching onto her.

“I can’t believe you survived. You’re such a strong girl. Such a strong, strong girl.”

“I’m *not* a girl,” was her reply, said without thought or pre-planning.

“No. You’re not. Look at you. You’re a woman. A strong, amazing woman. And I’m so sorry I never went back for you, I’m so sorry.”

Her face remained blank. She just stared at him. His words were as good as foreign.

“They wouldn’t let me,” he claimed. “It wasn’t my choice, they – they wouldn’t let me. I tried to go back out but there was – there were armed guards, saying that once you’re in, you’re not allowed out, that they were shutting down, that – I should have fought. I should have fought harder, I know that, I know that now. But look, here you are, and I can’t believe you’re here.”

She gently shook her head, not realising she was doing so.

“I can’t imagine the things you’ve had to do to survive. Did you have to face many monsters?”

She laughed. Only once, but it was a definite chuckle. Not a happy one, but a snort of acknowledgement over such a ridiculous question.

“Why haven’t you already come to see me?” she asked. “I’ve been here for days, or so they tell me.”

“I, well, I – I don’t know. I was scared, I guess. Scared that maybe you wouldn’t want me to come see you.”

She held his eyes for a moment. He wasn’t wrong. And she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of lying and saying that he was. Instead, she turned to the giant window that filled a wall of his office, peering out at the scenes below.

She was shocked by what she saw. Shocked, at first, then she

thought – *what else did I expect?* It was like nothing she'd ever seen.

It was a giant room that went so far into the distance she couldn't see the end. It was full of creatures. Masketes, Thorals, Liskers – even Wasters. But they were in chains, subdued, caught, wrapped so tightly they couldn't move. Some of them tried, thrashed against their bondage, fought against it – but these people knew what they were doing. These monsters were kept so securely, tied down with such an excess of chains, that there was no release for them.

Strange, really. How they were so afraid of a Lisker's bite, yet they kept all of these creatures captive beneath their home.

"What is this?" Cia asked.

Her dad stood and walked over to her, peering over the scenes below. He tried to put his hand on her back, but she stepped out of his reach.

"Learning," he answered.

"Learning?"

"Yes. Experimenting, finding out all that we can about these things."

"It looks like torture."

"They are animals. Monsters. They deserve nothing more."

She turned to her father and thought about how ironic that statement was. She let it sink in and, in her ingenious mind, she formed an idea. An idea that stemmed into a plan.

"What are you doing to them?" she asked.

"Learning about their weaknesses. Discovering what they are, how they work. Finding out if there's any way we can wipe them out."

"Why?"

"Why? So humans can survive. Isn't that what we want?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure if humans deserve to survive."

She remained looking below for a few moments of uncomfortable silence, feeling his eyes watching her.

“I’d love to go down there with you,” she said.

“What? Down there?”

“Yes. To see what you’re doing. See what your work involves.”

“I’m not sure it’s safe—”

“Dad, I’ve spent years surviving against these things. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

His face changed. Morphed into warmth, into pain, a reaction to being called Dad.

“Okay,” he agreed. “I’ll arrange it for tomorrow.”

She forced a non-committal smile at him.

“Thanks.”

She turned and left. As she opened the door, she paused, and averted her eyes to his desk.

There, framed beside a picture of her and her mother, were the words to the poem she had used with Boy.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She left the room and allowed Dalton to take her to her room.

She didn’t sleep, but she didn’t need to. She’d learnt to live without it.

Instead, she laid on the bedsheets and formulated every part of her plan in her mind. Once she had done that, she waited until morning, for the knocks of Dalton coming to collect her and take her to see her father again.

And this time, it really would be the last time she’d ever see him.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

---

DALTON CAME to collect her again in the morning. This time, his gun was over his back, rather than in his hands. He leant against the wall like the cool kid in a playground, a cheeky smile greeting her.

“Morning, sunshine,” he said as she opened the door.

She couldn’t help but smile at his dorkily charming demeanour. It was a pity he had no idea what she was going to do. He probably wouldn’t survive it.

“Right back atcha,” she playfully retorted.

“Fancy some breakfast?”

*No. Not really.*

She was antsy, she wanted to get to it – but couldn’t appear suspicious. She had been less than eager to see her dad last night – so if she seemed over-enthusiastic now, it would seem too strange. She had to wait, had to endure a breakfast she felt too sick to eat.

“What’s on the menu?” she asked.

She was taken down to the canteen. On the way, she passed a corridor, where all the numbers began with 2 – for example,

267, 268, 269. She recalled Boy's number from the previous day, which was 346.

As for breakfast, she was handed two pieces of toast with scrambled egg. The scrambled egg was perfect – the right texture, the correct mixture of egg and milk. She was sure there was some cheese in there too, which seemed strange, but worked perfectly.

“The chef used to be the president's personal chef,” Dalton informed her, explaining the amazing taste of her meal. “He earned thousands just following him around wherever he went, making him breakfast all the time.”

It was a shame that her stomach churned with nerves so much that it was difficult to eat. Still, she forced it down – she'd probably need the energy.

“Don't you think it's kind of bad?” Cia asked him, curious as to what Dalton's take on the place was.

“What's bad?”

“How so many people got this, and so many people...didn't. I mean, there are millions that didn't make it to safety. Practically all of our species were wiped out, and here are the people who could afford to live, with chefs who make ridiculously good scrambled egg.”

Dalton shrugged. “I wasn't rich.”

“Yes, but they needed protection, didn't they? What were you, army?”

He shook his head, swallowing a large mouthful of egg. “Nah. I worked for my dad's security firm, and I had just enrolled to join the Marines when it all went off. I was still young.”

“How young?”

“Young enough.”

Cia watched him carefully. Something puzzled her about

him. Something seemed different. Something about him was...genuine.

“How did I get here, Dalton?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who saved me?”

“Oh. That was me. And my mate, Joe.”

“And how was I allowed to come here? It’s pretty exclusive, I’m surprised—”

“That poem that Danny Rose has on his desk, the framed one. You were mumbling bits of it. Figured they’d want to hear that.”

“So that’s the only reason you saved me? Because of a poem?”

Half of Dalton’s smile slanted upwards, a cheeky glint in his eye.

“Nah, you were cute as well.”

“So it all came with your duty?” she teased.

She realised she was flirting.

Why was she flirting?

How did she even know how to flirt?

“Well, there’s not that many young, attractive women here. Figured we better make a start somewhere.”

She huffed and shot him a glare. He cracked up, finding her reaction hilarious.

“Chill out,” he told her. “I’m joking.”

She looked at him – no, more than a look, she peered at him. His skin was clear but for a mole on the underside of his chin, a mole that somehow added to his good looks. His hair was swept back, and his eyes were big.

She stopped peering at him.

She had to stop.

She was going to put everyone in here to death.

She couldn’t afford to like him.

She couldn't afford to like anyone.

