

Trust Me

Dedicated to S. J.

1.

It was on this day when I got everything I wanted.

For once, my cell phone didn't flash with light from a text message, or have the house phone cry out, indicating someone was calling. The house, every finely kept and cleaned corner- was silent.

See, most of the time I would get message after message, whether it was on Facebook, or a text- even a call. Not because they wanted awkward, blogging Kori- because they wanted Kori Rachel Glowan of the Glowan Estate at the end of Birch Street in Winslow Woods. It was a life I had to accept. That even on the rare occasion someone saw through me, I was still the rich, odd girl in the big house.

The silence was so blissful to me. Human voices- in my head they were just a nuisance. The only things that came out of them were words that would hurt you- or make no sense, or just be so irrelevant you didn't know how to respond. I never knew how to respond to people anyway. They were like labyrinths, all twisted inside, and you don't know where to turn or where to open up to and you just end of making a fool of yourself.

Maybe that's why I spent most of my time online or reading a book.

It was better that way. When people were right in my face, I could put headphones in and play some music. Instead of going out partying I could sit by a fire and read through one of my many classics I kept up on my bookshelf. And if my emotions were overwhelmed, I could hop online, blog about it, write about it- whatever I wanted. Life was more beautiful in a story anyway.

I had my computer on my lap and I refreshed my browser, biting my lip in anticipation and curiosity. It had just clocked to five on a Saturday, which meant my mother should be home within the minute. She would come rolling in from inside her Benz, announce dinner, and let me alone until then. Her words to get me to go outside or hang out with friends were useless. I liked the quiet life.

While the browser loaded, I glanced out my window to steal a look. Not that there was really any point, anyway. To my left and right were trees, trees, and more trees. But before that was a freshly cut lawn, the color of sickly looking acid all those sci-fi movies seemed to have. There was a grand big fountain and circular driveway, but I couldn't see that from my spacious, light and bright room. It was bigger than I needed. All I needed was a fridge, bed, wifi, books, and I was good.

But my parents who adopted me before I even knew my own name were millionaires who decided to get the biggest house in Winslow Woods. Winslow Woods was your normal upper middle class town filled with JAPS, sports players, and occasional pothead- but nothing like a Glowan. Our street continued on for a while, with nice looking buildings but nothing like the Glowan Estate you would hit as you reached the end of the road. That happened often, actually. Somebody takes a wrong turn. Hits our place. Then spends five minutes or so gazing at the sore thumb before being shooed by Martha the maid. Or, if I felt like humoring myself, blasting TARDIS noises would suffice.

I look back to my computer screen, and instantly shrivel up my nose in disgust. Instead of my blog, all I saw was 'Not connected to the internet' and a big X where it should say how much connection I have. I instantly

lean up from the pile of pillows behind me, and smash the refresh button a few times. Nothing.

“Christ!” I hiss under my breath, pushing the computer off of my lap and reaching for my slender phone.

I hit the bottom button and it springs to life straight away. It tells me it’s searching for a connection, but I make haste. I head to the app I have for blogging, and it spreads across the scene. Uneasily tapping my fingers on the edge of my bed, I wait for it to show up. But there’s nothing. Just the dull shade of blue the background would have, but nothing more and it refused to load further. Not only that, but it was three past five, and my mother was never late from whatever political town meetings she attended.

Having enough of this, I slide through my contacts and select my mother. I bring my phone to my ear, biting my lower lip again as I waited for her to pick up. It vibrated a moment, and I waited for the ringing to commence. But it never did. The line eventually dropped off, and a sound that equaled to a dying whale escaped from my lips.

I know what my mother would say right now. ‘Why don’t you go get some fresh air?’ However, it was a Saturday and I couldn’t see the point. This was my day to relax after a tiring week of grueling private school, and besides, I was just beginning my senior year and bringing my stress down was the best thing I could do.

So, hearing her voice echo in my head, I put one leg over the side of my bed, then the other, and landed down. My hair was already in a braid, and I had a pair of jean shorts on as well as a tank- so all I needed was a pair of shoes. I selected a gray pair of converse that was pocket money of mine,

and I tied the laces as I snuck my phone into my pocket. I probably would only be outside for ten minutes, not even. Martha was probably out minding the lawn and I would find her.

I went down a spiral staircase, edged along three halls, and passed our exquisite, stain glass and wood dining room until I made it to the front door. It was huge, and clear, so I could see right out into the front yard. Yep, there was the acid green grass and fountain. Not to mention the circular driveway that looped around then went down to the street. I pushed open the doors, smelling flowers from our garden that was a little ways ahead. Martha would probably be over there. I could ask her what was going on.

I didn't make it five steps out the door before realizing something was off. No, it wasn't the fact that I was outdoors. It was so silent outside. Normally right now, there would be life, clipping the bushes.... Landscapers... That's what it was! My mother had written down in our kitchen that the landscapers were scheduled to come today at 4:30. But it was five past five now... and nobody was here.

Just beautiful loneliness.

"Martha?" I then yell out, but half-heartedly because I hadn't made up my mind if this was wonderful or freaky.

When I didn't get a reply, I started walking down our driveway, where eventually I would hit the other houses. Closer together. Nothing like ours, but still, nice houses. Not a bird chirped. The only thing I could hear were my footsteps that scooted along the pavement as I looked around and about.

"Martha?" I yell much louder this time. "Mom?" But a gentle breeze is my only reply.

“Anyone? The landscapers aren’t here!” I call, slapping my hands to my sides. I pause. Obviously, nobody was here. Mom must be running late, clearly, and she must have canceled the landscapers today... But where the hell was Martha?

Some ways ahead, I could see the beginning of the houses on our road. A few had parked cars in the driveway, but nobody was out and about. At least, not that I could tell from here. My walking slowed down, not sure if I wanted to reach the end or not. To stall, I pull out my phone and check the time. Ten after five. Still no connection, no bars, no service. No blogging.

I finally reached the end of our driveway, and looked out ahead of me. A few trees swayed in the breeze, but the road was dead quiet. When I heard a hum, I brightened and hoped it would be my mother, but that faded when I realized it was just a bush swaying and rubbing its leaves. I was ready to turn around, sigh and pray for Internet connection, but something caught my eye. A blur of orange and green, and then suddenly a basketball is flying at my face and I jump to the side just in time before it smashed into the left side of my face. I hear a crunch, which I thought to be odd because it missed me. I instantly sprang to my feet, locking eyes with a boy who appeared to have thrown it.

“What the hell do you-“ I begin to hiss, but he jumps forward, grabs my hand, and jerks me forward.

“Move!” He says in this medium, soothing kind of voice that causes my eyelids to drop and almost give in, but then I pull free and stop.

“No! What are you even...” But I stop. Because coming from behind me I hear a moan, and cant help but turn around.

It's Martha. At least, I think it was Martha. But it wasn't really her. What I saw instead was her, shape, outfit, and all, but her eyes were all yellowed and green was dribbling from her mouth. In one hand was the basketball the boy threw, and on it was some of her green slime. But at her arm, there were red punctures where it looked like she had been bitten by something but it didn't bother her. It certainly was Martha, as she had our one of a kind uniform for her, and in a hand she held our bush cutters... but... What in the world had come of her?

I whirl back around to the boy. He's looking at me in some sort of desperation, like it's the end of the world and he was my savior, and the way he held out his hand made me almost believe it. But there was something familiar about him, but I couldn't put my tongue on it. He looked my age, maybe a year older, as he was my height but fitter and broader. His eyes were a gentle, muddy shade of green that almost looked like they could be brown, and he had brown and chestnut soft looking locks on his head that swayed slightly with the wind. His shirt was a dark green, almost the color of his eyes, and I realize he was the swiftly moving shape I saw before I saved my face.

"Please, don't go near her." He takes a step closer, changing his glance from me to the Martha-thing. "Come on, take my hand."

"Why would I listen to you?" I grit my teeth, frustration growing in my stomach like a spreading fire. "You just threw a basketball at my face."

"Not yours, sorry." He shrugged. "Hers. Now please, step forward..."

I'm about to turn around and face whatever had become of Martha, but suddenly I feel something clawing at my leg and I looked down to see

she had gotten back up and had wrapped her arms around me, clinging on as she threw open her mouth. Almost like she was about to attempt to eat my leg. And that was when the first wave of fear hit me that in fact, she was.

I was rooted to the spot for only a second, terror raising before the boy suddenly leaped forward and threw a kick at her head. Martha's head flew back with a sickening crunch, and I had to put a hand to my mouth to prevent myself from puking as she fell over, lifeless. And there was the boy, breathing heavily as he looked back up to me.

"Will you come with me now?" He asked urgently, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Gladly." I whimpered, eyes widening. I grab his hand, getting pulled forward straight away in the direction of the trees. "But... What happened to Martha, what is going on-"

"Where are your parents?" He asked, ignoring my questions.

"At work, but they should have been home... Christ, why do you ask? Again, what in the hell is going on?" My tone had an edge to it now, as I was growing impatient and part of me wanted to know things and the other wanted to cry.

"Should have been home. Look. I don't have time to explain, but they are most likely just like your freaky maid lady back there." He ran a hand through his hair, and then put it on my shoulder. "Now come on, move!"

I opened my mouth to speak, but it was useless. The boy, whoever he was, had gone back to dragging me along in the direction of the trees. Even though I had no idea what was going on, I wasn't sure I wanted to go to the trees. They would be more difficult to maneuver in, and who knows what

would pop out from a corner. Not another Martha creature, I hoped. I was choking back words I wanted to say, but when we hit the woods and started weaving through them I wasn't sure I could waste the breath anyway.

We're maybe one hundred yards in when a light mumbling sound causes me to skid to a halt. Hearing it as well, the boy let go of my hand and slowly came to a stop. I looked over my shoulder, not exactly knowing where it came from because it seemed like it came from everywhere and was static, like cicadas in season. But I couldn't make out what it was through the trees.

It appeared like the trees were almost moving at that point. Like the brown and greenish blobs were slowly drifting all over. But that was when I realized it. It wasn't the trees. There was what looked like a slow moving mob walked past the first row of houses on Birch Street.

It was hard to make them out from where we were, but I could tell they resembled pretty much what Martha was. Like... humans, but not. They were yellowed at the face, and green globs of who knows what dribbled from their faces. But among the fray were varying looking ones, human things that looked like they were rotten and some almost skeletal. Some carried briefcases, others had grocery bags and a few with random objects varying from road signs to tires. They were not human. Hell, they looked like Zombies. Zombies. Oh...

Well, shit.

"Run." The mysterious boy whispered into my ear. "When I say go, we run. They'll hear us. Doesn't matter. Go and don't stop."

All I can do is nod because I hardly have the strength to breathe. They were just ahead, crossing the road now in clusters. Like they didn't exactly know what they were looking for, but they wanted to find it. If these things were Zombies, then, well- they would probably want us. At least, that's what all those apocalypse books would say. In every one they would want to eat the kids. Eat their brains. I could hear them now, "Brains! We want your brains!" But I was sure that voice was inside of my head, and I think I'm about to go crazy when the boy suddenly hisses "Run!"

"You are not getting my brains!" I scowl as I take off in the opposite direction.

It's hard to be quiet when you're running through dense woods. My feet land on all sorts of things like crunchy autumn leaves and sticks. I charged so fast I thought I would leave the brown haired boy behind, but he stayed strong beside me, every so often glancing to his right where I was to make sure I didn't fall victim to the bastards.

I get the feeling this wont happen because the buzzing which I suspect was the zombie creatures moaning was gone, and all I hear is me and the boy's furious steps to put as much distance between us as possible. I then got an idea of how fast we were going because it sounded like there were four or five sets of my footsteps. Then it hit me. My lungs burned, we had been running for longer than I thought because out in the distance I could see the beginning of a road. So I steal a glance over my shoulder, and the surprise of what I see causes me to look longer than I thought I would and I catapult head over heels when I trip over a root.

There, in front of me, having followed us the whole way, are three very athletic looking zombie things that had run with us the entire time.

They had gym shoes on their yellowed feet and running shorts. One, a girl, had a sports bra on and the two men were shirtless. They looked like they had been on a run. And then... became zombified. And then, right here, right now, I realize that I will die.

Close to death, at least, until a large branch cracks over the head of the nearest zombie. I whirl around, jumping to my feet in time to see the boy, again coming to my rescue, and furiously hacking away at the three things with a large stick. I freeze for a moment, in fear, but a small part of me then thinks back. Back to my blogging. We always made fun of things like zombie apocalypses and would do foolish things like ‘grab the nearest object to your right. That is now your weapon in the zombie apocalypse.’ But this is real life and suddenly I’m doing just that, picking up a solid looking stone on the ground and chucking it hard as I can at the nearest zombie.

It didn’t do any damage, but I did grab its attention. It was the girl, and she ran at me furiously. I duck to the side just in time, and feel cracks at my ankles because hell, this is the first athletic thing I’ve done all day. A branch lays two feet from me, and I lunge for it right away. But in the process I slip, the runner girl lunging at me, mouth agape.

A paper cut makes me want to throw up, but somehow I find the will to drive the branch up into her gut no matter the circumstance. It doesn’t puncture her, at least not deeply, but it does knock her over onto her back. I don’t wait a single second. The stick is sharp and thick enough, so I ram it onto her throat, looking away and squeaking in the process.

I want to run so far away, away from the thing I just killed with yellow, bubbly blood now falling from her neck. But I find the will to stick around, and charge towards the one remaining thing that the boy was dealing

with. I lift up my stick, knocking it into the side of the thing's head. When it falls, the boy finished it off with his stick in the same style I did.

“Right. Well, not much farther now. Come on.” He tells me, and for the third time today pulls me along and saves my life.

I'm not sure of where we're going, but we were yards from the road now and wherever it is can't be far. I'm not sure if I could run on farther, anyway. My shoes aren't meant for running, and it wasn't exactly my best sport. We dash along until we hit the pavement, and I look both ways. Left, there's nothing but trees and road and it leads to downtown Winslow Woods. To my right is a bridge leading over a ravine. I suspect we would go to the left, but I'm surprised when the boy pulls me right.

It's much easier running on a road, but my legs and lungs still burn from our trek in the woods. When we reach the bridge though, he pulls me down towards the ravine. I have to shift my weight back to prevent myself from falling down the incline head first, but we stop at one of the middle bars and lean back against it, faces facing where we came from.

He sits down against it, pulling me down with him. Both of us are heaving hard, and the break feels good. But I'm not entirely sure what he's trying to do, because the zombie creatures would probably still be coming this way. And then everything hits me like the basketball in Martha's face and my eyes are wide, a cold sweat forming. I turn to the boy, who's cracking his knuckles and pulling off what looks like a small bag on his back. That's when it all spills out.

“Alright, who are you, and what the hell is going on?” I ask, choking back tears from fear and confusion.

“Figured you would say that.” He says softly, clearly trying to keep his voice on a low. “I’m Artie. I live on your street. And you’re Kori.”

“Yeah...” I look down. While he did apparently live nearby, I went to a private school nobody else on Birch Street went to, and when did I ever leave the house otherwise? “But what’s going on, what in the hell are those things?”

“I’ll explain everything later.” Artie tells me, putting a finger to his lips. “But I need you to stay quiet. They’re going to come here, okay? But I don’t think they smell any better than we do. They’re pretty dumb. Just keep quiet, and don’t move. We’ll be ok.”

I nod, leaning back against the pillar. Artie scoots closer, I guess to make our shape appear smaller than it is. He rests his little bag on his lap, and I still can’t tell what’s in it because it’s just a tight, thick black thing that couldn’t hold anything bigger than a gallon of water. I still have so many questions to ask, and the only thing holding me back is that the low buzzing moan can be heard now, and it’s growing by the second. It gets louder and louder, but I can’t see anything from under the bridge and so far down.