Watching him Hoover down his food, she took the opportunity of his culinary distraction to take the knife from beside her plate and slip it under the table. She placed it down the side of her shorts, unnoticed.

"I think I want to go see my dad now," she decided.

"All right, give me a minute," he answered, rushing down the last few bites of his breakfast.

Maybe, in another life, they would have been friends.

Unfortunately, friends weren't really something Cia could afford.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

---

DALTON TOOK Cia to her dad's office.

"This is where I leave you," he said.

She smiled. A small, faint, reluctant smile – a concerned one. One that wished they had met under different circumstances.

"Thank you, Dalton."

"Don't mention it. See you round." He grinned as he backed away. "Maybe."

He left around the corner, and Cia placed four clear knocks on her father's door. He opened it with that large smile he always had, that one that would precede an exciting trip to the cinema or a theme park or some other glorious surprise. As it was, he was just taking her to see a load of captive monsters.

"How are you?" he asked.

Cia knew she needed to disguise her upset. Hide the way she truly felt about him; the betrayal, the disgust, the detestation. All of it had to stay buried, and she pretended to be delighted at his presence.

"I'm good. Feeling much better after a good night's sleep, you know?"

“One always does.”

He stood there, looking over her proudly, his face beaming with glee.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Cia.”

*I’m not. I wish you were dead.*

“Me too, Dad. Me too.”

He led her through the corridor and to a lift, where he selected the bottom level – level 86.

*There are 86 levels in this place?*

That meant she was 83 levels below Boy.

Not ideal, but at least he’d be as far away as he could be from what was about to happen.

“There are, of course, some health and safety warnings I need you to adhere to.”

“Okay.”

“You are to wear the hazard suit they give you, and not take it off for a moment. You are to follow my instructions at all times, and you are not to approach any of the creatures – stay the same distance that I am from all of them, preferably further. These are dangerous animals, you understand?”

She wanted to smack him in his face and tell him to shut up. Dangerous animals? Safe distance? Did he have no idea how close she’d been to these things, the fights she’d had to endure, the chances of survival she’d had to overcome?

And he thought he was taking care of her?

He deserved everything that was about to happen to him.

They reached the bottom floor and the doors opened to a room of organised commotion. Security stood across the far room, before a window that showed the bottom of each of these creatures; it was the base of the room she’d seen through her dad’s office. Between them and the entrance to this grand room were people in hazard suits, putting pieces of meat in bags,

pieces of blood and juices on test trays, passing these on to other people who would secure them in boxes.

He took her to a table where he signed his name and prompted her to do so as well. She did. Then they were handed hazard suits, which they put on, and then were checked. Every zip, every fastening was thoroughly checked, then checked again.

Pathetic, really.

*They are so afraid to be in a room with them.*

They knew nothing of these creatures.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

She nodded. She definitely was.

He led her to a door, where security stood.

“We have Thorals, Masketes, Wasters, and a Lisker. But we haven’t captured the rest yet.”

He nodded at security then went to enter, but Cia stopped.

“Wait, what?”

He turned back at her, confused. “What? What is it?”

“What did you just say? About not capturing the rest?”

“Yes, we have four of the species.”

“You mean...” Cia closed her eyes and shook herself out of it, convinced she’d misheard him. “You mean – there’s more?”

“Well, yes. A lot more. Many, many more. Didn’t you think there were?”

She said nothing.

“I don’t know what you know, Cia, but Hell itself opened up. The doomsday clock had been ticking down. The government and the elite, they knew, but they were the only few that were allowed to know. How do you think they made this place in time?”

“So – there’s more?”

“This happened all over the world. These species are just

what came out in this part of the United Kingdom and made their homes here.”

“There are more all around the world?”

“God, yes. Lots more.”

He stepped forward with a patronising smile and an unwanted hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t you see?” he said. “This is only the very beginning.”

Security stood aside, and they entered.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

---

CIA MARVELLED at its grandeur and the volume of creatures. Masketes were chained to the floor across one wall with chains around their ankles, their wings clipped with metallic bondage. They couldn't fly away, and they couldn't fight their restraints.

Across the room were Thorals pushed up against the walls, metal wrapped around them. A few pieces of metal even went through the legs, keeping them held against the wall by pain.

Cia was surprised to find herself feeling bad for the creatures.

Then again, she wasn't surprised.

A glance at her father next to her reminded her who the real monster was. Who she really loathed. Whose treatment of others – both her and these creatures included – was nothing more than barbaric.

As she stared at him, she wondered – could there really be more out there? More than just these?

Could these really only be just the few species that she knew of?

She turned back to the creatures, not wanting to scorch her eyes by looking at his smug face for too long.

“Chains aren’t enough to hold them,” he said, noticing her observing the Thorals. “They are too strong. That’s why we put chains through their legs as well. It means it’s too painful for them to struggle.”

A group of Wasters were chained to a wall further down.

And then, the most dumbfounding moment of all – a Lisker. Her first ever time being in the presence of one. It was as big as she’d heard. It was held down by hundreds of metallic spikes fixed down the length of its body, and its head hung distantly on the floor, its eyes drooped. Multiple chemicals were being fed into its head, and it laid dormant as a result.

“What is that?” she asked, pointing to the Lisker’s head.

“Oh, come and have a look,” he said, gleefully directing her, so proud of what he’d done, so happy to have one of these creatures sedated like a pet. No, worse than a pet – a slave. A bitch. A morsel.

“What’s going into him?”

“Those are chemicals to keep it placid. If we don’t do that, then these restraints won’t hold it. As it is, it hurts too much for it to move whilst under drugs.”

“It must be powerful drugs.”

“Yes, and also a lot of drugs. The amount of drugs could kill a person a hundred times over – yet, if we let off just one injection of chemicals, it won’t be enough to hold it.”

*Let off just one injection. It won’t be enough to hold it.*

The thought played repeatedly through her mind.

“How quickly would it recover? How long until the chemicals would stop working?”

“Minutes. That’s how strong it is – it would take minutes for it to free its mind and liberate itself. That’s why it’s so important we have a competent team monitoring twenty-four hours a day.”

Even just the concept of hours seemed alien to her now. It was sun in the sky or it was dark – that was time to her. And this

was brutal – feeding chemicals into its body hurt too much for it to move.

Yes, this thing would kill her in an instant – but this was wrong.

This thing had earned its place on earth. Humans had lost their right.

Silently to herself, she made the decision – she'd start with the Lisker.

"Doctor Rose," someone said, walking up to him, showing him a clipboard. "Can I get your thoughts on something?"

"One minute, Cia," he said, moving to the person at his side.

She watched him, checking that he was completely distracted. She edged forward, closer to the Lisker.

She took the knife from the back of her trousers.

She edged closer still.

She reached her free hand out and touched the side of the Lisker. Its skin was rough, sharp. Coarse and bumpy. It pricked her finger, and she understood just how devastating this creature would be to have to fight.

She reached the knife into the air.

"What's she doing?" someone shouted.

Her dad quickly looked over at her.

"Cia!" he shouted.

It was too late.

She shoved the knife into the nearest tube of chemicals, emptying the tube of its drug, then did the same with a few more.

"Cia!" he screamed out.

Cia finally dropped the façade and allowed her expression to change from doting, wounded daughter to the warrior she truly was.

"Cia?" he asked.

He'd never seen this look on her face.

Then again, this world changes you.

“Cia, what the hell are you doing?” he demanded, somewhere between betrayal and fright.

She turned to him and ensured that his eyes met hers.

“Giving you all what you deserve.”



**THEN**



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

---

ONCE SHE'D FINALLY FOUND her way back, Cia sat and stared at the man in front of the dome, or the bunker, or whatever the hell it was. She stared at him and waited. Waited for Dad to re-emerge, for him to walk out and put his arms around her.

Or maybe he'd pass a message on, someone would go whisper in the man's ear, then he'd happily wave her over, explain it was all a big mistake, a big misunderstanding.

She waited. And she waited some more.

The whole time, just wondering how long he was taking.

He said he was coming back for her. He said to just wait, didn't he? That's what he said. He said to wait, and he'd be back.

So she'd wait.

She didn't want him to miss her when he returned.

She looked around herself. The trees were towering over her, their branches forming menacing claws, twisting into a monster from her nightmares. An eerie brush of wind caressed her leg like fur, but when she looked down, all she saw was her exposed calf.

Screeches and growls sounded far away, yet so near. She

had no idea what those screeches and growls were from. What they wanted.

Were they coming for her?

She realised that this was the longest she'd ever been left unsupervised. That normally a teacher or her dad or the child minder she used to have when she was really little would be there, would come back, make sure she was okay.

But no one was making sure she was okay.

The queue for the bunker diminished. The man looked up at the sky, noticing the strokes of darkness. There was a chill in the air that spoke of night, and he turned to re-enter his home.

"Wait!" Cia cried out.

The man looked back, confused, then spotted her.

"What are you doing here?"

"Has my dad come for me yet?"

A grin grew between his cheeks that she didn't like.

"Your dad ain't coming for you," he stated.

"He is. He promised. Can you ask him? His name is Daniel Rose – Doctor Daniel Rose. If you could just–"

"Sod off, would you! Look at you. You ain't getting in here."

He shut the door behind himself.

*Look at you.*

She looked down at herself. She didn't understand what was wrong with her.

Where was Dad?

Why hadn't he come back for her like he said?

Another cold wind encapsulated her and she grew goosepimples. She rubbed her arms in an attempt to warm herself up.

A bird call sounded, but she couldn't find the bird. Even the singing of birds was sinister.

But she knew there were far more sinister creatures. She'd seen them on the news.

She looked back at the door. It was shut.

She ran up to it and pulled on it, pulled, did all she could to rip it back off, to open it.

But it wouldn't open.

She looked around herself once more. At the twisting trees forming treacherous shadows over her.

Dad wasn't coming back.

And now she was all alone.



**NOW**



## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

---

ALARMS QUICKLY BECAME DEAFENING, accompanied by a woman's urgent monotone voice:

*“Creature escape, evacuate. Creature escape, evacuate.”*

Cia looked back at her dad. Saw the look on his face, the look of devastation, of years of work trickling through his fingers like sands of time, losing everything in a moment.

“Cia, what have you done?”

Everyone ran for the exit, desperate to save themselves, escaping the room of monsters.

*“Room shutting down in sixty seconds. Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight...”*

He'd said it would take less than minutes for the Lisker to come around and free itself from its bondage. Now she just had to wait.

“Cia, how could you—”

“How could I?” she shouted. “How could you!”

“How could I what?”

“You abandoned me! You left me to fight for myself! You act like you're pleased to see me, but I could have been dead – I was

out there, and I could have been dead, and you'd moved on with your life and gone about your work like it didn't even matter!"

"Cia, it did matter, I—"

"Don't lie to me, Dad!" She was screaming now.

"This was safety for me. Out there it would be death for both of us, it didn't make sense for—"

"Didn't make sense? You were my dad! I would have followed you wherever you went!"

"*Fifty-two. Fifty-one. Fifty...*"

The Lisker's hiss boomed. Its body twitched.

"Why don't you leave?" she asked. "It's what you do, isn't it?"

"Cia, I was glad you survived, I was hoping—"

"What? That we could join hands and be just like we used to be?"

"No, I—"

"I have someone to care for, and I would *never* leave him. Never! If someone offered me safety without him, I would face the outside."

"Cia, you have no idea—"

"No, you have no idea! You do not know what I had to do to survive! You have *no* idea!"

"*Forty-five. Forty-four. Forty-three...*"

The Lisker's tail flicked, freeing itself, and destroying a nearby room of equipment as it did. Beakers and chairs and glasses and tables smashed with no effort.

"Do you know what it's like to have to *fuck* someone so they don't kill me? So I have a chance to survive?"

"Oh, Cia, I—"

"Stop saying me name! My mum gave me that name – my dad is dead. *Dead!*"

He shook his head.

"Why don't you just leave, Dad? Why don't you just leave?"

He looked over his shoulder. The metal shutters were beginning to descend over the exits.

*“Thirty-seven. Thirty-six. Thirty-five...”*

“Cia, all I ever wanted was for you to be here. Just us two again. Against the world.”

She shook her head.

“The only person against me is you.”

The Lisker thrashed its tail once more, beating a wall above a Thoral, shattering the slate and freeing its restraints.

It was time to leave. Cia turned and ran, as fast as she could, aiming for the exit.

Her dad followed.

He looked over his shoulder, watching as the Thoral pounded the wall, freeing more of its kind. The Lisker’s body became freer, looser, its head lifting, headbutting the wall.

A Maskete freed itself of its chain and flew about the room.

*“Twenty-five. Twenty-four. Twenty-three...”*

The shutters were halfway down. She was halfway toward them.

The monsters hissed and growled and screeched. The Wasters cried their war cry.

She could see her father shaking. See him sweating. See the desperate fear over his face.

She pitied him.

In that moment, she saw him for what he was.

*A coward.*

*“Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen...”*

She reached the exit before he did. She stopped and turned, looking back at him.

He reached out for her.

A Thoral dove at him, thudding the floor beneath him and sending him to his feet.

*“Nine. Eight. Seven...”*

“Cia, please...”

From his place on the ground he reached out for her. Tears decorated his cheeks. Terror partied over his face. The invitation to his death had been delivered and he'd checked the box *attending*.

“Cia, I'm sorry...”

A Maskete landed atop him and took him in its claws. Its friends descended on his body, beating at him with their mouths.

“*Five. Four. Three...*”

At the far side of the room, she saw the Lisker free itself and batter through the shutters, destroying the only means of containment. Dozens more of the creatures left through the gap, fleeing into the rest of the underground bunker.

“*Two. One.*”

In fact, the only side of the shutters that was able to shut was the side Cia had left through. And the last sight she saw before the shutters came down was that of her dad, pleading for his life as he was torn apart.