I so badly want to cry. It’s hard enough fighting off one of those things, that if they see us- its over. I know how many I saw earlier, around two hundred, and we’d be overtaken in seconds. But I guess this freezes me in fear, because I’m not even breathing. Artie’s hand is lingering on my stomach, and I would guess that if I squeaked or said something it would shoot to my mouth in seconds.

They were much louder now, and I could hear more than the moaning. I could hear footsteps, brushing along the ground like kids do when they just

woke up and are lazy. I pray Artie's right in the sense they can't smell us. After all, they just were like people. I did see Martha. Or what I thought was Martha. They were just... zombified. Were my parents like that? Is that why they never came home?

The thought is too much to bear, so I shut my eyes and squeeze my limbs tighter against my body. Then I'm suddenly back on the topic of Artie. He was so damn familiar but I don't know where it was from. He said he lived on my street, but I could see that's not where I knew him from. Maybe when we got away from the horde, he could tell me a few things. Because for now, he was just a stranger who did a girl a good deed.

They're going over the bridge now, I can hear it well enough. The dragging is just over my head and passing by, but they haven't noticed us. I pray it stays that way. I'm not sure how much time passes during this, but eventually I can hear what seems like the end because there are only a few remaining footsteps and the moaning is becoming less and less. But we don't move an inch despite of this.

Eventually, about ten minutes later of light breathing and staying as frozen as possible, Artie gets up. He reaches a hand out and I take it, and I realize it's not even been an hour but I'm already used to his touch. His skin has this softness to it, like a little kid but with the grooves of the eighteen year old he probably is. I waste no time, but still warily look around. "All right. Please tell me what's going on."

"I'm pretty much wondering the same thing. But, I probably know more than you do." He shrugs, slinging the bag back over his shoulder. "Come on."

I follow him, expecting an answer or for him to show me something. Instead, he takes a seat right beside the water, his sneakers just where the muddy water is lapping at the dirt and stones. I take a seat beside him, picking up the muck and dropping it, giving my hand something to do and something to think about. It's just us, him looking out and me distracting myself for about a minute until finally he speaks up.

“It was maybe ten. I went downtown, you know, with friends. Just to get some smoothies and play some basketball, normal stuff. But people were freaking out and the police were all over because apparently last night a bunch of people dug up all the graves at cemetery in Brimwood last night. I didn't buy it, but we saw the pictures and there it was.” He sighed, recollecting himself. “Maybe an hour later there were a few random people having breakdowns because people they know got all weird, their eyes got red and they turned all green and stuff. They all had bite marks. But before people knew what was going on, everyone got that way. The infected just kind of kept attacking. People freaked out.”

He takes a moment to pause, but it feels like an eternity. Like something in a movie. Nothing that would happen here, or anywhere. But he finally clears his throat and carries on.

“Anyway, one of those things came to the court where my friends and I were chilling. They laughed. Called it a zombie. And... they got too close. It bit one. Then another. It all happened so fast. I had stayed back. Before my damn eyes, they turned, just like that. It's a god damn zombie apocalypse. I ran like hell, but more than half of the people were all crazy like that. I came home, ran in, and then ran into you. Here we are.”

If this was yesterday when things were normal, I wouldn't have believed Artie for a second. But after what just happened to us, it seems like nothing out of the blue. My eyes wander to his bag, the small little black thing, and then I look back up at his eyes. They had this sadness in them. Like he was replaying everything he just said in his mind right now.

“Just like that?” I ask.

“Just like that.” He tells me.

I sigh, flicking a stone into the water. “So what now?”

“We try to live I guess.” He shrugs, twiddling his thumbs. “Find food and shelter, see if there's any place else where people are ok. Any ideas?”

“Still in shock, Artie.” I close my eyes, focusing on the slow moving current in the water. I wait a second, and then I let my wavering thought slip from my lips. “Why'd you save me? You know... since they were coming. You could have gotten a head start.”

His eyes flicker for a second. Almost like my question surprised him, and there was something embedded in the back of his mind. His thumbs stopped, and he bit his lip. Waiting. The entire question felt an hour long, but this wait for a reply felt even longer.

“I couldn't even think that.” He blinks. “I wasn't going to let a pretty girl get killed by her crazy maid.”

I get a chill when his lips form the word ‘pretty’. People called me awkward, strange, and most often rich. Never pretty. I was pretty plain looking anyway. I had medium length light brown hair and hazel eyes, a pretty general look. The only thing I had that stood out was a small, blue

highlight in my hair that took years to persuade my parents to let me get. But I'm not pretty, I never was pretty. I was plain. Plain old Kori.

“Where are we even going to go?” I ask.

“I don't know. We need to get food and stuff first before everything. Weapons. Hate to break it to you, but we're going to have to do a lot of zombie bashing if we want to live.” Artie says tightly.

“I know.”

“Right. Well, I was thinking after that we check my school. I want to see if anyone's alive. Some clubs and stuff meet today. It's worth a try.” He said it blandly, but when I saw his eyes glaze and his teeth let go of his lip, I can tell straight away Artie has all intentions of seeing if other people are alive. People he knows. And I get it, because I want to know if other people are alive too.

Artie goes to Winslow High School then, if I'm right. I go a private school, but I've been to Winslow High a fair share of times to see theater performances and whatnot with some friends who hang out with me occasionally. But it's a giant place, huge in the building and the amount of kids that go there. It's a good school, or was, depending on if the... Well, zombies got there. But Artie was right. It was worth a shot.

“So, I guess we follow the road.” I shrug, getting to my feet. I grab a big stick laying beside the water since it has a nice sharp point, and Artie does the same.

“I guess we do.” And he shoots me this curious little smile that causes my brow to furrow and fingers to rub together.

And just like that, the two of us, two complete strangers, set off down the road leading down to Winslow Woods. Survival was what brought us together. I don't know what would come of us, if we would make it a month or a mile. I'm not sure if I cared. The only thing on my mind was that this was just like all those zombie apocalypse novels I read at home and just like people jokingly said it would be.

But this time I'm experiencing it myself.

2.

“Do you think the hordes’ left Birch yet?” I ask Artie two minutes into our so far silent trek towards Winslow High.

“I guess.” He shrugged. “Why?”

“I, well...” I stammer. For the full two minutes and during our near death expedition I couldn’t help but think of my blog- and my glorious book collection. I know my blog was hopeless, connection was gone and who knew how many people were now dead, or worse- turned. But I had a nagging curiosity if others realized this before everything crashed. Was the zombie raid only here- or everywhere else? What if someone blogged about what appeared to be a strange, Halloween-like joke going on, later to realize it was real and they were killed?

But if I was going to be going somewhere, fighting- I could lose myself so easily. Just a book, or two, that could save me on the inside. What I would give for a copy of *The Great Gatsby* or an installment of *Sherlock Holmes*. I couldn’t just leave, having every row of my bookshelves be forgotten or torn apart.

I then realized Artie was looking at me curiously, brow furrowed and lips pressed together, awaiting a reply. I guess I had lost myself in my thoughts, just as I guessed I eventually would. Seeing this, I took a deep breath and stole a glance in return as some form of an apology. But I felt I couldn’t just let myself go looking at him in the eye. I rubbed my thumbs into my palms, eyes wandering towards the Glowan Estate, wherever through the trees it may be.

“My- my books.” I stammered. I almost felt embarrassed I was saying it. “I cant just... Can we just stop back? I just need one, or something... I don’t know...”

“Ah!” Artie exclaimed, his lips curling into a smile. “You read.”

My cheeks flushed with red. I tucked a brown lock of hair behind my ear, shyly looking down. When Artie saw this, the little smile he just had vanished and his eyes seemed to fade.

“Nothing to frown about.” He shook his head, twirling his stick in his hands. “I mean, that’s great- I do a fair bit of that too, actually, but, ah... I don’t think we should risk going back. God knows how many of those could be there and how their numbers are growing.”

I don’t open my mouth because I couldn’t even dare to reply. My love was invested in not people, definitely not people- but the things I was able to live and create in my head. Books. If I open my mouth I know would cry, and if a stranger like Artie saw that then I may as well let a zombie get me from my embarrassment. It was too much, though. Having to leave them. God, I cared more about my collection than I did about my own parents. The sheer thought of that leaves a terrible gut feeling in my stomach, a quote echoing in my head my English teacher once told me. You don’t know what you got until its gone.

“Are you ok?” Artie then asks, and I realize my entire face was going red and my eyes were squeezed together.

I whirl around and stop. “Yes. No. I...” That’s when I loose it. A tear trickles down my face, and I feel the sobs growing in my throat.

That's when Artie does a funny thing. He gets crouched down, tossing his mystery bag over his shoulder. That's when he takes a hold of my right hand, rubbing his thumb on my palm, which I don't know how it does, but the feeling soothes me. I don't know what he was getting at, and I was about to ask, when suddenly he looks straight into my eyes and speaks.

"I promise to find you a book. Any book you choose. You will be reading your way through that thing when we get out of this mess, alright?" He tells me softly, and the lump suddenly disappears from my throat. "Tell me a book."

"The Great Gatsby." I say. It's the first thing that comes to mind.

"Then Kori Glowan, I am going to get you a copy of The Great Gatsby." He then rises, dimly nodding with this determined, sly look on his face.

We carried on after that, Artie offering his jacket to help me rid of my pathetic little sniffles. No words spoken but the mutual feeling of emptiness.

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So hungry. The green dribble falling from her chin was the product of her sick cravings, a yearning for food. No, not food. What is it? What was she before? The woman, not so much anymore, paused her from lumbering on a now destroyed street. Overturned... what were they? Right, cars. There were many overturned cars, and now all the stores beside the road were empty, and the only life... not life, hunger was nestled inside of the mutilated once-humans.

But what was she craving? She hissed, yellowed fingers opening and closing in frustration, her nails breaking into the flesh every time and

causing an orange shade of blood to ooze out. She lifted her hand, licking in the sweet smelling liquid.

That's what she was hungry for.

Blood.

Her scratched cheeks curled up into a mismatched smile, and she walked forwards. Yes, blood. That sounded nice. She wandered on, wondering where she would find it. There was an image in her head, of something she once was and used to see, flesh and bone constructed to a shape that moved and darted, so tasty, needed to be welcomed...

What were they called... street pole? No. Not quite right.

She made it to one of the stores on the broken street, banging her fists on the door until glass sprang into her skin and she could climb through. Alive. She felt alive. She could see better than the others, feel better. Hear better. Smell better. Better. Better. Better.

There were objects in glass casings and all hung up. With a hiss and click in the throat, she made way to the far left of the store. There was something shiny. Tapering at the end, sharp, sharp. Very sharp. And her hand fit perfectly around the wooden part on one end. She took it from the wall, tossing it in her hand.

What was this? A dim memory went through her mind. Cutting. Food. Slice, chop... Yes, it was something to chop and slice. But much stronger, sharper, shinier.

This would do.

She stepped back through the spidery hole she made in the window, feeling so much more alive already. Better than she was before this evil, this sickness. She was certainly alive now, she thought. Much more alive than before.

And ah, that was when the thought finally came to her. The food she wanted. What it was called, it came.

People.

~

I did not say a word to Artie after that, but his side glances toward me let myself know he was still continuously watching and checking on me. It was an entirely new feeling I hadn't felt before, to have someone right there, making sure you were alright. Most people let me alone, didn't care. Left me to my own stuff. Artie almost seemed selfless to me.

We had been walking along for twenty minutes or so when I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, so I turned around. Artie's face was nearly blank, but his green eyes connected right into mine. Once he realized I was listening, he turned away, staring over my shoulder. I realized ahead that the road took a sharp left a few paces ahead, and that's just where he was looking.

"Once we turn there, we'll hit town." He said quietly, taking his hand off my shoulder. "So if you want to take a little break, let me know. Things might get a little bumpy."

"Just a horde of zombies. Only a little bumpy." I replied sarcastically, taking a seat with my back to a tree. "I'll catch my breath."

Artie smiled, taking a seat beside me. Once he was situated, I noticed how he took the little black bag from over his shoulder and set it gently in his lap. I couldn't help but notice the little details he had at every single move. How gently his fingers wrap around things, his skin never turning white from any sorts of touches or efforts. How his eyes narrowed only slightly when in work, tight in concentration at every little thing he did. He was curious. Like he should be the person you see in a painting with every detail crafted by an idea, a thought. Every angle animated, not a mistake made.

Then my eyes wandered back to the bag that was now in his lap. A zipper wrapped around the top of the cube, not a slit but a full lap that would make the entire top come off. It was good quality, with a nice shine and texture. I couldn't tell what it would hold, though. But eventually, my curiosity got the better of me, and I shuffled, looking at Artie.

“Ah, if you don't mind me asking...” I leaned in. “What's in the bag?”

His eyes flickered a moment, then drew off, duller than they were five seconds ago. He bit his lip, clearly feeling a wave of sadness, or simply uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have asked in the first place. I was ready to turn away then and there, but then Artie put his hand on the zipper and pulled it open.

At first I couldn't see what he was pulling out because everything seemed all dark and black in there, and whatever it was, wasn't light. That's when he reached his hand in, and I could hear his fingers grasp something hard. He then lifted his hand, and at first I couldn't tell what he was holding up. Then I noticed. In his hand was a large, shiny, professional camera.

“A camera?” I asked, confused. “It’s a fucking zombie apocalypse, and instead of food or weapons or something- you brought a camera?”

I regret saying what I did right away, because for the first time of the day I actually saw Artie’s spirits completely drop. He wasn’t the brave, kind boy I had known so far. Now he looked so broken down, cradling the thing in his arms as his chestnut locks ran against the tree. His eyes seemed even darker, lips pursed together. Like I just completely crushed him. And I felt it in my heart.

“No I mean... God. I’m so bad with words.” I put my head in my hands. “I’m sorry. I just- why a camera? I just can’t see what it would do.”

“Well...” He sighed, turning back towards me. “It’s ah, a long story... But it does, it does a lot. A lot to me.”

He rubbed his shoulder uncomfortably, and he looked how I did when I was talking about my books. Like both of those things just brought pain, desire- and that was when it all suddenly clicked to me. I thought about my words for a second, but then I managed to open my mouth and send my words straight towards him.

“I get that.” I shrugged. “But I mean, we’re sitting under a tree. We have time. I’m sure I could understand if you told me.”

“I guess.” Artie nodded slowly, coming back down to earth, breathing regularly and eyes getting more color. He slipped the camera back into the bag, zipping it up. “But can we make a deal?”

“Course.”

He cleared his throat, scooting a little closer to me, bringing his knees up. Whatever he wanted, I wouldn't think it would be so crazy considering the world was ending.

“When we make it through this hell,” He began, raising his brows and flexing like he was getting up from sleep. “And I swear we will, we will keep our secrets between us.”

“Ok.” I figured it was a clear enough deal, considering there was truly nobody we could ever tell people to that we tell each other. “Now, I'm ready for a story.”

Before Artie began, we had a little minute of silence. It could have been more manageable had birds actually been chirping and we could hear the lull of an old man humming along the trail, but Artie had closed his eyes tightly, clearly reliving something painful of some sort so there was no way I could rush him. But finally, he opened his eyes gloomily and spoke slowly and softly.