She removed her friendship bracelet, placed it on the floor, and said her goodbyes.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

---

*“PLEASE EVACUATE to the first floor. Please evacuate to the first floor.”*

Dalton knew the process for evacuation. It was one of the first things they were trained on: Get to the top floor, then wait in line to be let out. It wasn't first-come, first-served – there were different lines in order of importance. Higher government officials took priority over the next, and higher-ranking officers took priority, etcetera, etcetera – Dalton could guess which line he'd be in, and he didn't imagine it was very high. Which meant, to stand a chance of escaping or survival, he'd need to be at the front of that queue.

He also knew the only way that this alert would be sent out would be if a creature, or set of creatures, were loose.

This meant monsters were running about somewhere in the eighty-six floors of the building.

This meant Cia was trapped in there too.

And he didn't know why, but that was stopping him from joining his low-level queue.

Who else would he take with him? His family? His friends?

Hell, Joe could save himself. And his family – they were gone years ago.

It seemed, as little contact as he'd had, that Cia was his only friend.

So he stood, in the middle of the floor, watching people run past him in streams of chaos, listening to the loud woman's voice that didn't shut up and just clogged his thoughts.

*"Evacuation, get to first floor. Evacuation, get to first floor."*

Why bother rescuing Cia? Would she bother rescuing him?

Or was this just because he had a crush on her?

"Fuck it," he muttered. He couldn't go back for her. He needed to survive.

But survive for what?

He charged to the stairs, following the crowd. He couldn't stay for her. He couldn't. He couldn't go back.

Then he remembered where Cia had been going today.

*Her father is taking her to see them...*

That meant she was probably in the midst of it. If the creatures had been let loose, then she would be one of the first in their path.

He stopped running.

*Dammit.*

Why was this such a difficult decision?

He compromised with himself – he'd find out where she was, and if she was alive. Then he'd make his decision. One of the CCTV rooms was only a few doors down, it would be easy enough to find out.

He arrived at the door and went to knock – then wondered why he was knocking. He kicked the door open and, sure enough, it had been abandoned.

Upon the television screens dotted around the room were images of people running.

Then he saw them – the creatures. They were already on

the sixtieth floor. He watched as a group of Thorals devoured a fleeing family. He shook his head at the sight of their suitcases. They packed a suitcase to leave in an emergency? *Clueless.*

Their blood splattered the screen and he flinched away.

He searched for the screens that displayed the facility on the eighty-sixth floor.

There she was. Sprinting through the corridor, away from the chaos, toward the stairs. He saw the corridors adjacent to hers, saw how full of predators they were, and worried that she wouldn't make it very far.

She left the screen, into the stairs.

Where could she be heading?

Then he remembered.

*The boy. Room 346.*

He reloaded his ammunition and left for the third floor.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

---

A BRIEF FEW days of sleep and a day of respite had served Cia well. Not that she wasn't tired, she was exhausted – but she had reinvigorated her determination to fight through it.

So she ran, toward the stairs. She saw people jamming themselves into the lift and it didn't appeal to her. It wasn't just the claustrophobia, it was the notion that she wasn't in control of her movement. The stairs would be more exposed, but it would be up to her where she was.

She'd fought these creatures long enough now that she knew them, and that gave her the advantage. As far as she was concerned, the shelter everyone in here had been granted for the last number of years had left them inept at dealing with this situation, and she predicted that the survival rate would be low.

Behind her, the chaotic clatters of destruction created a symphony of suffering. There was no looking back, it wasn't needed, it was obvious what was happening; the sound of walls collapsing, people screaming, screeches of Masketes, growls of Thorals, hisses of Liskers, war cries of Wasters – it was all combining to a stunning crescendo, and glancing back at its climax of noise would do her no good.

She barged through the doors and peered up at the stairs, crisscrossing upwards as far as she could see. There were eighty-three floors between her and Boy, and the lift didn't seem like such a bad idea anymore.

The screams grew closer through the corridor behind her.

She couldn't stand there and think about the exhausting ascension she was facing – she just had to do it. Had to get up those steps as quick as she could.

And there was only one way she could logically do it.

*A step at a time.*

So she began, running upwards, then turning and going onto the next set, onto the next set.

At least there weren't many steps between each floor.

Each set of doors she passed had a narrow pane of glass displaying further suffering in fleeting images. She didn't have time to stop, but morbid curiosity couldn't help but make her glance.

Then again, the suffering, of course, was only for the humans. The creatures were having a great time. It was like an all-you-can-eat buffet, and they were piling up their plates and going for seconds.

She wiped a line of perspiration from her forehead. Ignored her panting. Persisted upwards.

She reached another floor and the doors smashed open, taken off their hinges by a flying body, inside out, narrow tubing flailing from its belly and weak tissue holding onto the remnants of a leg.

She stumbled over the body and carried on.

There was nothing she could do to save them now.

There was nothing she could do to save anyone.

She was so close. Boy was so close, she could almost see his face, his hands over his ears, his eyes closed, refusing to listen to

the sounds, to the suffering, refusing to acknowledge what these people had done to him.

A Lisker bite being contagious?

If exposure to Lisker venom was harmful, then Cia and Boy would be dead already – what with the quantity of bones discarded by Liskers they'd walked past.

Instead, they tied him up liked a museum exhibit. Prodded and poked him like an act in a freak show. Gave him nothing but observatory treatment.

Boy would not have understood anything about what they were doing to him.

And, with that thought, any remnants of remorse she still felt for her actions left.

She didn't want humans to die out – but she wanted those unworthy of the few places left on this Earth to feel her vengeance.

The last few floors came, and the sounds became fainter.

This was good. It meant the creatures hadn't reached Boy's floor yet.

But it was just a matter of time.

She reached the floor and kicked open the door.

*“Evacuate. Evacuate. Evacuate. Evacuate.”*

The woman's voice wasn't even directing them where to go anymore.

Did this mean the top floor was full? That there was no way out for anyone?

The way out could come later. Right now, Boy was the focus.

She ran down the corridor, past fleeing scientists with their laboratory coats waving behind them.

The man who showed her Boy the previous day ran past her. His face was flooded with tears, scarred with anguish. She

felt a vague sense of triumph at his suffering, though it didn't last long as she resumed her focus.

She reached door 346 and went to open it.

It didn't open.

"No!" she screamed.

She'd made it this far.

She stood back, prepared her shoulder, and barged into the door. Stood back again, prepared, and barged.

She didn't have much behind her, and her shoulder hurt, but she didn't care; she would persist until the door came down or her arm came off.

Eventually, it buckled. One more barge and it flung open.

Behind the one-way window was Boy. Unable to cover his ears due to his restraints but closing his eyes and shouting nonetheless.

Her heart melted. He looked so vulnerable, so weak, so sad. So in need of her.

She picked up a chair and threw it at the window, but it did nothing. It was reinforced, and there was no way she was smashing through it. She noticed an open door and realised it didn't matter.

She went through it and there he was.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

---

DALTON TOOK the stairs down two at a time. The chaos was distant, but it was getting louder. With every floor he went down, he could hear it.

Then, as the facility began to shake, he could feel it. The trembling beneath him, the rumble of a dozen overgrown creatures landing their overgrown claws on the ground.

How had this happened?

“Dalton!” someone called out to him from above. He looked up and there was Joe, higher up the stairs, nearly at the door to the first floor.

He put a hand up to acknowledge him. He hadn’t much time.

“What are you doing?” Joe asked.

“I’m – I’m – I’m just going back for something.”

“Are you crazy? We have to get out of here!”

He sighed. How could he explain this to him?

He didn’t have time for this.

“I know, just – I – I’ll meet you up there, just give me a minute.”

Joe began rushing down the steps.

“No, don’t follow me!” Dalton insisted.

Joe paused. Stuck between coming and going.

“But I don’t understand, mate, what are you getting?”

He sighed.

“Oh my God,” Joe exclaimed. “You’re going back for the girl, aren’t you?”

Dalton said nothing.

“Are you fucking mental? She’s just some random nobody we found on a riverbank.”

The screams were getting sharper. The growls more pronounced, the screeches more ear-piercing, the thudding ground shaking his feet.

“I don’t have time to explain, I have to go.”

“Dalton, man, can’t you hear them?”

“I don’t have time to—”

“There is no point going back. We need to get to the first floor; the evacuation has started and we’re in a low priority queue as it is!”

“No. I’m not going, not yet. I have to get her.”

“But you won’t survive—”

“What is the point!” Dalton threw his hands in the air. “What is the point of surviving if I can’t look at myself in the mirror! Have you seen this place? It’s full of arseholes who wouldn’t give us the time of day – and they still don’t, unless we’re protecting them!”

“They are a bunch of bell ends, mate, I don’t disagree, but now ain’t the time!”

Dalton looked to the door leading to the third floor. Looked back at Joe. To the door.

Was he being stupid?

Was this a pointless quest?

“And so what, you’re going to risk your life?”

“It’s not—”

“Yes you are. You’re risking your life, all for some black bitch.”

Dalton looked back at Joe as if he was seeing his friend for the first time. A whole new character unveiled itself, and it changed everything, destroyed any friendship they’d ever had.

“Goodbye, Joe,” Dalton said, with as little emotion as he felt.

He ran through the doors, around the bend, and to the door reading 346 that had somehow been taken off its hinges.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

---

CIA DOVE TO HER KNEES, grabbing Boy's face, cupping it in her hands, telling him it was her, telling him she was finally there.

"It's me, it's me, it's okay, it's me," she kept repeating.

He was moaning too loud to hear her. His eyes closed, head shaking, battering his wrists against his restraints.

"It's me! Please, stop moaning, it's me!"

She covered his mouth, hard, muffling his noise so he could hear her.

"It's me, Boy. It's me, Rosy. Can't you tell?"

He shook his head, refusing to accept it. It wasn't her. It couldn't be her. She left him.

She kept her hand in place, moved her lips to his ear, and gently whispered:

"The devil has departed, And you are not alone."

His eyes opened.

"Take time to rebuild, your love in our home."

He stopped moaning.

"Shared time it is slowing, The pace of our heart."

She took her hand away and put it affectionately on the side

of his cheek. She looked him in the eyes, deep in the eyes, recognising that fearful look he so often had.

“But from now to the end,” she told him. “We won’t be apart.”

His eyes welled up. His lip quivered. And he spoke, ever so softly: “Rosy...”

“Yes,” she desperately confirmed, nodding, crying. “Yes, it’s me.”

“Rosy!” he cried out.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“You left me...”

She furiously shook her head, wiped her eyes on her sleeve, tears gently sliding down her red cheeks.

“No, no I didn’t. I swear I didn’t.”

He shook his head. “You left...”

“No, Boy, I didn’t.”

“I opened my eyes and you left, and you didn’t come back...”

“I was captured! Something got me, something bad, and I had to fight, Boy, I really had to fight, but I got out – I got to you.”

“You left...”

“And now I’m back,” she said confidently, and his pouting stopped, replaced by a warm, painful look of vulnerability. So grateful, yet, at the same time, having been through so much.

“I am back,” she asserted. “And I promise you, I *promise* you – I will never, ever, ever leave you again.”

“You promise?”

“Oh, yes!” she cried, flinging her arms around him. She grabbed hold of his shirt, curling it in her hands. In that moment of solitary pain she let everything out.

The Wasters.

The rapists.

The Maskete nest.

All of it came out, in a barrage of weeps and cries and tears and desperate words of “Never again” and “I promise, Boy, I promise.”

“We have to leave,” came a blank male’s voice from the doorway.

She turned her head. It was Dalton, his gun at his side.

Boy immediately grew terrified, but she grabbed hold of his face and focussed his eyes on hers.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I know he looks like one of them, but we can trust him. All right? We can trust him.”

A reluctant confirmation of trust shone from his eyes, and that was all she needed.

She grabbed onto his wrist restraints. They were secure, bolted to the arms of the chair.

“Do you know where the key is?” she asked Dalton.

“Yeah, it’s with one of the scientists. I passed him on the stairs, he’s long gone.”

Boy began to whine again, but she turned back to him as quickly as he began to worry.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “We’re not going anywhere, we’ll get you out.”

“We need to hurry; those things are out and they’re coming up through the floors. It won’t be long until they get to us.”

She turned to Dalton. “Any ideas?”

He hesitated.

“Stand back.”

She stood back and allowed him to go to Boy’s side. He aimed his gun at the bolt securing Boy’s right wrist and shot.

The gunshot was loud, and he began to scream.

“It’s okay!” Cia told him. “It’s okay, look at your wrist.”

He looked down at his wrist. It was free. He looked to Dalton, astounded that someone dressed like him would be kind.

“Got to be a big guy now,” Dalton told Boy. “Got another one to go.”

Boy scrunched up his face, but the gunshot was quick, and his other wrist was free.

He ran into Cia’s open arms. She squeezed him, held him as tight as she could, put everything into that hug.

“Never again,” she whispered in his ear. “Never again.”

“Guys,” Dalton urged them.

She stood, took his hand.

“We need to go now,” she told Boy. “And I need you to be brave and do everything we say. Can you do that?”

Boy nodded.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded again.

She turned to Dalton.

“So what next?”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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DALTON LED them along the corridor.

The shouts and screams were loud enough to run through every tendon in their bodies. The floor bumped under the strain of struggle and death.

“They’re in the floor below us,” Cia observed.

Dalton raised his gun as they turned the corner, ready for anything.

The lights flickered, quickly on and off, then went. A faint white light shone sporadically along the corridor wall.

“The power’s gone,” Dalton said. “The backup generator has put on emergency lighting, but it won’t last long.”