“Well I mean, we never went to school together or anything. Hardly know each other. But ah, I was always that guy, you know? The high up senior boy. Always surrounded by people, you know? I don't know how it happened. I guess it was who I spoke to, that I could... I could do more shots than anyone else when I got pulled out to some party. I'm not proud of it. In fact, that's really the point of my story.” He cleared his throat, rubbing his fingers together. Taking a few breaths before continuing on. “And well, everyone would be on the football team. Basketball. Some shit, you know? But I wasn't like them, really. I'm just some dreamer who would rather sit on a hill and take pictures of a sunset than down a red solo cup or crash a football game. So for years I would do all these things, try football,

basketball, theatre, swimming, anything people wanted me to do. Whatever they thought I should do. When instead I just wanted to take pictures, put headphones on, paint a landscape, I don't know. But when I saw you outside and I saw that was happening, I guess it was just instinct to grab the camera. Because no matter what happens, I don't want to lose myself. I don't want to forget.”

There were so many thoughts now roaming through my head that I couldn't reply right away. Now that Artie really explained himself to me, I could look into those green eyes of his and see the way he looks upon life, hungry for the beauty and inspiration of it. But I couldn't lie, he was attractive on the eyes and with his kind, engaging personality- there was no way anyone could ever look past him. I wasn't sure how to reply. So I guess I said what I would have wanted to hear.

“I'm sorry.” I looked to him, my voice almost in a whisper.

“That's all right.” He shrugged, looking up into the sky. “At least I'm free now.”

I wrinkled my forehead, confused at his reply. But I couldn't get the chance to ask what he meant, because suddenly Artie was rising to his feet, pushing his hair back with a spare hand. He then held it out, and I took his grasp, easily being pulled up considering how fit he was. Now that I thought about it, we were probably seated for around ten minutes and I had managed to catch my breath and ready myself despite the deep conversation we just had.

“You good?” He asked, hoisting his camera bag back over his shoulder.

I nodded, slowly advancing towards the left turn that would lead into the edge of downtown Winslow Woods. I would never want to go there in a million years considering the condition of the human race, but Artie and I had no food, weapons, anything, not even a location we were heading to. ‘Away’ I thought to myself.

I only made it about five steps forward when Artie’s longer strides overtook me, and he brushed past me, a protective hand making sure I wouldn’t pass him. This was when I brought the sharp looking stick I grabbed in the woods in front of me, ready to clobber anything that moved. And when we went around the corner and the edge of town came into view, I was almost surprised. It was silent.

Winslow Woods was your general upper middle class town established some years ago that looked pretty but didn’t feel pretty. It was gorgeous, nobody could deny that. Fresh flowers were always potted outside of stores, and the street and sidewalk was a nice color, with a good, smooth texture. Bikes would always be on the holders on the sidewalk, fountains always spewing in every direction. The stores were all small businesses, with cute little French names that sold things for much more than they should, but were purchased anyway. And the food was all Americanized food from around the world from sushi to Mexican to Italian, but mostly Italian.

But the people were what made the town ugly. Most inhabitants of Winslow Woods were people like my parents who simply weren’t as wealthy or involved. The wives had their little gossiping chit-chats, talking of the little stores they planned on opening that would eventually die out after a year. And their husbands would go on to work at jobs nobody could

possibly enjoy doing, sitting at desks working with numbers and statistics and whatnot so they could bring back enough money to support their three floor, beautiful home that had been redone at least three times in the past ten years. There, the children would grow up and do some sport, some activity. Their parents would always say on how they're the next big thing and oh so talented, but they were no different from anyone else. Except for the strays. The people like Artie and I who weren't quite like the rest of people at Winslow Woods. Because we aspire for different things. Dream of things nobody else does.

But Winslow Woods was nothing like that today. Instead, it was bare. I expected it to be crawling with zombies, but I was wrong. I guess they had moved on to somewhere else, maybe found something to eat. Maybe I was simply dreaming. Wouldn't that be a night.

We advanced slowly upon the town. Sure, we were only on the quietest end with a little drug store, gas station, and spread out café's and bakeries. Some cars were on the road, others had run off. And there was a small, lingering smell of decay even though there was nothing dead or rotting in sight. I glanced around back and forth, wondering where we should go first.

"Where do we go?" I whispered quietly to Artie, who had stopped as well.

"Gas station wouldn't be a bad idea." He shrugged. "Don't know about weapons, but there'll be food and stuff."

"I was thinking the drug store." I said, not taking off my gaze from it. "Medicine, y'know..."

“That works. Let’s get what we can and meet back here in ten, alright? Be careful.” I didn’t realize it before, but Artie had lifted up my hand and was staring into my eyes with a strong sense of urgency.

Instead of replying, I flashed him a small, soft little smile that I figured he read considering he gave one back and turned around. I suppose there was a new air of confidence, considering we couldn’t hear any crazy moaning or see any sudden movements. It wouldn’t be a problem at all getting supplies.

After a few steps, I made it to the front door and gently pushed open the door. Right away, I heard a shrill ding and I froze, sweat building on my brow. It was the door, but it could attract the attention of something... but after standing there for a full thirty seconds, I had confidence it attracted the attention of none, and I carried on into the store.

It had a fresher smell than there was outside. I wouldn’t mind spending more time in here, did Artie not expect me back in ten minutes. I knew my objective, though. Medicine. Food. Weapon. At the front of the store there was a small navy blue duffle, so I snagged that and advanced toward the meds and food.

There was nothing that could be vital towards survival in the food. Well, there was food, but nothing I could live off of. Just some bagged stuff and bottled water, but I didn’t waste my time. I filled a third of my bag with the food, turning back towards the meds. In went some fever pills, painkillers, gauze, anything I knew how to use. There were a few other things I didn’t recognize, but I threw in because they seemed useful.

As I advanced towards the back of the store, I began to think of ideas for a weapon. My walking stick could batter some of the zombies off- but would be of no use killing them unless I was in a situation like the woods. It was better I got something more powerful, more lethal.

I thought of a gun as I slipped some canned food into my bag. A shot in the head would kill a zombie, surely. And it was more than certain there would be a nice little pistol snug in a drawer at the front of the store. I was about to turn around and see if my guess was correct when I got a thought. Ammo. I wasn't sure how many shots I could get out of a gun, but I know I wouldn't have any extra. Ammo was a problem. Using a gun just wouldn't help in our case.

Coming to my senses, I decide a weapon would be the last thing I find. As far as I could tell, there weren't any of the mutilated beings in sight and I still had a few minutes before Artie wanted me back. I wasted no space in my bag. I put as much of the food into my bag I could, steering away from fruits or meats. Those could rot, and I wasn't sure how long this would last, but dry foods would last me longer.

When there was just a little more space left, I slung the duffel over my shoulder and made for the front of the store. It was as quiet as it was as I entered, not a zombie soul in sight and the only other living thing being Artie across the street. I would suspect there would be something I could use if necessary towards the front desk, and I was only feet away when something sent a chill up my spine. Like I was being watched, eyes on my back. I was only thinking this for a matter of seconds before suddenly a, thick, clammy arm closed around my neck.

My first instinct was shooting my arms upward and grabbing the arm that had now closed around me and given me the inability to breathe. The skin felt like dry leather with wiry hairs shooting up, but I wasn't able to twist around and see the face of my assailant. One thing was for certain, though, he was no zombie. His skin would be yellowed and rough if he was.

I tried choking out a scream, but his grip tightened and all I could do was attempt to gasp for breath, only to get nothing. I fought against his grip, jumping up and lurching my body side to side in attempt to escape his grasp. That was when I heard the voice of whoever was attacking me.

"I gotcha!" A grumbling voice that probably came from a middle aged man who smoked far too much. "You aren't gonna bite me! This is my place!"

When he was speaking, his grip loosened slightly and I managed to gasp in a breath and hiss out pieces of words. "I... n... zo... be..."

"Not me! I'm gonna lock this place up and you aren't going to get me!" His voice was crazed now, and I suddenly realized this man aimed to kill me.

Little black dots began to dance across my line of vision, and my knees began to buckle slightly. His grip got tighter and tighter, and I realized I didn't have much time before the black dots would get bigger and I'd pass out- and probably die. I desperately shot my eyes around, looking for something as I clawed at his arm. And that's when I got it. Just to my right was a small can of tuna.

I tore my right arm from his and snagged the tuna in my grasp. I could feel his hot, putrid breath on my neck, and that's just where I whipped the tuna can to. I swung it on a high arc, slamming the metal container into his

head. Right away, his arm fell from my neck and I saw my chance. Ripping free, I stumbled forwards towards the front of the store, but whirled around towards the attacker.

I thought I knew that voice from somewhere, and I was right. It was the drug store manager. I never knew his name, but he was one of the oddballs of Winslow Woods. People flocked to the local Walgreens instead of having to deal with this guy. He was in his fifties and has been smoking and drinking for as long as I could remember. And with his salt and pepper hair and dirty face, I couldn't see why anyone would want to hit the drug store instead of a Walgreens. And now, he was standing six feet from me, a hand over his head.

“Ah! You damn zombie! I'll kill you!”

He made another lunge for me, but I could tell he had been drinking. Sure, he managed to nearly choke me to death, but now that we were running he wasn't as good on his feet as he should be. Not to mention, he thought I was one of them. I grabbed another can, this time a large one of beans, and held it at my side.

“I'm normal, god dammit!” I waved my arms over my head as the store manager stared into me. “I'm not one of them!”

But he clearly wasn't listening, because he continued to fly towards me. I jumped towards the front desk, looking for that gun I was wondering about before. I could hold him back. Even someone who was drunk wouldn't try choking me again if a pistol was leveled at his chest.

I was almost there when I tripped over something, and on the ground I realized there was string tied across the path to the desk. It was a trap, but a

pathetic one, and the manager did say he was going to stake this little place off. The string caught me, but that wouldn't hold off a horde. And just when I began to rise to my feet again, a rough hand closed around my foot.

I kicked out, thrashing to escape. My tuna blow on his head had slowed the store manager down, but now he was crawling towards the rest of me and Artie was nowhere in sight. It had to be ten minutes by now, surely. He had to realize something was wrong when I wasn't there. But I had to get rid of the manager somehow. And when I looked left, right by lower drawers, I saw a glass box tipped in red. And inside, a fire axe.

I guess that would do.

I lifted the can of beans up and shattered the glass with a hard, rough slam. None of the pieces fell against me, but I made sure not to lay a hand in the broken glass. The store manager tried pulling me away, but I dropped the now dented can of beans and got the tips of my fingers on the axe. Just a little closer... It was on the hook, waiting... but he pulled against me.

I wasn't going to let this happen, get killed by someone who wasn't even the enemy. With a gasping breath, I plunged forward against his grasp and with a last effort, closed my hand over the fire axe. I ripped it off from the hook, whirling around. But this last, squeamish effort had pushed me out of sorts. Right when I was ready to hold the axe until the man backed off, it flew from my hands just as I stared into his eyes. And buried itself in his skull.

My body froze completely. Just like that, it came loose from my sweaty palms. I didn't want to hurt anybody. Not anyone who hadn't changed. And the light faded from his eyes, slowly. From the reddened,

drunken olive eyes to ones that had no life at all. And then his grasp on my foot softened, and he fell away, his blood not even changing the shade of red that was on the fire axe. My blood turned cold, and I began backing away. Lip trembling. Just as Artie came flying into the store.

He shot around the turn, right at the entrance to the desk where I was hovering over the body of the store manager. He looked just about as frozen as I was, turning pale. But he was far stronger inside and out as I was, and he was the first to speak.

“Kori, oh Jesus. What happened?” He held his palms away from him, advancing slowly towards the mess. “He’s no zombie, I heard a commotion. Kori...”

I buried my face in my hands. “Oh god. I didn’t mean to. He was a drunk, Artie. He tried strangling me. I... oh god. I killed him.”

The tears rolled down my cheeks, but I made no fierce and gasping breaths. Artie was right. We had made a massive commotion, and I didn’t want to make things worse. But I couldn’t find a way to pull myself away from the body.

“Look, we can talk, Kori. Just take my hand.” He took a hand from what I noticed was a big bag of supplies on his back. “Come on, Kori.”

“I killed a man.”

“Okay.”

“He’s dead because of me.”

“Okay, Kori.”

I sniffled, slowly coming towards Artie. My mind, still slightly on the topic of survival, lifted the fire axe from the man's now split head. I had never seen something so gruesome in my life. "Don't you care that I killed him?"

"What do you want me to do, punish you?" He shook his head, looking into me. "I don't know what happened, but you said he was drunk and tried to strangle you. And as far as I can tell, we're going to have to do a fair bit of killing if we want to live."

"But he wasn't even one of them, he was-" I was about to go on further, but Artie had turned away. He strolled towards the back of the store, and after ten seconds passed he returned with my duffle.

"Artie-"

"Shh!"

I narrowed my eyes, looking at him. Instead of the forgiving face he had on, now he appeared extremely concerned and looking back and forth. I could see a small bit of sweat appearing where his reddish locks started, and he seemed much tenser, as tense as I was a minute ago.

I pondered calling his name again, but something held me back. The ember that appeared in his eyes, the way his hand was up, telling me to hold off. That was when I realized his other hand was slowly advancing towards a golf club he had sticking out of his bag. When his fingers closed around it, I began to hear something. Like a hum. At this point, he gave my bag to me and I tossed it over my back, not breaking eye contact once. The hum got louder, and now I could hear small hisses and yells. That was when I realized it. They heard our commotion.

“Should we run?” I ask, my voice just above a whisper.

Artie held his golf club out in front of him. “Yeah. We run.”

3.

Artie was the first out of the front of the door. In a whisper I had warned him about the ringing, and with a swift takedown of the bell on the door we were out. We were wary at first, my bloodied fire axe held in front of my face, and I felt a new power course through my veins. I couldn't see anything yet, and Artie definitely couldn't considering he was as frozen as I am.

However, the hum was in the air. The moan, the proof they were still there. And it was gradually getting louder. Artie nodded to me, and we set at a jog down towards the gas station. Keep going in that direction, and it would hit Winslow High in a little over a mile. That is- if things didn't go wrong. I wasn't so sure it would be a clear track with what we were hearing.

As we ran across the street, I couldn't help but pay attention to the blood that was wet and drying on my knuckles. It swam into the cracks of my skin, already dark and caked on the edges. I tried rubbing it out with my palms, teeth clenched together with my blood racing. I couldn't see anything but the split skull. The man's grip around my neck. The blood was the cynical reminder of what had just happened. And I was so caught up in it, I hardly noticed the shape that appeared down the street.

I knew I wasn't imagining what I was seeing, so I froze and turned around, fire axe hanging from one hand. Actually, scratch that. I most likely was dreaming.

Down the road at an intersection was a lady advancing forward at a lame trot. She was definitely already a zombie considering her skin was a gross yellow and turning green, and I could see there was a dribble coming

from her mouth. But that's not what surprised me. Covering her rotten body was a bone white wedding dress with layers and layers of luxurious fabric that dragged behind her. Her hair, now frizzed, was half up but now falling apart. I could see she now only had one pearly shoe, and even that was coming off. It was like... I wasn't even sure what it was like. My mind was still processing what I was seeing when more shapes came into view. All with their skin as gross and yellow as the bride. But there were men in suits, and all the other women had on brightly colored dresses, but none as exuberant as the bride's. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A true crashed wedding.

“Oh man. Oh man oh man oh man...” Artie shook his head, and that was when I realized he saw them too, advancing towards us, clawing at the air. “Come on Kori!”

He sprinted forwards in the direction of a small little alley with vines reaching up the brick walls. I chased after, thankful I had something with laces instead of flats. But it was six by now, and it would be getting cold in the early September day. My blood was pumping, keeping my body hot for now. However, when Artie and I sprang forwards, we heard the sounds of over a hundred other footsteps too. They spotted us.

We splashed through puddles on the ground that were leaked from piping in the building next to us. With my head down, I realized the blood that leaked onto my shoes was swirling off at each step, and my heart was calm for a moment when I saw the scene slinking away. But my relief was short-lived. When we shot out of the other end of the alley, I saw a dark shape, heard a grunt, and then the world was spinning all around me.

I ended up on the ground somehow, all the air in my body nearly coming out of me. I leapt forward onto my knees, as my brain quickly processed that moment. There was something- I was hit by something soft. Where was Artie? My eyes shot around as I grabbed for my axe and pushed myself to my feet, still hearing the ring of the fight in my ears.

Artie came into my view about two yards from me, on the ground in a heap. I suspected he was the shape that had bowled me over, and I noticed what it was that did it to him. An extremely large zombie man in a suit was hovering over him, a champagne glass in one hand that was cracked and small pieces were hitting the ground as he waved it around. Artie was a hero. I knew he would spring up in just a minute, but the brute was three steps from him, and he was still coughing on the ground. And the steps of the other zombies could be heard.

“Oh lord.” I muttered, shaking my head. My bones cracked, but in a desperate effort I leapt over Artie, swinging my axe in front of my face. I made a cut forward, but I wasn’t used to the weapon and it made a gash on its thigh instead of anything lethal. I was thrown off from the weight of it, and seeing the moment, I realized the zombie had thrown his glass at my face.

I ducked out just in time. This time, I was ready. I moved a hand further up the grip, and slammed it into the gut of the brutish man. Instantly, I saw a splash of red, and the beast fell over backwards, as disjointed as Artie was. That would do it, but there were so many more coming. They had to be turning into the alley now. I wasted no time. I scrambled back over to Artie, who was just getting to his knees.

“I owe you.” He rasped, getting up while catching his breath.

“I think you’ve saved my life far more times than I have to you.” I shook my head, placing the golf club back in Artie’s grasp. “You good?”

“Better than ever.” He teased, springing forwards.

Our first few steps were slow, and Artie’s breathing was still labored, but eventually we got back into stride, making way down the road and through an open park. There was a gazebo in the middle, a small pond going through it where not a single bird floated. On a normal day, friends would hang out on a bench or couples would stand in the gazebo. Not today.

The school had to be just under a half mile away now, but the mutilated were hot on our trail. I could see the shapes of one or two a road back, slowly getting farther away. But we couldn’t run forever, and I could see the sky was advancing to a shade of orange, and daylight wouldn’t last forever either.

We got to a point where I could no longer see any of the zombies behind us, but they were heard clear as day. But my throat was stinging and the sweat went down me in rivers. I was a blogger, not used to this exertion. Artie, on the other hand, looked like he could tackle five more miles. But that wasn’t the case now, since he suddenly spun to a stop and began ushering me into one of the stores on the road we were on. I didn’t oblige, I’m not sure my lungs could take anymore.

The second we dash through the door, I’m overcome with smells of flowers and spice. Well, that made sense. I now realize we had run straight into Tousseau’s Soap Shop. At every turn was a sculpted bar of a different color, the smell obscuring any of the rotting coming from outside. Obscuring

any of our smell. I'm not sure the zombies could smell us very well in the first place... but this was brilliant.

“Follow me.” Artie motioned with his hand, sliding towards a door in the back. I wondered if we were exiting so soon, but that thought was false when he opened it to a staircase. He took two steps at a time, and I followed, though at a much slower pace. I closed the door behind me, even though I wasn't sure what we were getting into.

When we reached the top of the stairs, all was dark until I heard a click and an old overhanging light lit the room we had walked in to. I was surprised at what Artie brought me into. It was what looked like a small apartment above the soap shop. The floor was a rough wood, and a desk was in front of a window that looked out to the street we came from. There was a box in the middle of the floor that was closed, and a closet was off to the side. Overall, it appeared like a storage place more than anything. But it could work.

Artie put a finger to his lips, and slowly tip-toed to the window. There, we saw that the entire wedding party had made it to the street but were dumbly standing around. They lost our trail in our soap excursion, and didn't know what else to do. Artie and I didn't make a sound. In fact, we crouched so only our eyes peeked over the desk so we wouldn't be seen. We must have been there for an hour, all the way until the sun set and the moaning became less and less. We could finally breathe when the bride let out a screech, motioning with hands and walking off in the direction they came. The entire wedding party followed after, looking as hung-over as ever.

We breathed, stretching out our locked limbs at that point. Artie leaned against the wall, and I laid, face down. The running and the standing

in place took its toll, and I was done. So tired. My eyelids were heavy, and the wooden floor suddenly felt unusually comfy. Just one second...

“Two hours. Damn.” Artie’s voice was hushed from across the room. I then sat up. “No, you can rest if you-“

“I have so much I want to know.” I said, shaking my head. “What is this place, what even...” my voice trailed off, and I played around with a strand of my hair.

“I get it.” I could see his arms were wrapped around his knees, and he was looking at the ground. “One of my, ah- someone that used to be one my friends, his uncle works up here. This is his place, the French guy. Mr. Tousseau. When we had nothing better to do we would just come up here. They’d pull out some weed, and I’d be right here.” He pointed at the ground, eyes glazing over. “Watching. Not even doing anything. And now...”

I nodded as he spoke. In just two hours, I had learned a lot about the boy. “I get it. I just, I don’t get this. Everything happening. Its so crazy.” I rubbed my hands together. “Crazy...”

I could see there was a crack in the window, and that would explain the chills on my arms. I was cold, and it was night. Normally, I would be relaxed in my bed but now there was just the wood floor and a box. Heat was made from my hands, but it wasn’t enough. As if looking into me, Artie stood up and advanced towards the closet. I didn’t look to see what he was doing, but suddenly I felt a soft blanket draped over my shoulders. And there Artie was, sitting next to me, biting his lip, staring out like he always does.

“I’m so tired.” I say, feeling the weight of my body once more.

“Hold on.” Artie then said, reaching for his camera bag.

I narrowed my eyes, confused. He pulled out the professional device, turning it on and adjusting it in ways I didn't even know. And I stayed there, blanket over my body, moonlight leaking through the window. Artie made his way to the desk, leaning against it and zooming in slightly, his touch gently pressing against the holds.

My gaze fell onto him, as I wasn't quite sure what else to do. The camera clicked, and Artie let it drop as he put a lens cap back on. The bag welcomed the camera as it did before, and Artie tucked it away. He came back down beside me, looking left into me. Our eyes met, both with the reflection of the stars and the moon.

"I just want to remember this moment." He said to me, turning back to the window. "I just want pieces to keep with me, if that makes any sense. Memories are... they're special."

I nodded to him, though I wasn't sure why a picture of me was anything important to him. But with his words, I leaned down on the wood, head resting on the cold surface. The blanket wrapped around my body, but my legs stuck out and the cold was cynical, cackling at me as it dug its icy fingernails into my legs and face. Even my hair didn't block it off. Illinois nights were freezing.

"I'm so cold." I mumbled, trying to get deeper in the abyss of the blanket Artie gave me. "I am not dressed for this."

"I don't have too much." He shook his head, running a hand through his red locks. "Just..."

"Just what?" I asked, looking up.

“Here, come here.” He bit his lip, scooting closer to me on the ground. And suddenly, Artie wrapped his arm around me, and that was when an electric charge shot into my heart and made everything work ten times faster. The blood flew through my body from his touch, for this was nothing I had ever felt before or intended to, but his warmth spread into my body and I was content.

He then laid down beside me, arms wrapped around my body. I went from being frozen to completely toasty, his grasp gentler than any bed could ever be. A few gasping breaths came out from me, for I was still full of surprise, but then I fell back into a rhythm. Relaxation. Just me, Artie, and the moon.

I got warmer and warmer, everything heavier and heavier as I allowed myself to forget. The zombies. The terror. Everything. The only thing I was thinking about was for some reason Artie’s camera, pointing at this moment here and now, clicking and capturing it and putting it into the drive of my heart.

And then a final wave of exhaustion overcame me, and my eyes closed, losing sight of everything but me and Artie’s Heartbeats, beating and beating at the very same time.

4.

I can't lie, I didn't sleep very well that night. Even though Artie stayed by my side the entire time, never taking his contact away, my dreams were a confused mess of thoughts and nightmares. The storekeeper was the worst. I couldn't stop seeing his lifeless body on the floor of the store... skull split wide open and blood pouring onto my shoes.

But my thoughts turned into questions. I had nothing but questions. Yesterday was hellish, unreal. I couldn't believe the fact that there had actually been... zombies going after Artie and I. How my parents had probably become them too. But I couldn't see how all of this could have happened. Artie said a bunch of graves in a nearby town had been dug up, a bunch of bodies gone. Holes in the earth where they should be resting in peace. Then, apparently people had been changing. Yellowed skin, green glob coming from their mouths with bloodshot eyes. I saw that part, along with other bodies, ones that seemed skeletal. Like they had come right out of the ground.

Like they came right out of the ground.

So I guess that may be the source of everything. What if the bodies weren't dug up at all? What if they dug themselves up? My mind flashed to different scenes. Then over to Martha, how she looked like herself besides the mutilations and... the bite mark on her leg. Everything began to piece itself together now. Zombies rise from the earth, they bite people, the people become infected, right? The thought seemed solid. All these ideas came at me while I was half asleep and the entire thought of it got my heart racing. I turned over on the ground, facing a sleeping Artie. Now that he was unaware

of everything around us, I got the chance to really study him further than when we were running for our lives.

His arms had come off of me, and both were close to his chest as he slept. With his eyes closed, I could see how full his lashes were and how gently he breathed when in rest. He looked so calm and peaceful, a completely different boy than the one grabbing my hand and racing into the trees.

But there was something... something more. His soft lips, the rich hair and eyes- It was like I had seen him somewhere before. That his attributes did that to me, like I knew him before, saw him before. But it wasn't possible. I didn't even know his name until he was pulling me away, still didn't know much about him. In spite of this, the curious familiarity continued to nag at the back of my throat.

I stood up, gently pushing the blanket off of me and sliding it onto Artie instead. The sun was beginning to rise as I could see through the window, but there still was a faint chill in the air. In my jean pocket, there was my phone, which I realized had been bumping up against my thigh the entire day. I suppose that's what adrenaline could do to you. Leaning against the window, I turned it back on. It buzzed to life, but in the top right indicated no signal. Figures.

My finger hovered over my blog application. A day ago, that was my life. Quiet Kori, blogging away. Pushing my private school homework to midnight because I was too lazy to do it earlier. Because the wifi was rich and buzzing. I almost laughed out loud. Artie sure had opened my eyes to the outside world, along with the zombies.

I gave in, and the application opened. But any ounce of hope I had drained straight away. It flashed to a dark blue, and went no further. No connection, no blogging. I had no way of knowing anything about what was happening. If it was only here, or all over the world. That was when I switched over to my text messages. I knew there was no way to get ahold of anyone, but I just wanted to see my thoughts before hell broke loose. Two days before, a message to my father about a dinner party. Earlier yesterday, a message to my grandmother to see how she was doing after hip surgery. And the last one I sent was an hour before my excursion with Artie, to my best friend, Rosie. Saying a quick little ‘bye’ before she went to acting practice.

I shook my head, sliding my phone back into my pocket to keep as a casual reminder of how things used to be. Maybe they still were that way. Maybe this was some joke being played on me and people would jump out of the shadows laughing. But I found this highly unlikely.

A loud banging caused me to jolt and leap back in alarm. It was coming downstairs, in the main part of the soap shop. Sounded like the front entrance. I was going to say something, but the noise had woken Artie up. He got up to his knees, pushing the blanket off of him. When I wake up, I’m tired, groggy. But the noise brought Artie instantly to his senses. His eyes shot back and forth, testing to see if he was imagining what we heard. But then the noise happened again, and a small amount of dust fell from the ceiling.

“Shh.” He put a finger to his lips and stood up, creeping over to the window where I was standing. I didn’t dare look over. I saw him leaning out, staring at the sidewalk in front of the shop where we heard the noise. Almost

as soon as he looked, he leapt back in alarm. He then proceeded to slide over to his golf club on the ground, and picked it up along with my axe, tossing it into my grasp.

“Look, we’ve got a small group of zombies down there. We need to be really quiet and get out of here, we aren’t too far from the high school now. I go first, there’s a back exit down the stairs.” He held out his hands, motioning the plan as he spoke. Just then, another jolt. “We get past the zombies, and-“

“Artie?”

He furrowed his brow. “Yeah?”

My fingers slid down to the phone in my pocket. Then, my eyes wandered outside where I could see a small grouping of the of the... the things bumping at the door. My flashbacks to the days before suddenly erupted in the mind, along with my hatred and fear for the things outside. I spun around.

“Can we... can we not call them zombies?” The words shook off of my tongue, my eyes tight. A small smile then crept to my lips.

“Ah, ok.” He gave me a strange look. “Why? What would you say we call them?”

My smile widened, mind slightly crazed as the memories continued to flash all around my head. It then faded, and I stared at the ground, face rested. “Its hard to think, that we are... in the center of a, a zombie apocalypse. A different name lessens the blow, yeah? Well, I just-“

I was going to continue when a flash suddenly came from my pocket. My hand slid my phone out, curious to see what it had to say, if connection

suddenly turned back on. But I was wrong. It was just a warning that had been going off for a week telling me I had a gigabyte of space left. A gigabyte. A...

“There’s a lot of them.” I nodded my head to Artie. “I miss my wifi. I declare we call them bytes. Because... of sentimental reasons.”

Artie looked confused for a split second, but he then dropped his head, tossing his golf club around, smiling and chuckling. He shook his head in a teasing way, softly sliding to the door and motioning for me. He didn’t stop tightening his cheeks, laughing softly.

“Well, Kori. We better get going, to escape the small, pathetic little megabytes before we look at a large group of gigabytes.” Artie showed his teeth, gently opening the door.

I laughed in return, walking softly after him. My fire axe was ready in my hands, light and powerful in my grip. Just minutes ago I had a tightening in my chest from what went on, but the lightness of our conversation had made my anxiety leave and be replaced with humor and energy.

Artie gave me a thumbs up, and started down the stairs. We went slowly at first, as they were creaking and who knew if the zo- if the bytes could open doorknobs. I placed my feet on the edges of the stairs, not wanting to hit the creakiest areas. I learned the anatomy of stairs on my days sneaking down to our bottom floor to grab a glass of milk in the middle of the night.

When we neared the bottom that was when we noticed the bytes were continuing to bang at the door. But it was old, ready to be replaced. It was pushed inward, threatening to fly open any second. Their banging was

louder, and that was the second where Artie broke to a run. Trying to sneak past them would be hopeless. He dashed around the turn, nearly falling over himself, but I followed after. He was right. Right in back was a door leading to an alley.

This door seemed a little nicer looking than the front one. It opened without a squeak, and the two of us jumped out, closing it behind us. The soap shop was fine for a night, but too weak to stay in. The best bet was the high school. Even though I went to private school, I knew the ins and outs. Knew how it ran. Been there plenty of times. And it was just a little under a half mile away. When the door finally closed behind us, I knew that was the signal. I leapt forward, Artie taking up the rear.

“Just go straight.” He hissed into my ear. You’ll see it.”

I didn’t reply, instead just ran along the wall until we hit a street. An intersection, in fact. I knew what road we were on. If we went straight and looped under a bridge, the school was just to the left. It was on the edge of town, in a nice little hilly area. But the school was large. I was certain I was the only member of Winslow Woods who went to a private school.