“So where do we go?” Cia asked.

“First floor.”

“Is there a way out?”

Dalton reached the stairs, peered through the window, and turned back to Cia.

“There will be priority queues for evacuation – obviously, we’ll have to wait for the last one to be let out.”

The corridor shook and they fell to their feet. Cia caught Boy and held him in her arms.

“We won’t have time to queue.”

He peered out the corridor and looked upwards. Three floors to go.

He looked downwards.

A Thoral smashed through the door a few floors down and knocked part of the wall out as it burst into the stairwell.

Dalton went back into the corridor, shutting the door.

“Let’s just get up there first, then we’ll figure that out.”

“Okay. Let’s go then.”

He put his hand out.

“There’s a Thoral out there.”

Cia saw the look of a person who hadn’t experienced a grave death-battling fight with one of these creatures. She recognised that fear from a memory long gone.

“There’s only one way out, and we’re going to have to move quickly then.”

“But it’s—”

Cia clutched onto Boy’s hand and barged through the door ahead of Dalton.

“Are you crazy?” he shouted as he followed.

Looking down, they could see the Thoral, its mouth dripping blood, its cheeks stained with flakes of muscle and splatters of fluids.

“Just keep going!” Cia urged, running up the stairs.

The Thoral battered into the staircase, collapsing a large chunk of wall. This capsized the steps Cia was running up. Taking an extra leap, she and Boy made it to the top step before it went down.

Dalton didn’t. He grabbed onto the remaining step with his legs dangling helplessly.

The Thoral smacked its lips and began to climb.

She considered whether to just run. Whether to just get out. He was one of *them*, one of the elite. Why should she help him?

But then again, he wasn't. He was an army recruit that got lucky.

And he'd gone back for her.

Dalton threw his gun onto the step and reached himself up.

The Thoral jumped up and snapped at his leg, but he moved just in time to miss it.

The Thoral readied its next leap, and this one would be better.

Cia tried to hoist him up, but it was no good. She was too weak, and he was too heavy.

"Please, don't leave me," he begged.

But Cia couldn't see how she'd save him.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

---

BOY HAD NEVER SEEN a gun before. Not a real one, anyway. One of his cousins once had a BB gun, but that just had little pellets and could barely kill spiders. He remembered sitting in the backyard, watching as the overweight, selfish brat would fire at ants as they ran away, aim at spiders in their webs, helplessly minding their own business in the corner of the garden.

Boy would look to his mother and wonder why she never did anything.

She'd sit there, talking to his aunt, neither of them considering the barbaric actions of this horrible teenager.

Even at that age, he wondered: *is this what people do?*

Because one thing he'd never understood was people. He'd understood animals, he'd quite enjoyed cuddling a rabbit in the pet shop just a week before, and his other cousin had a pet dog; it was a Chihuahua, and it used to yap. When it yapped its jaw snapped, and this scared him at first, and he hid and covered his ears and closed his eyes so the dog couldn't yap at him.

But then, he'd seen that dog yapping at his mum and dad. And it did nothing.

Maybe it wasn't so harmful.

He'd still kept a safe distance, but he'd watched, seeing how that dog played happily.

To one side was his cousin, scourge of the insect and arachnid population, sadistic torturer of helpless animals.

Then there was the dog, playing freely, chasing its own tail and rolling around in the mud.

Boy ran out and joined the dog. He pretended to chase his own tail, even though he didn't have one, but that wasn't important, he'd just pretend. He'd play freely, on all fours, jumping up and around. Then he'd roll in the mud, and that's when his mum would get angry.

She'd shout at him.

And he'd think: *why are you shouting at me?*

His cousin was acting as an executioner, and all he was doing was playing with the dog.

And now, looking at Dalton's gun, he felt that familiar feeling of confusion. Why carry it? What are you going to hurt?

Then he saw Rosy. Saw her reaching out for Dalton, grabbing on his arm.

And he saw the Thorax.

He wanted to close his eyes, cover his ears, and shout so he couldn't hear it, wait until it went away.

But for some reason, he didn't.

Perhaps, in some part of his mind, he realised he couldn't play anymore.

He realised that sometimes you just had to pick up the gun and shoot.

So that's what he did. He picked up the gun, found the trigger, and pointed it at the Thorax.

When he pulled the trigger, the gun kicked, and it hurt his shoulder. The bullets didn't hit his target and he wanted to ball up and cry.

But this time, he didn't.

He did what Rosy did. He kept trying. She would always keep trying, and he knew that whatever he did, however bad it was, she would always keep trying.

She was his hero.

So he emulated her.

He pointed the gun at the Thoral and fired a few bullets.

It hit the Thoral and he felt bad, but then he remembered it wasn't a bug, or an ant, or a spider in a web. You shouldn't pick on something that's smaller than you.

And they were far smaller than this Thoral.

It did little to kill the Thoral, but it seemed to be enough of a minor inconvenience to deter it for a moment. The Thoral looked at its side, as if it felt a prick and it was wondering what it was.

That was enough time for Dalton to climb up.

Then Dalton ruffled his hair and said, "Well done, kid."

He preferred being called Boy because that's what Rosy called him – but kid would do. Maybe he'd let this guy call him kid.

"Can I have my gun?" Dalton asked.

Boy gladly surrendered it.

Dalton fired a few more bullets back at the Thoral, then ran. Rosy grabbed hold of Boy's hand and gave him the biggest smile he'd ever seen.

"Well done," she said, a look of genuine surprise on her face, and he felt proud, *really* proud, that he'd finally done something to help her. "You kick arse."

He smiled.

He liked that.

He liked kicking arse.

They ran up the final flight of stairs. Boy looked back at the Thoral and it was still chasing them, but at least they were nearly there.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

---

ARMED SOLDIERS STOOD at the exit, next to a man with a clipboard. They were just about finished with Priority Queue 1 and were about to get the go-ahead to start letting Priority Queue 2 leave. The man with the clipboard turned to the soldiers and nodded.

“Yes, yes,” he said, his voice like he had spent all his life with a butler doing such menial tasks for him. “Yes, I see, everyone seems to have gone. The prime minister, president, mayors, parliament, all accounted for. I can’t see anyone on this list, can you?”

He didn’t care if the soldier said yes or no, he just wanted to show them that he was the competent one in charge of the list, not them.

“No, sir,” the soldier replied.

“Right, lovely, well let’s get started on Priority Queue 2 then.”

He waved his perfectly moisturised, limp hand at Priority Queue 2.

“First five, please,” he instructed, and the first five came. A family, well-dressed, approached. The father, wearing a silk

Dolce & Gabbana sweater, Charles Tyrwhitt chinos and brown Salvatore Ferragamo shoes with brogues, approached.

“So what are the plans?”

“We have an evacuation site a mile away, the soldiers outside will direct you there.”

“Will it be safe?”

“I assure you, good sir, the soldiers have been well-trained for these situations and will escort you expertly.”

The two soldiers looked at each other.