There weren’t any bytes in sight besides a lumbering man in a plaid shirt who was standing in the middle of the road. He turned to us, a moan escaping his lips. A noise, were it heightened, could attract a lot more of his kind. Artie took care of it. With a quick whip of his club, the man’s neck snapped backwards and he fell in a heap. We carried on, the bridge in sight. A new adrenaline pumped through my veins. We could make it.

I leapt over the body of the man, not looking down to see the mess of it. I knew better. I mean, I knew that I needed to kill these things if I wanted

to survive. But it didn't mean I had to enjoy it. It didn't mean I had to look down and see the dead eyes staring up at me.

We made it to the bridge after a minute or two, and we took a breather in the darkness. The only byte we encountered was the man Artie dealt with. Otherwise, nothing. Not a single sound, only our heavy breathing and my axe as it thumped against my thigh. I prayed I wouldn't have to use it any other time today.

“School on a Sunday. Yum.” Artie teased to me, flipping his golf club and taking off at a jog to the school.

I smiled, racing after. It had only been a day, but Artie and I had begun teasing and talking like we had known each other for a month. Brought together by the need for survival. And I realized that I would be dead without him, for he saved my life so many times I lost count. I made one up to him, but no matter what, I got the feeling I would never stop owing the mysterious bronze haired boy.

When we escaped from the bridge that was when the school came into view. It was at the end of this long road, cold and still in all of its grand angles. A huge parking lot was on the side, steps and steps going up to the front entrance where pillars planted themselves down. It seemed to go on for ages, slight amounts of landscaping going around the endless building and the football field being across the street- and huge. But my heart dropped as my gaze dropped. In front of us, on the street, where maybe ten or so bytes. All our age. Much like us.

Looking like they came right out of school.

“Oh god.” Artie took a step back, his golf club nearly falling from his hand. “Jesus, its Sam. And Connor. And... oh man.”

They hadn't seen us yet, and Artie was now all out of sorts. I pulled him aside, pushing him into the grass and making him lay down as I did the same. His eyes bulged, hand turning white from his grip on his club. I got the feeling Artie knew these people.

“Artie?” I whispered to him. “Who are they?”

I thought he would take a minute, but he spoke back right away. “The boys I was hanging with. That were joking around. I cant kill them, Kori. I cant do it.” He wiped a hand over his nose. He seemed as broken as he was about his camera, which was still slung over his shoulder.

“Lets sneak around, alright?” I tell him, rising him up and shaking his shoulders. “We don't have to fight them.”

He nodded, getting to his feet. There was a stretch of grass if we didn't want to use the road, but a mess of trees and bushes were strewn along the way. If we made a run for it- and watched our step- we could make it. Artie got the same idea as me. He gave me one last nod, and set off at a run. But he was quiet. He moved in such a way where the balls of his feet hit before anything and the grass only rustled slightly.

I, on the other hand, was not so careful. I was small, so being loud on my feet wasn't the problem. It was how clumsy I was. My jeans caught on bushes, and my hands whipped into trees. Before I knew it, my shirt snagged on a branch but Artie was farther ahead, masked by a few trees. He couldn't see me if he tried. I whelped, trying to pull free. But I realized the problem I was in when one of the bytes staggered towards me.

He had the same build and height as Artie, but dusty brown hair sat atop his head instead. He sported the typical bloodshot eyes, but I could tell they were normally icy blue, with loose jeans and a football jersey. A big guy, probably someone popular and fit in his better days. And he wanted me. At the same time, there was this nagging voice in my head. He was a friend of Artie's. What if there was a cure or something? How could I kill a-

He lunged.

Well, screw that. I swung my fire axe around, but this byte was better than any of the ones we dealt with. He ducked out, reaching a hand for me. But I couldn't make noise, I couldn't make Artie come back and deal with me fighting with one of his ex-friends. I needed to make quick work of it.

He smacked me in the jaw, and I forced myself not to yell out in pain. That was when he opened his mouth, revealing the green slime that had replaced itself with saliva. More flashbacks. The bite marks on all of the infected. How this guy seemed to really, really think I was tasty or something.

"Oh hell no!" I hissed, bringing my axe back around and burying itself in his shoulder.

It was enough. He toppled over, falling into a bush. I never ran harder. Artie had to be waiting for me on the other side, wondering if they got me. Maybe he had to deal with them too. I prayed not. He was strong and brave, but I got the feeling his heart was too good to smack someone he got smoothies with using a bloodied golf club.

I did catch up to Artie, and I was right. He was waiting for me, a desperate look on his face. Like he thought I got caught up in his crowd. I

had- but I would never let him know. And the fact that I knew I would hold the truth from him made my heart ache. But I had more important things to do.

“Right. Lets go.” He nodded, out of breath.

We dashed across the street, encountering no other bytes. The name for them stuck in both of our minds. It was a foolish joke that had lessened the stress of the situation. Made things seem not so bad. Even though everything was now crazy.

My legs burned from our small fight scene and run here. The stairs going to the front entrance didn't help at all. But we succeeded in opening the doors, as they always were open up here, and we flew inside. A sense of safety overcoming us from the largeness of the building, and the wonderful room temperature.

“Where do we start?” I ask Artie, who begins walking down a hall on the left.

“I don't think anyone would be here. But it's pretty safe. I say we drop at the auditorium.” He motioned his hand forward, and I follow after.

It was a big place after all, the auditorium. It was the place I had been to the most here to watch performances of all sorts with Rosie. There were plenty of seats, a large stage set in front and a pit in front of that where the band usually plays. It was a nice place, old, beautiful. So quiet unless there was something going on inside. Then, it became even greater.

I didn't knew this end of the school very well, so I tracked after Artie who knew what he was doing better than I did. Eventually though, I began to recognize everything when we entered the main hall that lead to the

auditorium. There were ads and reminders plastered all over the halls, some fallen to the floor. Like there should be kids making way to class, but a great hand scooped them out and left everything empty.

Before long, the door to the auditorium loomed right before us. I was ready to push it in, but then a soft hand closed itself on my arm just before I did. I turned around to see Artie expressionlessly looking into my eyes.

“Hold on. I’m just saying, we might run into people around here. Some clubs and stuff meet on weekends sometimes. But if they’re... you know, different. I want to get out of here.” He told me, releasing me. “I just need to see if there’s anyone left.”

I nodded, throwing him an understanding glance. That was when I pushed the door in. With a click, it revealed the large and glorious auditorium, the lights curiously on and the netting removed from the pit. Like someone was in here, but left, leaving everything.

My gaze wandered around and about as I walked on towards the stage. That’s when I realized how hungry I was. My stomach was grumbling, and I put a hand to it. A hand that now had splattered blood on it from Artie’s friend. Shyly, I tucked it away, rubbing it on my jeans. But not before a dash of movement caught my eye in the pit.

I squinted, stepping forward slowly. I could have imagined it, sure. But I had been through a lot of crazy shit in the past 24 hours, and I got the feeling I wouldn’t be imagining anything more. Anything was possible. So I lifted up my fire axe, putting a hand on the wood of the pit. I took a deep breath before looking over the edge, leaning in.

That was when an object suddenly slammed into my face, and everything became nothing at all.

5.

“God, I didn’t know it was her. I thought it was one of them.”

“Well, I didn’t think anyone would be at the pit.”

My eyes were shut, even though my mind had awakened. My head was throbbing, the right side especially where something cold and hard had smacked me what felt like seconds ago. But judging from the voices, I had probably blacked out. The first voice was a girl. An extremely familiar sounding girl. The second voice, I could tell straight away was Artie. I was curious, so I kept my eyes closed as I listened on.

“We’ve been here since yesterday. The whole cast. But... we’re the only ones left now.” The girl’s voice trailed off.

“Jesus. It’s ok, we’re here. You don’t have to talk about it.” And there was Artie, being his normal calming self.

There was a pause, and the girl spoke again. “Everyone else should be back soon. They dropped towards the cafeteria to find some food.” I then felt a hand stroking my head, right where it was painful. “I feel terrible.”

“She’s tough, Rosie. She-“

My eyes fluttered open at the name. Rosie. The last person I texted before everything crashed. The person I could call my best friend, the person that matched the voice I was hearing. Somebody I genuinely knew and understood in all of this craziness. I flew upwards, encasing her in a tight hug.

I regretted the fast move, for a wave of dizziness instantly overcame me. But I held on, and I felt another set of arms wrap around me as well. When I felt alright, I pulled away, seeing Rosie's eyes looking right into me.

She was a little taller than me, but not much. Her frame was smaller though, and her small hands and feet gave her a soft look. Rich, very light reddish blonde hair went in wavy locks down her face, and creamy blue eyes stared gently back at me. She had on yoga pants and a simple pink tank top, and the outfit was for acting I would suspect. Well, of course. She was in a play for Winslow High, and she had left for it right before everything happened, as she had texted me. Maybe I had suspected she became a byte, like the rest of them. But here she was. Right in front of me.

“Oh my god, Kori. I'm so sorry for throwing a microphone at your face.” She shook her head, desperately giving me another hug. She pulled back. “I thought you were one of them.”

“Good news,” I started with a weak smile. “I'm here. I'm so happy to see you're ok.”

“Ugh, god.” She sat back, putting a lock of hair behind her face. “I was so worried. I wanted to text you, but all the lines are dead. I cant believe other people are ok.”

I was about to reply, as my heart had soared ten feet from knowing one of my best friends was alright, but then I heard a set of footsteps. It was Artie, kneeling down to us. He had on this smug little smile, throwing his arms over both of our shoulders. Both Rosie and I smiled at him in return, and Artie stayed in that foolish position until Rosie spoke up again.

“I see you met Artie.” She teased, and Artie sat back.

“Well, he saved my life.” I said with a shrug, letting my honesty flow. “He brought us here.”

“Well, this is wonderful.” He said, rising to his feet. “I’ll give you guys your time, I’m going to find the loo... A man’s gotta go.”

Artie walked off, hands behind his back as he jokingly whistled and scooted along. As if, now that we were safe, he let all of his troubles and desperations loose. I could see how people liked Artie so much. I mean, I knew both Arties now. The let me save you Artie, and now the school Artie. I liked how it felt to know he was right beside me, making sure I was ok. But I loved seeing him at ease even more.

Rosie was silently laughing, cheeks becoming redder until she finally shook her head and breathed when he exited the doors. I was smiling too, which was a rarity for me until now and all the crazy things I did with Artie. I was changing. I wasn’t sure if it was in a good way or bad.

“You know Artie?” I ask. I then shake my head. “Sorry. Stupid question. You go to school with him.”

Rosie grins, looking at me and then the door that Artie walked out of. “Yeah. Everyone knows Artie. But not many really know Artie. We’re pretty good friends. He’s really so much more than what he seems.”

I shyly look off. I learned this in our excursion, and I wasn’t sure how to tell Rosie this. So I guess she knew the Artie I knew as well. Well, Rosie was a really good kid. Never got in to trouble. Sweet as sugar, people would say. I guess that’s how we got along. It’s hard to not like Rosie. And she would never befriend Artie if she didn’t know the real him. So I guess it made sense.

Just then, I heard a side door open from above the stage. My head was clearing now, and I was pretty sure I wasn't imagining it. I knew I wasn't crazy when Rosie turned around too, her bottom lip quivering. But her eyes didn't grow wide, she didn't even flinch. I knew she didn't suspect any of the bytes to be coming, and then I looked back to what she said. The others went to get food. Ah, that would make sense then.

My assumption was correct. My heart beat quieter when instead of bytes, two girls and two boys came rolling from the stage. I knew them all, minus one of the boys, and who they were was not all that surprising. They were theatre kids, acting kids. The first girl that caught my eye was someone I had only spoken to a few times, but Rosie's words of wisdom filled me in on everything with the other theatre people. Her name was Natalie, Nat for short, and was the most energetic person I had ever met in my life. A sheer opposite of my own self. It was impossible for Nat to ever look unhappy or negative. It was as if a smile and wide, bright eyes were automatically built into her face. She did theatre, and always was given the happy, ADD style character. Those types of roles were practically pre-casted to her.

Just behind her was none other than Shawn Hacker. Everyone knew who the Hackers were. Shawn was the youngest of four brothers, a blonde haired, popular sophomore. Every one of his brothers were big in football, leading Winslow High to playoffs and whatnot. But Shawn found his calling in acting. He didn't sing, or dance, but was an upcoming star in plays. The kid could act.

And trailing behind the two of them, was one of the most interesting of all. Maggie Hansen. I had lunch with her and Rosie one time, and she was kind but quiet around me, which I found quizzical. After all, she was an

upcoming senior at the time like us with plenty of friends and scored leads all the time. Rosie had then told me her story, the things I didn't know about Maggie. She didn't know anyone as a freshman. Had moved from New York or something. No one bothered her when she went to try out for the musical with bracelets jangling on her wrists. And as the unknowing freshman, she scored one of the leads. People were amazed. That was when they tried to get to know to mysterious, brown haired and brown eyed Maggie Hansen. Rosie had told me she was shy at first, but became a friend of everyone. The freshman all the seniors loved. She had continued scoring leads, making her way up in rank. But Rosie told me there was more than that, for she knew her, like many other people, better than most. That under her jangling bracelets were marks of pain she could never rid of or bear to reveal. That her skin had taken far more bruises than it should have. And every day, she hid it all.

I could see the uncertainty in her walk, how she held her hands behind her back, a bag of fruit bumping against her leg. But she didn't seem even the slightest bit out of course compared to the boy behind her that I didn't know. He was a strange one, definitely a freshman from his build. He was walking back and forth, not really finding his feet. And upon his head was a cowboy hat.

“We got a lot of stuff, I got some-“ Nat began to say in her high-pitched, rolling voice. She then paused, her eyes meeting mine. “Oh my god, Kori, hey girl!”

“Hey Nat.” I said shyly. “Maggie, ah... Shawn. Nice seeing you all alive.” I took another breath, eyeing the freshman boy. “Sorry, I don't know who you-“

“It’s the doing of Satan.” He grumbled, popping a squat on the stage. “The spawns of Satan will get us.”

“Crazy crew kid, named Aaron I guess.” Rosie whispered into my ear as the other kids came down by the chairs too us. “Keeps muttering stuff about the devil. We don’t mind him.”

Nat came and sat next to me, Shawn beside Rosie and Maggie sitting a little farther off. They all put their food in the middle, except for Maggie who kept one of the sodas they gathered and took a sip. Everything was silent for a moment, even Shawn, who was known for how much he spoke and brought trouble to. But after a minute or so when everyone had grabbed a piece of food, Rosie sat up straight and addressed our group.

“Ok, everyone, as you can see, Kori is here. She made it with Artie, but he’s out at the moment.” I could tell that when Rosie said Artie’s name, Shawn curled up into a smile. “So they’re going to stay with us. They know what its like out there. The other cast may have made the bad decision of going out in it all, and they’re gone.” She bit her lip, eyes flickering. “But we know some things now that Artie told me. And we can make it through this.”

“Oh my god, Arties’ here?” Nat exclaimed, eyes widening. “I knew he was out in town and I thought he would be screwed when we knew what was going on.”

“We’re talking Artie.” Shawn laughed. “He’s legit.”

I felt a strange heat rising on my back. Shawn was a jokester, yeah, but I could tell he knew the Artie most people knew. Partying Artie. It hurt a little inside, knowing people still thought that. That in less than twenty-four

hours I could feel for him, know him. It almost scared me, how much the boy changed me in so little time. How many things he had done for me. That was when I thought back to five minutes ago.

“Artie should be back by now.” I said softly, rubbing my thumbs together.

“We can go get him.” Rosie offered, raising her head and widening her blue orbs.

“That’s alright.” I shook my head, rising to my feet. “I’ll go.”

Rosie looked like she was going to protest for a moment, but she let it be. All of us knew how safe the school was, how deep we were into it. Besides, as Shawn said, Artie was tough. Not that I actually thought something was wrong with him. He was probably just looking in a mirror, cleaning himself up. Which reminded me how much of a mess I probably looked.

After a walk to the end of the auditorium, I pushed open the door and turned to the right. The bathrooms were down there, just at the end of the hall and across from the library. Not too far, and if Artie was on a normal pace he would have been back two minutes ago.

When I made it to the bathrooms, I was amazed how quiet it was without anything going on. No kids were buzzing through the hallway. Nothing. I couldn’t hear a single soul, not even Artie. I expected to hear him whistling from inside the boy’s bathroom, but there was nothing. Hair rose up on my skin, and I warily stepped up to the door. Seeing as I couldn’t hear anything inside, I squeezed my knuckles together and gently tapped them against the door.

“Artie?” I said in a hushed voice into the bathroom. “You there?”

No answer. I furrowed my brow, waiting a full fifteen seconds before tapping my fist into the door louder than the first time. It echoed inside of the room. Not a step, not a voice. My body began to shake. What if he left? Or worse, what if something got him? It was all too much to bear.

I shook my head, pushing open the door. I didn’t look at first, in case he had actually been in there, needing privacy- but no movement caught my eye. So I turn around, looking in each corner of the bathroom. There was nobody in there. But I did notice a wash of red in one of the sinks, with paper towels clumped together over it. I guess Artie had been cleaning up. So where was he now?

I walked back out, but not before looking at myself in the mirror once. I was a mess. The bottom of my hair was tangled, dirt smudged all over my body. Light splashes of red were on both hands and my shirt, and tears were on the bottom. I wasn’t surprised only Nat decided to sit next to me. I could have been mistaken for one of them.

Pushing open the door, that was when anxiety took control over my body. Artie was nowhere to be found. Maybe he was just trying to play some joke, pop out of nowhere. But this was no time for that, not when we needed to survive. If he popped out now, I wouldn’t laugh. In the state I was in now, I may even slap him. But my Artie was gone. In the hall, my eyes looked all over. On both walls, there was nothing. Ceiling- nothing either. Not a mark- until I looked between my feet. There, a smudge of blood was on the floor. Rubbed in the direction of the door across the hall- to the library.

My head shook. “What are you doing in there, Artie?” I murmured, walking towards the library door. It definitely seemed open, and the handle was wet. He had to be in there.

I put my hands on the handle and pulled. The door swung open, and instantly I was taken aback, sent scrambling back over my feet. In front of me was a gruesome sight. A large bookshelf was completely overturned, books spilling everywhere. But so was blood. On one corner of the shelf, a female byte was laying lifeless on the ground. It had to be a student, for it didn't seem any older than me. But the corner of the shelf had crashed onto her skull, and it was crushed under the weight. Blood ran onto the pages of the books, and a hand went over my mouth. I couldn't see how this could have happened.

“Artie?” I yelled out, eyes darting all over the entire place, leaning over the shelf. “Artie? Are you in here?”

For a second, silence. I worried the girl had gotten him before suffering the fate of books. But the silence was only for a moment, for I was relieved when I heard the muffled voice of Artie.

“Kori?” It came from under the shelf. “I'm down here. Hate to break it to you, but they're out of *The Great Gatsby*...”

A gasp escaped my lips. Now that I could follow his voice, Artie came into view. About four feet from the girl was Artie, pinned under the shelf. I could see him now. The shelf and spilled books obscured most of him, but a few of his brown locks could be seen along with one of his legs. I ran over to him, kneeling beside the shelf. How he had gotten there, I didn't know.

“God, Artie!” I shouted, furiously shoving books away. “How did you get there? What happened?”

“Ah, well, I learned why girls always go to the bathrooms in groups.” He teased, but his voice was weak and quiet under the mass pinned on him. “Never know when you’re going to get attacked by a zombie byte, Kori.”

I shook my head, all mixed up by how he could be joking when a dead byte was four feet from him and a big bookshelf was held on top of him. What if he was hurt? From his voice, I got the feeling he was ok, but you never know. When I had thrown all the books to the side, my fingers gripped the edges and began to pull. But the shelf was heavy.

“Artie!” I shouted, growing impatient. “How did you get under here?”

I managed to push the bookshelf away slightly, and my response was a faint whimper from Artie. I had to be careful. But there he was again, talking back with waves of humor. “Mr. Gatsby lured me in. But, ah- Mrs. Buchanan over there got pretty mad. Tried to- ow! Slower. Ah, she tried to get me. I pushed the shelf over. Not smart.”

I was making progress on pushing the shelf off of Artie, but not quick enough. I could hear his tightening of breath and kicking at the wood, giving me the signal he was uncomfortable under there. I could have gone back and gotten help, but I don’t know where the shelf was stuck on Artie and I couldn’t leave him alone. I couldn’t let him stay under there, losing his breath and pages fluttering in his face. The sheer thought of this was what motivated me. I heaved the bookshelf, and that was my best move yet. I finally got it halfway off of him, the shelf now only on the right side of his body.

“I’m getting you out of there.” I hiss to Artie, feet scraping against the ground as I fought to push it off. “I am not letting you get left alone stuck under a damn book shelf because of a... a...”

“A book?” Artie said quietly, completing my sentence.

“Yeah.” My eyes darted to the left and right, and then I let loose another vicious push. That did it. Artie coughed a few times, and then squeezed himself out from under the bookshelf.

He crawled away from it, wiping a hand to his head, which I could tell was covered with sweat. I was too. All of him was. I let out a hand, pulling Artie to his feet. He tripped, staggering a few steps and stiffly cracking his back as he came upwards. My heart soared when I realized he was fine, standing in front of me. Heart soaring, that was, until I realized that there was blood smearing his left shoulder.

My eyes widened in horror, putting a hand forward towards the pooling. It was small but warm on my touch, and in my desperate bought of contact Artie’s eyes wandered towards the wound as well. He simply shook his head, pulling my hand away.

“Relax, I’m fine.” He told me, motioning towards the door. But I stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

I wasn’t going to let Artie be the leader again this time. My hands reached out, pulling his shirt in a downwards arc. My stomach churned. Underneath the dash of blood stained to his shirt was a large gash on his collarbone, bleeding and clearly deep. It looked clean at least, a neat straight line. But bad, none the less.

“Oh. It’s nothing.” He pulled away, starting to walk to the door. His pace was crooked and rigid. “Lets just-“

At this moment, I did something I had never really done before, and I wasn’t sure why I did it. Because when Artie began to walk away, my hands had grabbed onto his and pulled Artie back to me. I softened my grasp, rubbing my thumbs onto his palm like that time yesterday, just as he did to calm me down. I put my other hand to his cheek, stroking it gently and shaking my head.

“Please just let me take care of you for once, ok?” Our eyes met. “Let me help you.”

There was a moments pause, but then Artie slowly nodded, keeping his gaze on me until I, still holding his hand, walked him towards the door. He seemed dizzy, and I wasn’t surprised. The book shelf had just toppled over onto his entire body, and his wound was bloody. I knew fully that he would be ok, but I couldn’t imagine how hard it would be for him to mask all the pain and walk in a straight line.

When we got to the hall, I had to right Artie before we walked forward. It was like leading an alcoholic. He was roughed up, and both he and I knew it. Eventually, he just let me slowly lead him forwards, arms linked. After all he had done for me, saving my life countless times and always the first person to run into a raging battle, it was the least I could do. Right now, he needed me, no matter how hard he obliged.

We got about halfway down the hall before I heard footsteps. Artie heard them as well, but his head raised up slower than mine did. There, in front of us, was a speed walking Maggie and Rosie, frightened looks on their

faces. When they saw us though, I could see the relief in their eyes. Almost relieved. When they saw Artie, much like me, their teeth clamped together and temples pulsed.

Without any surprise at all, Rosie was the first to get to us and speak. She stared at Artie, who blinked back with gentle eyes while Rosie shook her head and looked at me, now frightened as she was before both she and Maggie found us two.

“What happened?” She breathed. “Neither of you two came back and we were so worried.”

I shook my head, righting Artie and making him sit down. He leaned up against the wall, running a hand over his shoulder and squinting at both Rosie and Maggie. While I tried to hush him, Artie spoke out anyway.

“Never liked public reading.” He shook his head, trying to hold back the gentle blood flow. “The books are pretty snappy.”

I ignored him, looking back to Rosie and Maggie who’s faces read nothing but confusion. “Look, I just need a needle, some thread. Towels.”

Maggie took a few steps forward into the light of our conversation. Her arms were crossed, skin looking paler than it normally was. Her lips were pursed together, fingers rubbing at her arms, looking slightly shaken. But her eyes wandered to Rosie, then Artie, and finally to me. That was when for the first time today, I heard her speak.

“I’ll get them.” Her voice was soft and quiet, but all of us could hear it. “I’ll just... run down to the sewing room.” She took a few steps back, faintly smiling. “I’ll be back soon.”

None of us could oblige, for within a snap Maggie had turned on her heel and set off at a jog down the hallway. I never knew her this way. Other than our lunch, she was always surrounded by friends, smiling and laughing. I guess it was all fake, trying to hide her silence, and ultimately, her sadness.

When Maggie went off, Artie shook his head gently and proceeded to close his eyes, leaning his head against the wall. He looked at ease, so I stepped away over towards Rosie. I thought it would be a quiet wait, but my thought was deemed wrong when Rosie began to speak quietly into my ear.

“Maggie seeing Artie like this has got to kill her.” Rosie said in a hushed voice, watching her skip around a turn and disappear from sight.

I narrowed my eyes, turning back. “Well, why?”

“Artie took an acting class his first semester freshman year. Maggie was in there too. But quiet Maggie, you know, like now. Artie was the one who told her she should try out for the musical. Sure enough, she got in.” She paused, biting her lip. “That’s how they are. Always sort of doing favors for each other. Getting the needle and thread is just another favor for her.”

I threw a glance at Artie. I was sure learning a lot about him today. “Oh.” I said quietly in return to Rosie, who stared at the doors of the auditorium.

“You can go.” I tell her, motioning with my head. “I’ll wait for Maggie.”

There was a pause, but eventually Rosie nodded her head and walked off to the door. When her back was turned, I went to my knees and crept over to Artie who looked like he could be sleeping. But when he heard me

on the ground, his eyes peered open and he smiled softly at me when my back hit the wall.

None of us felt the need to speak. Our expressions were enough. Even though both of us knew this wasn't a life and death situation and Artie was tough- it was strange. He allowed me to be the leader this time. He didn't protest one bit when I raised a hand, stroking his head just under the hair, gradually pushing his sweat away. The more I did it, the more he smiled. And eventually, he put a hand to me, grabbing a lock of my hair and running it through his hand.

We stayed like this until Maggie came back, breathing heavily but not a scratch on her. She dropped the needle and thread at my feet along with, god bless, gauze. We flashed each other smiles, and no words had to be spoken. Like I was to Artie, Maggie and I read each other's minds. Like at that moment, respect for each other grew.

I leaned away from Artie, taking the string and looping it through the hole in the needle. When he saw this, I notice he stood up, biting his lip, and eyes following the sharp, shining object. I paused.

"Afraid of needles?" I say, not pulling my eyes from my work. Eventually, I got it through and knotted the dark green string.

"I'm not a fan." He took a deep breath, and at that moment, pulled off his shirt in a single thrust.

I had to stop myself from staring wide-eyed at his bare skin. He wasn't one of those shiny six pack men, but I could tell he was fit. His skin was firm and soft, revealing he kept himself healthy- and probably didn't mind a run. I was marveling at him. Even the stream of blood that ran down

from his collarbone couldn't keep me. It was Artie's awkward look at the needle, idly in my hand that brought me back to my senses. Still a little stunned, I reached for Artie's shirt.

"Take a deep breath." I said to him.

"What?" He narrowed his eyes, speaking quizzically. "Why? I..."

It took everything I had in me, but I reached my hand forward holding the shirt and rubbed it over the wound. It had to be clean, dry. A gasp escaped Artie's lips, and his hands turned white as they gripped and slid along the floor. My body turned hot as it absorbed the blood and wiped the red around the gash, but I knew I had to do it. I was the only person who would allow someone to.

I finally brought the shirt away and threw it across the hall. That was when Artie finally breathed, squeezing his eyes shut but trying so hard to be strong. It made my eyes water, wanting to break down but I couldn't. I had to be there for Artie, fight for Artie. I didn't break a single stride as I reached back down for the needle, blowing on it once before setting a hand a few inches from the wound.

Now, I didn't really know what I was doing. I had seen people with stitches, and I had a main idea- but I knew my movements would be choppy and nowhere near as good as they should be. But if it wasn't closed, I knew the gash would become infected. It was wide open, the yellow under his skin showing. I could hardly bear to look at it. So instead, I looked into Artie's eyes.

"Go on." He told me, looking at the needle hovering in my hand. "It has to be done."

I nod in return, and that was when I shoved the needle under his skin, knowing I couldn't look back now. It came out the other side, the string holding in place from the knot on the end. But Artie's eyes had widened, and the second the needle pierced his skin one of his arms grabbed onto my free one, his hand staying there, softly just keeping my contact. And I didn't pull away. Because one look in his eyes told me everything. That he just needed someone to hold on to.

I continued weaving the needle through his skin, each time his grip tightened on my arm a little bit. I grew stronger with each touch, and he grew weaker. But still with me, looking at my eyes the entire time. Light fading from his olive orbs each time it went through. By the time I got to the end of the gash, he looked exhausted. Like a little kid who wants to keep running, when he really just wants a nap. I saw relief more than anything when I tied a knot at the end, pulling the needle from the string and dabbing at it with the gauze. Safe.

"I didn't know you could do stitches." He smiled faintly, head against the wall.

"I cant." I shook my head, wiping my now bloodied hands on his shirt I gathered again, which became our towel.

"Nonsense." He shook his head, taking his hand from me. "I feel wonderful now."

And then he brought his head from the wall, and kissed me on the cheek.

~

With a sharp, sickening, slicer she had gained great power over the others. They were dangerous like her, unaware of pain, fingernails ready to claw, teeth ready to dig into flesh, tear, eat... so hungry. They all were hungry. Hungry for... what was it?

Oh, yes. People.

They wanted people. Human skin and blood. It was what seemed right, seemed so delicious, delectable. Oh, the hunger was the worst. The yearning to fill their bubbling, gurgling stomachs. They all were dangerous. They all would fight to kill the people at any cost to fill up their stomachs with the morsels.

But she was much more dangerous from the other ones. Yes, with her carving, stabbing slicer she had easily made herself on top among her other kind. She had found a group, maybe one hundred in all. Each and every one had the same desire as her, but she wanted it more. When they had finally come across a cowering piece of meat, she had used her cutting, paining slicer to push all the others back so she could fill her rumbling, feisty stomach before the rest of them. One was braver, wanting the meat just as bad. She silenced him with a quick blow to the... what was that word? Her words were jumbled. Wreck? Check? No, no...

Neck. That's what it was. She destroyed him with a sharp blow to the neck. That made the others respect her. Fear her. Kiss her feet with lust and honor. They would do whatever she wanted. With the beautiful, glimmering slicer she had sent some off to find fresh meat. Others became just under her.

And an unfortunate few became her target practice. Yes, she was doing very well.