What training was this?

They were told they were never going to have to leave this place, it was an impenetrable bunker, perfectly designed and built years in advance. Apparently, the government and the dirty-rich had known what was coming all along and had prepared for it whilst the rest of the world hadn't a clue – but it didn't bother them, they had been safe inside it.

Except now, it was their job to brace the outside and fight any creatures that may attack.

They felt like taking their chances in the bunker.

“Right, well the next trip is leaving in—”

An abrupt commotion ensued from a far door. The clipboard man looked up, full of disgust for who would be making this ruckus in such a difficult situation. As it was, it looked to be an army man – one of theirs, it would seem, acting disgracefully, with a teenage girl and a preteen boy. They were shouting something, the man waving his gun around.

“What the devil is going on?” the clipboard man demanded of the nearby soldiers.

“No idea.”

“Well then, go and find out!”

The soldiers looked to each other and approached.

Then they recognised him. Dalton. What the hell was he doing?

“Dalton, mate, what are you doing?”

“Get out! Get out! Get out!” he kept screaming.

“Dalton, what are you—”

Dalton fired his gun at the ceiling, to and fro, causing a wave of shock, a prolonged gasp, and everyone ducking.

“Get out! Why aren’t you listening, get out!”

The soldiers pointed their guns at Dalton.

“Dalton, man, put your gun down.”

Dalton shot the roof again. It only put a few minor dents into the metallic surface, but profusely shocked the poorly dispositioned onlookers.

The soldiers switched the safety off on their guns.

“One more time, Dalton. Put the gun down or I’ll shoot.”

“Listen to him!” cried the girl. “A Thorax is on its way and it’s about to get all of us!”

“A Thorax?” the clipboard man cried out, his face twisted like he’d just mistakenly eaten shit. “Nonsense! I know they were loose, but they were over eighty floors down.”

“No shit, dickhead,” Dalton exclaimed. “They are loose, and it’s about to come here!”

“Privates,” he said to the generals, “would you please put this miscreant down, he is causing me a headache.”

“Dalton, man, please don’t make us do this.”

Dalton approached them, still waving his gun about in the air.

“You need to listen to me.”

“Why should we?” came the voice of another soldier nearby. It was Joe. Dalton saw him glance at the girl behind him, his face curled with anger.

“Right, enough of this,” clipboard man decided. “Once I have gotten to three, shoot him. One.”

The ground rumbled. Everyone looked to each other nervously.

The girl moved in front of the boy.

“Two.”

Dalton aimed at the two soldiers.

If he was going down, so were they.

“Three.”

Before anyone could shoot anyone, the wall collapsed and a Thorl came charging in. Clipboard man had barely acknowledged the need to run before he was taken in its mouth and torn in two.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

---

DALTON TURNED BACK to Cia and Boy.

“Time to go,” he told them. He grabbed hold of Cia, who grabbed hold of Boy, and guided them forward.

He locked eyes with the soldiers as he ran past them, like they were in a silent moment of understanding that they never would have shot.

Even though Dalton knew they would have.

Everyone had stared at the Thoral with such horror that they’d barely thought to run. But, halfway toward the exit, that changed, and everyone fought everyone to get to the single rectangular hole that separated the screams from the outside.

The two soldiers fired at the Thoral, but only caused a wince.

Joe ran up to Dalton’s side.

“Dalton, man, I’m coming with you.”

Dalton looked back at Joe with a perplexity that said it all.

“Listen, mate, I’m sorry about what I said, I just—”

Dalton punched Joe in the face, knocking him backwards.

Cia looked at Dalton as if she required an answer, but he simply shrugged at her and they continued forward.

But their route to the door was blocked. They were crammed in the middle of a mass of people shuffling in one direction.

Cia could hear Boy whining, could hear his anxiety kicking in. She wasn't surprised – he was being pressed up against a moving wave of people without any choice.

She wrapped her arms around him and kept whispering, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay."

But it wasn't okay.

The Thoral had taken out everyone who had opposed it. The soldiers lay next to their guns, alongside the families who were far enough away from the door to be deemed Priority Queue 4.

Cia looked over her shoulder as the Thoral moved closer to the masses.

She looked to Dalton, then back at the Thoral.

It swiped through another row of people, pushing them aside like they were pieces on a board game.

"Dalton," she said, aware that the Thoral was coming close.

She felt afraid.

For the first time in a while, she allowed herself to feel it.

She'd spent so much time fighting it, so much time being numb, relying on instinct. And now there was nothing she could do, nothing to speed up the escape, nothing to quell that fear. She could die at any moment and there was no quick-thinking plan or act that would get her out of it.

It seemed like Dalton recognised that fear, as he put a reassuring hand on the base of her neck and stroked her hair.

"It's okay," he told her. "It's going to be okay."

For once, she was the one being comforted.

For once, she was the one being told it was going to be okay.

She'd never had that. And it felt good. For the first time, it felt good.

And the fear left.

And she knew that, as much as she'd protect Boy, he'd protect her.

Just as the thought arrived, they made it to the doorway and ran out into the blinding sunshine.

People fled in every direction. Aimlessly disappearing, beneath the trees, wayward, no specific route in mind.

Some clutched onto their families, making sure they were with them, making sure they were safe.

Some didn't.

For some, it was all about their own survival. Their wife and children weighed them down, so they just sprinted in one direction and never looked back.

Dalton and Cia knew there were enough clueless people running aimlessly behind them that they didn't need to waste energy running too fast. They had the advantage – there were easier targets than them. So they jogged, all three of them, together.

Jogged until miles had passed and the people fleeing were growing sparse.

They found a tree. A tall oak tree, old, with long, sturdy, spiralling branches.

Dalton helped them climb up, then he followed. Once they reached the highest point, they stopped, and they waited.

Watching below.

Watching as the elite died out or ran away.

Watching the elite use each other's bodies as blockades while they used each other's bodies for warmth.

And when dark came, Dalton took the watch.

Meaning Cia and Boy could have an undisturbed sleep with someone else watching over them.

And then the next day, maybe Cia could take watch.

It wasn't that she needed someone to take care of her. She didn't. She'd never needed that.

It was just nice to be able to sleep with both eyes closed for once.

**Later**



## CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

---

HER EYES OPENED TO A ROAD.

She'd been here before.

She looked down, afraid that she would be in someone else's body. But her hands were still her hands, her legs were her legs, and when she ran her hands through her hair, the same frizz replied.

Just like before, it was a single-track gravel road between desert, leading to red hills under red clouds.

And the girl was there. Young, blond, light-purple dress.

But she wasn't walking.

She wasn't even looking at Cia.

She just stood there, her back to Cia, motionless, watching the great void that lay before her.

"What are you doing?" Cia asked. For some unknown reason, she expected to feel searing pain as a response to her talking. Yet she felt nothing – just her own body and her own mind, same as she always was.

The little girl didn't reply. She made no movement beside her arm, which drifted upwards ever so slowly, then waited, her hand open, as if someone should fill that hand with theirs.