There was a big, big building not too far off from where they were. They managed to find some meat in there. But some of the others, the dumber ones... they got lost in the mass of, what? What were in there? Not floors, stores! There were plenty of stores in there. Many things.

But not enough meat. She wanted more meat. She would make sure she would find more people. She would eat them all. And the others who were lucky enough to get a chunk bitten out of them before escaping would join her. With the same lust and hunger.

The same yearning.

The same plan.

~

Artie had taken me completely by surprise, to say the least. Even though his lips had only touched my cheek, my eyelashes fluttered, pupils dilated and a tremor went through my body. Where his lips pressed onto my skin, I felt a small little hum and bells that chimed, and only ended when he pulled away with a smile on his face. But I was not used to this. I didn't know what to do. The only time a boy every did that was when... when...

I tried shaking myself into focus, but my mouth was slightly agape and I was still dumbfounded. It was just friendly. A thank you. Right? I felt my eyes begin to sting from holding them open for a while, shocked and confused. Then, I noticed Artie had now begun looking at me, curling his brows and gently smiling. That was what made me calm down- slightly.

I wanted to speak. Or did I? What would I say? Do I laugh softly, ask why he did it, or simply smile back? The options were swimming through my head and the ten seconds after he did it seemed like the longest of my life. And when we heard a voice down the hall, I knew that was my lifeline. That I could get out of this, leave and think.

It was Rosie, who else? She cared above and beyond, so selfless, only focusing on kindness despite of everything going on outside of Winslow High. She had her lips squeezed together, hands behind her back in an unsure, quizzical sense. Like she wasn't sure if she wanted to come forward or not. But she was here, opening her mouth, words spurting out to Artie and I.

“Are you guys ok?” She asked, genuine kindness and curiosity breezing towards us. She then looked at the stitches, then to me, and I could see her relax a little.

“We're golden.” Artie responded before I could, thank god.

“Well, we wanted to have a real formal chat. Only if you're ok. If you're not, then-“

Artie laughed softly, shaking his head. From the tightness and painfulness of the situation before this, he had developed a late afternoon morning voice in the moment. “No, all good.”

He went to stand up, and I guess instinct was just my golden ticket today, for my hand shot forward for him to grab. Artie paused, glancing into me, then grabbed on. His hands were very sweaty and clammy from clawing at the ground, but didn't slip from his firm grip. I hoisted him up, feet planted in the ground. When he had risen, there was one other moment

where we locked on. My frightened, curious eyes looking at Artie. But his gaze was much different. Calm, understanding, but there was something else. I had no idea what it was. The way he looked at me for just a second, different from all the other times he did. But then he had raised a hand to feel at his new, choppy stitches, and had turned to face Rosie.

She bit her lip, and then nodded us onwards. I left the shirt in the hall, for it was nothing but a moist, red rag now. The gauze was in one of my hands, in case the stitches got screwed up or something, but otherwise, my duffle bag and axe were in the auditorium. The same place everyone else was, probably wondering if I ended up killing Artie or not.

The two of us followed Rosie back into the auditorium, but I strayed a little farther behind the two so I could reach my hand up and lightly dab at my cheek. All we were doing was talking. So what, I did him a favor. So why did he...

My thoughts had to stop when the auditorium doors were opened by Rosie. There, shirtless Artie sauntered in like his bare chest was nothing out of the norm. It probably wasn't, knowing his façade. I realized that now that the bleeding had stopped, Artie was much better on his feet. He made it down to the stage where everyone was sitting in a neat little circle like they were when we left- except for Aaron. The boy was sipping a coke, staring off into space with this worried expression. Maybe he thought Satan would actually get him. Who knew.

When we hit the end and all gathered to sit down, Shawn got a bout of laughter. He looked at Artie, who had his hands crossed as if he were chilled- and possibly hiding some of the dry, smudged blood. Shawn shook his head, pale face showing nothing but humor.

“Abs!” He called out to Artie. Artie didn’t reply. Instead, he smacked Shawn in the back of his white blonde hair and sat down between Nat and I.

We all had a moment to settle in. I was starving, and Artie probably was as well. We were offered some of the cafeteria food, cold, wrapped burgers and chips. It was probably the best we would get for a long time. I graciously took my serving, as did Artie, and had to hold myself back from digging my face in and eating it all in three bites. I would make myself sick, as it was my first meal now in over twenty four hours.

After five minutes of eating in silence, Rosie put her food down. It was easy to see she was the leader here, thank god. Not that anyone here was incapable, besides Aaron, that is- but she was kind. Not afraid to speak. And rational. Better she be in command instead of someone like Shawn who may take everything as a joke and care more about impressing everyone instead of actual surviving.

“Due to Kori’s fine job at doing stitches...” Rosie began, flashing me a broken smile. “Both she and Artie are here, as I said before. Now, the past day has been extremely difficult and crazy. But I think if we work together, we can make it through this. Now, if we-“

“Well, I mean, what’s it even like out there?” Nat spoke towards Rosie, but her question seemed directed towards Artie and I. “The rest of the cast checked, and they didn’t come back. But we’ve been here, and... and...”

Nat seemed a little upset by her own words, but her face could hardly show it. However, we all sensed the small bouts of pain in her tone, and Artie pat her on the back. Now, I figured it was my turn.

“Yesterday evening, Artie saved me. We were out there. Or, I was. Alone.” I shook my head, reliving the events. “My maid, who seemed completely normal and fine thirty minutes before had changed into one of the zombies. Artie and I call them bytes. Lessens the blow. But, anyway. It looked like she was bitten by something. We ran off, but god, those things want you. They will chase you. They will try to kill you.”

I took a deep breath, regaining my composure. “Anyway, most look like something bit them. All the crazies. And believe me, they’re all the same. All they really want is to bite you and kill you. And they’re tough. You have to beat them down, no matter how hard it is. And it’s hard. They go in groups.” I bit my lip, looking to Artie. But he threw me a glance, as if to tell me to carry on. “And man, they are everywhere. Its as if the entire Winslow Woods is dead. We thought that was the case until we ran into you guys. We got some food- but it was hard. They’re everywhere. And, well, you just kind of have to be with someone. Otherwise... things can go wrong...”

I sat back, watering eyes shooting at Artie one more time. I had a little more to say, but could not find the will to say it. That was enough for me. Having to have all the flashbacks echo in my mind as the words spilled from my mouth. To people I had only spoken to a few times in my life. It just seemed too strange. But at this point- what wasn’t?

“Are we even... safe here?” Nat’s voice had fallen to a whisper, her big eyes seeming smaller.

Rosie looked at her with her regular, light and cheerful voice. “Of course. We haven’t had any problems.” But even I could hear her uncertainty after the Artie incident.

I noticed that the entire time the conversation was going back and forth, Maggie seemed to be getting more and more uncomfortable. She had brought her knees up, nibbling on her lip and rocking slightly. I could be wrong, but there may even be a shake of the head too, eyes slightly narrowed. But she was ignored, and the conversation went on.

“So, really, the plan is to stay here. Find whatever we can, wait this whole thing out. We can last. We made it this far.” Rosie made contact with all of us, even Aaron. “If anyone has other questions, speak up. Its about time we worked things out.”

“Well... what about food?” Shawn butted in, squinting. He put a hand on his stomach. “I mean, we’ve got some stuff here, but it’ll go bad eventually.”

“Well...” Rosie began to talk, but her voice trailed off. Like she didn’t want to face that problem right now, because we all knew, it may be the biggest of them all. “When that comes, we’ll just...”

She stopped from a loud shuffle coming from my right. Maggie. She had gotten up from her crossed legs, slapping a hand on her thigh. Taking us all off guard from her quizzical, loud move, we stared as she leaned up against the pit, hands turning white as she dug them in the ridges. That was when she spoke, but much different from all the other times. She was louder. Fighting through her words.

“Look, Rosie. God, you’re the best. We all love you.” She started saying, shaking her head and looking into her eyes. “I appreciate your optimism, its wonderful. And I wish we could all talk like that. But the point is, this is real life. I know it seems like this is a dream or something, and I

know, I know how weird and crazy this is.” She shook her head, firmly using hand motions to express herself. But as Maggie went on, I could see her eyes get a little glossy, and voice begin to crack up. “No matter how bad we all want to be optimists with this and work things out as cool and casual as we can- we need to face the truth. There’s a reason there’s only us remaining out of most people in Winslow Woods. And it’s only a day in. God, who knows what’s going to happen now.”

She wiped her nose, pausing, but fought on with her words. My heart began to beat fast. The talk. Everything. And then, she had started up again. “But if we want to live, we need to open our eyes. Yes, we have been doing well. But as Kori and Artie said... its bad out there. And one of the blasted zombies or bytes or whatever the hell we call them, got in here. And there are so many more. Food goes bad. And their numbers will only grow.” I could see her grip loosen, voice softening. “And Rosie, I was like you. I know how much better it feels to hope than to accept reality. To just think that things will get better and we’ll be ok. That all of us, will be ok.” I could see a tear beginning to fall down her face, and a hand went to her left wrist, with more jangling bracelets than the other. “And maybe we will. But my god, we cant just sit here talking about how things will go in our favor. Maybe they will in some parts. But... what I’m really trying to get at...” She took a deep breath. “We just have to realize the food will go bad. That the school isn’t as safe as we thought it was. That we are going to have to work so hard, so hard to survive. And we can’t just sit here and hope. We have to make our own blessings.”

With that, Maggie completely turned her back to us. However, I was at an angle and could see that there were tears gliding down her cheeks, and

she was rubbing her hand under her bracelets, scratching almost. And at that exact moment, I could almost understand everything Maggie was feeling. Stepping inside of her. Seeing through her dark eyes.

Sitting at a window instead of over a pit. I could see it now very clearly. Before me was Maggie staying there, looking over a muddy backyard with rain pouring down and turning everything into a gray haze. Her room was clean, but it wasn't a problem because there was hardly anything in it in the first place. I could feel a stinging sensation on her left hand, going in clean lines, the coldness of her bracelets the only thing making it tolerable.

And when she finally turns away from the window, I could see quiet, Maggie Hansen hitting over a glass of water she had put on her nightstand. Accidental, of course. But the glass shattered all over the floor, and the water rushed across the wood under her. Her father heard it. That was where inside of her, I could see a flash of hope. Maybe thinking nobody was around, and she could clean it up before anyone knew. But her hope was clearly broken.

I see her father rushing into her room now. He's yelling terribly, and all Maggie can do there is stand there, the freezing, iced water rushing onto her toes and turning them white. And there is her window, utterly rainy, like an image of her life itself. That is when her father finally rushes up to her, his giant, clammy hands closing over one of her delicate wrists, but this one without bracelets so that his force begins to leave bruises. Once more, a small dash of hope. That maybe he'll forget, bless her with the only fine of an apology and cleaning her mess. But that, too, is broken.

There, he raises a fist and brings it around to her shoulder. When she twists around, another to her back. This makes Maggie fall forward, into the mess she had made. Her hands falling on the broken pieces of glass which cut into her skin, as if she didn't have enough already, and causes little rivers of red to run in with the freezing water that was turning her skin white. Her father leaves the room, and then she's left there for a moment. Dazed. Unable to see because tears are clouding her eyes. But they are not sadness. In her eyes was her hope. And there, it was, ebbing out of her little by little in droplets of salty liquid. On her knees, letting it all wash in with the water and the blood. The pain, disappointment, and hope running into one. And then its over.

That was when I completely understood Maggie Hansen.

And everybody, at that point, was too stunned to speak. Faces agape, amazed that Maggie was loud, let alone spoken. Everyone, except for Rosie and I. Rosie had brought her hands to her cheeks, teeth clenched together. Knowing full well what Maggie had said, and the truth slowly sinking inside of her. Then there was me.

I took a stand as well. Most stayed in their locked up positions, letting reality weave through them. Artie looked at me, eyes pained and milky in comparison to my own, that were replaying a million stories all at once. And then, I had walked forward. Slowly at first, but I made it over to the pit where Maggie was. She was in the same position as before. Silently letting her tears fall, fingers running over her skin. That was when I reached forward, bringing her in a loose hug.

And Maggie did not oblige. She was in too much pain to argue. And after a moment, she rested her head on my shoulder, sliding her hands

around me too. Letting the tears really fall. Letting everything out. Any last remaining ounce of hope she had left. But she was not to worry. For at that exact moment, I had changed. From oblivious, strange Kori to someone completely different. I was now a person who, no matter the consequence, would not let anyone feel the pain Maggie Hansen did. That was a promise. So as her hope flew from her eyes, I was recharging her. Sliding my strength at the tips of my fingertips into her heart.

Because if we could not hope, then we could sculpt our own power.

7.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

The splitting voice was impossible to ignore as it echoed from the theatre office, a room fairly close to the auditorium itself with windows overlooking the front of the school. After the talk with everyone and Maggie’s incident, we all had flocked off to do whatever we want. Until now, as the sun was setting, and each and every one of us shot up in alarm from the yell.

It was Shawn, no doubt. Everyone knew his loud and powering voice. After all, he had run off to the office with Nat to do god knows what. But Shawn was a jokester, the guy who acted tough. So hearing him yell like that in full out worry and anger was alarming. So alarming, that every single one of us got to our feet and raced over to the two of them.

It took a little hall weaving, but we managed to get to the theatre office not long after the yell. There, Shawn was leaning out of one of the windows, his pale skin turning even whiter from his worrisome grip. Nat was on the floor, leaning against the wall with a worried, crazed look on her eyes. I realized then her hair was a little messy and her shirt on crooked, and looking back to Shawn things came together from before the yell.

“Shawn, what is going on?” Rosie yelled, walking up to him. “We all heard you, and-“

Shawn just shook his head, pointing out the window. “Look at him! What the hell is he doing?”

We all went to a window and peeped out. At first there was nothing, but then we saw a flash of movement, and everything came to view. In front

of the school was Aaron, walking in a dead sort of circle with a box in hands. He was too far out to see exactly, but he was pouring out grains of white onto the grass in a wrap around the school. Somewhat close, but a worry. Because down the block were a group of ten or so bytes, slowly walking in our direction.

“He’s got the salt, all of the kitchen’s salt.” Shawn shook his head, pointing at Aaron one more time. “He’s crazy! He’s making like a demon circle or something!”

Rosie ignored Shawn, walking up to the window with more ferocity than I had ever heard in her. “Aaron! Get in here, now!”

She didn’t get an answer. Aaron just continued sprinkling the salt onto the grass, doing whatever he thought he was doing. In a minute or so, the bytes would make it here. At the pace they were going, we didn’t have long until they spotted Aaron and wanted a meal. That was when Artie stepped forward, right between Shawn and Rosie.

He was still without a shirt, but his mind was back to us entirely. He told me his collarbone didn’t hurt anymore, even though I didn’t believe him. Much better. But I still didn’t think he was better enough to say what he then said.

“I’ll get him.” He nodded his head towards Aaron. “I know how to fight them, I’ll just-“

I tapped him on the shoulder, furiously shaking my head. “You aren’t in condition to fight right now! I’ll do it.”

I began to storm off, but not until Rosie stepped in front of me. She seemed very strong in the moment, bigger than her little, sweet frame. I could see the anger dwelling in her, and the desperation.

“I appointed myself here. I’m not going to sit here. Kori, I’m coming with you.” She nodded. “Lets go.”

I couldn’t tell Rosie no, with the commitment engraved onto her face. Besides, there wasn’t time. I nodded to her, setting off at a run towards the auditorium, but not before I heard Shawn ask Artie to go somewhere with him. Where that would be, I guess I wouldn’t know until we had Aaron safe inside. We were dashing around turns, furiously slamming the doors open and making for the stage. There, my fire axe lay untouched. I swung it in my hands a few times, waiting for Rosie.