No one did.

“You know this had to be done, right?” Cia commented. “I mean, you knew it. You even nodded at the suggestion.”

She had no reply.

The girl’s body convulsed as if crying, her hand remaining upwards, waiting for someone to hold onto it.

*He* wasn’t holding her hand.

*He* had left.

*Cia* had killed him.

“He left me no choice,” Cia insisted.

Cia stepped forward to go to the girl, to place a hand on her shoulder, hug her, comfort her – but something stopped her. She halted, feeling as if it wasn’t right. Like that wasn’t what she was supposed to do.

Instead, she stood there for the longest time, just watching this girl waiting for *him* to take her hand.

Cia didn’t feel him near. He’d been there before, but she hadn’t seen him, she’d felt that he was there – now, she felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

“We all deserve the right to live,” Cia said, though this wasn’t as much to the girl as it was to herself.

“And to die,” she added.

The girl’s arm dropped to her side.

Her head turned slightly, covered with hair, her features faintly visible against the red haze.

“What should I do now?” the girl asked.

Cia stepped forward, watching this girl, trying to look for an expression; but her face was too concealed for her to see one.

“What should anyone do?” Cia said. “What is there to do?”

“But I’m lost. I don’t know.”

“We’re all lost.”

“But...”

The girl's voice trailed off.

For a moment, Cia almost felt sorry for her. Then she grew tired. She wished for this to be over.

"You should walk," Cia said. "Just...walk."

The little girl nodded, as if this was a good enough answer for her. She turned back to the horizon, and that is what she did: walk.

Down the gravel path, alone, to nowhere.

Cia watched her until she was gone.

Then the dream ended, and her mind phased into an empty slumber – the kind of peaceful sleep we should all be so lucky to have.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

---

CIA TRACED her finger along the edge of the clouds. Laid on the soft grass, she watched as they passed by and squinted at the brightness of the blue sky.

Winter was definitely over, and summer was surely coming.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“Erm...” Boy replied, peering up at the clouds. “I don’t know.”

“Just look very carefully at the cloud. It must be a shape, what shape do you see?”

“Erm... a sword?” he said.

She squinted at the cloud. Tilted her head. Peered.

Ah, yes, guess it could be a sword. Why not?

“Good one.”

Heavy footsteps cracked nearby twigs. She didn’t flinch. She knew who it was.

“Working hard, are you?” Dalton said, dumping a pile of wood to the floor.

“Thought I’d let you work on your muscles, seeing as you don’t have a gym you can go to anymore.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.”

Cia smiled at his sarcastic laugh. She loved teasing him.

“Look, I said you get the stuff, I’ll build the shelter. Fair deal.”

“Still don’t get how you’re going to build a shelter out of this.”

She smiled. He still had a lot to learn.

She sat up, wiped the grass off her back and looked at Boy.

His eyes were closed. Looked like he had somehow began napping.

*All right for some.*

She looked for the sun. It was halfway down the sky, which meant it was mid-afternoon.

“I best get started. We don’t want to be exposed when night comes.”

“I’ll go get some more wood.”

She smiled at him.

He paused, smiling back.

Their eyes caught each other’s for a moment, and it looked like one of them would say something. But they didn’t. And the moment passed.

“I’ll get to it then,” he said.

“And put your back into it,” she teased.

With a playful glare, he left.

She watched him go. Thinking of what he’d lost, and how he was now.

If anything, she believed he was happier. She had no way of knowing, of course. He had been in the overblown bunker for years before she ever came along, but she was confident. If his choice was inside the bunker, feeling alone, or outside here with her, she liked to think she’d know which he’d choose.

He was happier, she was sure of it.

She wondered if that would still be the case if he knew the truth.

What if she told him?

As in, the real reason his home had been lost?

But then again, what would she say? That she got angry at her dad, took it out on him, and in doing so let thousands of people die?

She had told herself they deserved it, but now, she wasn't so sure. Yes, it wasn't fair that they'd all had a home and food and luxuries, whilst the people left behind had to fight for their lives in a permanent state of flight or fight. That was certain.

But what if she'd been able to stay there? If they hadn't turned her away when she and her dad had arrived?

Then she would have been one of them.

Would she have deserved it? Would the same fate be suited to her?

She would hardly have made the decision to stay outside if she'd been able to stay in safety, would she?

Then again, look at her life. Boy on the ground, napping. Dalton disappearing into the trees to fetch wood so she could create shelter so they could hide and so he could... hold her, again. Like he did each night.

She wasn't alone anymore.

But again, that was because of her. Because of what she'd done.

He couldn't know his home was destroyed because of her. He couldn't.

It would change everything.

And she couldn't take that.

She felt safe now. Every day was a fight, but it was a fight all three of them faced.

His home was destroyed, but she couldn't have her new life destroyed, either.

He couldn't know what she'd done.

Never. Ever.

She wouldn't tell him. She'd just keep it to herself, left unspoken, like their bond – left to the corners of their mind, where their true feelings lie.

She was the only living person who knew.

So she made that decision, affirmatively, to take it to her dying day, and to never say anything.

He didn't need to know. It didn't matter anymore.

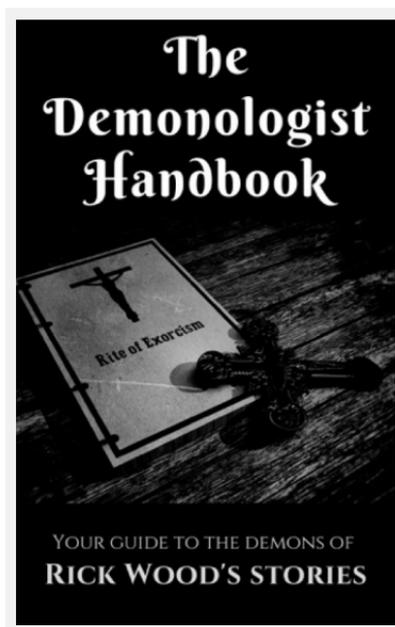
He didn't need to know.

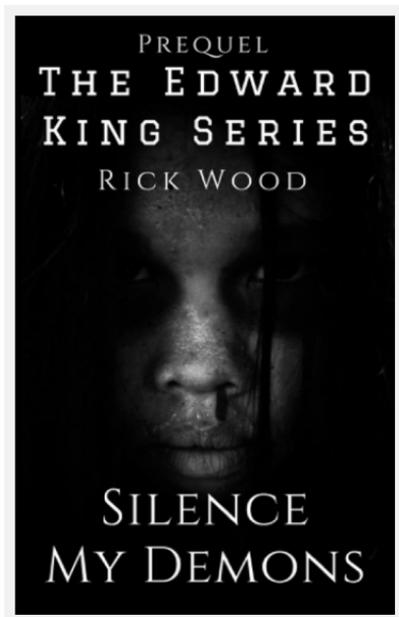
He didn't.

And he never would.



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