Then I got a thought. What would she use? It wasn’t as if she could battle those things off with her fists. She had disappeared for a second, so I guess I would be surprised. And when she emerged from the pit, I was, but not entirely. Rosie was wielding a microphone stand about as tall as her, cold and rough, and a jagged cup at the end where a microphone should be. That would work.

She nodded me onward. While Rosie was the head here, it was Artie and I who knew everything about what it was like outside. So, I suppose I was the one leading our two person assault. And my god, if we managed to get Aaron inside safe, then he would get it from me. The Satan mumbling freshman had done enough for us today.

We were all out sprinting to the front entrance. It took a few turns, and by the time we got there, forty seconds had passed and god only knows if the

bytes had spotted him earlier than I thought they would. I prayed something had distracted them, maybe an animal or something. Because even though Aaron was crazy, I couldn't let somebody die in my presence.

The two of us had slammed out the front door, running across the lawn to Aaron. My lungs were getting tighter, even though the fight hadn't even started yet. Didn't matter. It was ringing in my ears, and Rosie's too I'm sure. And to our luck, Aaron was where he was before. Sprinkling the salt on the grass, oblivious to the bytes that were now frighteningly close.

I could feel everyone else's eyes on us as we made it to Aaron. But the bytes were so close, that a yell would no doubt bring them towards us. Besides, these looked much more powerful than the other ones we had dealt with. Adults, three women, seven men. Looking like they were dressed for work. Fit. Would be a pain to deal with, and I prayed we wouldn't have to. Rosie had gotten to Aaron before me, as she was a better runner, as I was sure everyone else here was. Her hand instantly closed around his wrist, hissing in his hear. When I reached him, I could hear what she was saying.

"Aaron! Come on! They're going to get you, you have to come inside!" Rosie spat at him, tugging on his arm. But Aaron pulled back, shaking out more salt where he stood.

"They wont come to us. Satan will not take them over my barrier." Aaron walked off a few paces.

Now it was my turn to speak. "Aaron, god. They aren't the spawns of Satan. They are zombies, and they want to kill you. Now come on!"

My voice only trailed off when suddenly, I heard a loud moan. Now rushing footsteps. Rosie and I turned around slowly, only to see that the

group of zombies had now seen us, and set out at a broken run for all of us. That was it. With all the strength I had, I closed a hand on Aaron and began to drag him towards the front entrance. He of course obliged, but I got a few feet. Only a few feet when the first byte got to us.

It went for me first, even though Rosie slammed her stand into its stomach. Of course it wanted me. After all the hell I had to deal with, it was only customary the bytes had to go for me first. And these, Artie would call these gigabytes if he could yell. Because they looked tough.

It almost got to my shoulder, teeth bared and eyes blazing. But not before Aaron suddenly threw a handful of salt at its face, and the hot minerals landed right in the business man's eyes. It let out this terrible screech, turning away from me and rubbing its boiled hands onto the shrunken, yellow face of the man. I couldn't help but laugh. Aaron's little devil circle did us some good.

I heaved him forward, slamming the boy onto the stairs. It seemed that incident knocked a little sense into him, because at that point Aaron began to crawl slowly up the steps. But not fast enough. Two more bytes, a man and a woman had come upon us. Now Rosie and I came in. She was a completely different her. I could see the fight blazing in her eyes, something I never had seen before. After all, she was sweet Rosie. No way could she be a stand-swinging warrior. But then it struck me. Maybe she was when her friends were in danger. That she was just too nice to let anyone even get a scratch.

I went for the woman, as she was closer to me. My axe was ready. I slammed it into her chest, immediately scoring a hit on her ribs. I heard a crack and splintering, blood spurting onto the already red weapon. But she wasn't dead yet, somehow, she was hanging on. Ignoring the pain. All she

wanted was me, so I tried jerking my axe out of her crushed ribs. No luck. My heavy sidekick was twisted in her bones and flesh. I tried shaking it loose, as the woman was weakening, but it stayed put except for coming out maybe another inch.

I looked to my right desperately to see Rosie grappling with the man. Her stand put tons of little punctures and smashed in bones with the way she was hitting it, but it was nowhere near as lethal as something as my fire axe. And, another byte was coming her way. And I knew I couldn't let her deal with two, not when Aaron was now cowering behind her. So with a great deal of my strength, I raised up one of my feet. Slamming it into the neck of the woman, causing her to fly off my axe, finished.

I dashed over to Rosie, hacking into the back of the man's head with my fire axe. That finished him off. I couldn't help but gag at the sight, though. Get a chill for the fact that he was killed in the same way the shopkeeper was. I was dazed, then. The only thing bringing me back was Rosie, driving her stand into the throat of the other man, giving us space. But she was pale, obviously sickened by this whole thing. I didn't blame her. My stomach still was challenged when it came to this aspect of surviving.

We grabbed Aaron, slowly making more progress of the stairs. But the others were nearly upon us, grabbing at our feet, but Aaron was just a weight. He let us pull him, but he clearly didn't want us to. The door was so close, so close... but not close enough, for a hand suddenly closed around my ankle, and I whirled around to see a big gaping mouth attempt to latch on to my calf.

"Not my best friend, you bastard!" Rosie suddenly shouted, slamming her stand on his head, and making him fall over backwards. I looked at her

once. There was so much fire in her eyes, but behind it all, only a tired desire to make sure everyone was ok.

We pulled Aaron upwards, slamming him past the doors into the school. We rushed in, pushing them closed just as the final bytes were upon us, clawing at the glass. We got a salt covered Aaron inside, that's what it was all for, right? But now that the fight was gone, I realized how exhausted I had become. I crawled forward, not focused enough to get to my feet. Rosie had leaned against the wall, Aaron sulking off. I didn't mind him. He was alive- that's all that mattered at this point. I just wanted to sleep.

I thought god had come down and held me in a blanket, but I was wrong. Instead, I glanced upwards to see Artie lifting me with his arms up to my feet, but clean. Instead of a pair of bloodied jeans and no shirt, he had on a white, buttoned shirt and dress pants. Not to mention the bowtie. I squinted, unsure of why he had on this attire. But I would not oblige. He looked wonderful in it, body looking stronger and fitter in nice, clean clothes. I made a warm smile, looking over to see that Rosie too was being helped up by Maggie. Nat was nowhere to be seen, but Shawn was a huffing mess, looking ready to kill Aaron.

I let Artie hold me for a moment, too tired to oblige. I was going nonstop for well over twenty-four hours now. I was done. Enough of storming into battle for now, all I wanted was food and a bed. If only! And a book in my hands, and wifi, glorious wifi so I could blog in between chapters. But Artie was more than enough. His grasp let me know I was ok. That I could trust him that things would be ok.

He then pulled away, only to show what he had in his hands. There were a pair of black sweat pants, and a sweater I could see. Nothing that was

mine, but clothes none the less. I looked at them, mouth opening slightly, then up to Artie.

“Shawn took me to the dressing room. We found some clothes. Come on, let’s get away for a moment.” He said in a soft voice into my ear.

I nodded, realizing just how freezing I had become again in my tank and shorts. It would only get colder from this point on, and all I wanted was to climb in the sweats and the pink splashed sweater, and to be held tight and... I shook my head. I was exhausted. I wasn’t thinking straight. Artie was just guiding me along. He wasn’t... no. Not like that.

He brought me into a classroom I didn’t recognize, but it was right beside the auditorium. I approved. On one end were desks, completely abandoned, but beside those were two couches and a rug with book posters hanging everywhere. So I guess it was an English room or something, a place to read, but god- I just wanted to fall over onto those couches and fall right asleep. It was almost completely dark out, and my eyelids seemed to fall with everything. The last fight took plenty out of me. Artie then sat me against the couch, gently putting the neatly folded clothes beside me.

“You can put them on, I wont look.” He said, shaking his head and walking off to the other corner of the room.

I nodded gently, tearing off my shirt and shorts, which I realize had red splashed all across them. They were slightly torn and muddy, a gross sight. I wouldn’t put those on again for as long as I lived. I threw the sweater over myself first, glad to see it was a good fit, and it was all nice and warm inside.

I then slipped on the sweatpants, humming a tune from a theme in a movie I saw recently, but I couldn't remember which. They, too, were a good fit, and I felt like I was in a bed again. All nice and cuddly on squishy, velvet pillows. I leaned my head against the edge of the couch, at that moment, seeing Artie return. He had propped my axe against the wall, adjusting his bowtie and coming forward.

"You've gotta be exhausted." He shook his head, sitting next to the couch and stroking my hair. "Maggie told me you gave it your all."

I nodded slowly, heavy eyelids looking up to him. "That's a nice outfit, Artie."

He laughed gently, standing up and walking towards the other couch. Everything was getting a little blurrier, and I had reached down, pulling my phone from the bloody pocket I had. It clicked on. Only seven thirty, but I had done more in the past twenty four hours than I would normally do in a week. Artie then spoke again, sitting down and crossing his feet.

"Keeping it classy." He said. "You can go to sleep, though. I'll make sure nothing gets you."

I nod, closing my eyes. Almost straight away, I could feel myself falling into a darkness, flying into waves of dreams and nightmares, mind twisting and head spinning as my consciousness began to wash away. But not before I heard one more sound, one last voice.

"You can trust me."

And then, nothing.

8.

As I awaken, everything seems fuzzy and out of place. My eyes couldn't seem to remember where to wake up to. In a matter of days I went from home, to soap shop, and now classroom. I had to open my eyes completely, let everything form before me until I realized this is real, I really am here. Like a backwards dream. Because in that case, you think everything is real until you wake up. But not now.

I had dreamed of foolish things. The Great Gatsby was the roots of my dreaming, the title wrapping around any thought. A book flapped open and a yellow car raced out, leaving behind little strips of memories. There were connection bars of course, and they powered up until suddenly, a large x covered my vision, my mind awoke, and I had opened my eyes.

I was facing the wall on the couch, and with a great heave I whirled over to look off the other side. I was comfy and content, and hadn't exactly wanted to awaken. But daylight was leaking through the window, and in front of me, sitting on the ground, was Artie.

Well, no. He was sitting against the opposite couch, his golf club cradled in his arms. He was asleep, no doubt. Close to me, his body facing where I was sleeping. He looked much better than he did the first time I saw him sleep, when he had stains of blood on his clothes and confusion wrapped around his eyelids. Now, in his dress clothes and clean body, he looked much better. Happier, even though he was only sleeping.

Instead of getting up straight away like I normally do, I allowed my body to fully wake up this time. As my head cleared, I felt much better than the day before. I wasn't as tired, and my bones felt rested now. Even so, I

wasn't in any form to run out and take on another small horde. This rest was a treat to myself, and I wasn't sure when I would get it again. So I decided to savor it.

While I had composed myself, I thought about the topic Maggie brought up yesterday. Rosie's reaction. I wondered if we would try to do anything about it, change up some rules here or what. Get ready for the harder stuff that was going to come. Because I had listened to Maggie, I understood. And she was right. Things weren't going to get easier from here, only harder. We had all learned that so far.

Finally, I got up. Gently putting my feet onto the ground, I picked up my phone silently. As it clicked on, it read Eight AM. I had slept for a good amount of time. Of course, I wanted more. But things had to be done. This wasn't going to be easy, and we had to ready ourselves. But Artie- Artie had done so much already. I owed him my life ten times over. So as I began to walk forward, I left him in peace to rest.

I let out a yawn as I strolled through the hall, sliding more so since I had left my shoes back in the room. It didn't matter though. The auditorium was an extremely short distance away, and I was upon it in thirty seconds. The door opened easily, but latched behind with a loud crunch. Didn't matter, though. We were very close to the heart of the school, and odds are nobody heard that but the people in the auditorium. And I had expected to see everyone- but that didn't happen. The only people inside were Rosie and Maggie, playing a game of cards on the floor.

“Oh, glad you're awake, Kori.” Rosie said with a smile, cheeks pink. “We wanted to work on some things.”

I call back out as I neared the two girls. “Yeah, sure. What with?”

Rosie stood up, putting her cards on the ground, face up. I was no master of cards, but it looked like she had a full house. Maggie had squinted a little when Rosie rose up, staring hard at the cards and then shaking her head. I couldn’t help but laugh a little. Maybe Maggie had been doing well, too.

“Ok, well.” Rosie took a breath, pausing. Spending time to look at Maggie for a moment before starting back. “Maggie was right. Today we’re going to start really working at things. Getting food, making sure the doors aren’t going to open. We can’t just sit here.”

I bite my lip uneasily. “I know. Artie’s still sleeping... What do you want me to do?”

Rosie takes a squat on one of the auditorium seats, looking at me and narrowing her eyes. Eventually, she speaks. “Nat and Shawn ran off to just find little useful things. Artie deserves his sleep... We were going to look and see how much food we have. Aaron’s been mumbling more stuff about his salt and Satan... but you and Artie are the strongest ones here. I need you to start barricading the doors, find anything that could be useful for killing those things... When Artie wakes up, I’ll send him to you.”

I nod, stretching again and clenching my teeth. I was still tired, but barricading was something I could do. I had all the motivation in the world after tugging string through Artie’s skin because the bastards broke in. As for weaponry, just about anything could work. I could give someone a concussion with a book if I wanted to at this point. But I knew everyone

would be wary at first, and in that case, we needed the best weapons possible. I couldn't let anyone be brought down.

I was about to turn away, when I heard a slam of thick paper hitting the floor. Then, I see Rosie looking at Maggie in alarm that was now standing, arms raised above her head. Her cards were at her feet, and for the first time, I saw her smile.

“What?” Rosie asked quizzically.

Maggie pointed at her cards on the floor. She then smiled even broader, exclaiming her words with much intensity and sharpness. “Look, I got a royal flush! Thought you had me with the full house, no?”

I could a flash of Rosie's face the moment before I walked away. There was a touch of amazement that she had in fact been beaten, but more so happiness and relief that Maggie was beginning to lighten up. Escape her broken world, walk away from the rainy window. And god, I was glad she was too. Now that things were being prepared, life at Winslow High should improve.

My limbs cracked a little as I walked away, their noises begging for a little more rest. However, I had to do my fair share of work. I could barricade the doors, that wouldn't be a problem. Besides, on defense, I'm sure we would be fine. We only ran into small groups of the bytes, nothing major. With backed up doors and now all of us prepared to fight, we should run into problems. Hopefully.

My hands finally made it to the door of the auditorium, fingers running across the cool push surface. They were scratched, rubbed, and chilly- but the wood looked fresh and glowed under the glaze. Now that we

didn't have anyone to keep things looking pretty- who knew how long it would be before the walls got dirty, chipped, or forgotten. Just the thought of the Glowan Estate getting run down to a sunken, wood bowl made my heart sick. That was the thought that made me push the door open, and climb out of the auditorium into the glowing halls.

I made it out a few steps, stretching. There were a few stray, random exits if I turned left, instead of right by the front entrance. That would take a while, and I would save it for last. I knew there was a way out, towards one of the side entrances if I weaved a little ways, so that's where I would start. However, I only made it a few steps in that direction before a hand suddenly closed around my foot.

I squealed, tumbling forward onto my knees from the sudden pressure. It began to pull me back, and my hands reached out for anything, anything at all. It was a byte, of course it was. And it had gotten me. I wouldn't become one of them- no way in hell. But there was nothing around, and I whirled upwards. There, looking at me with a foolish smile- was Artie.

"That's not even funny!" I hissed, pulling away and standing up. He put himself against the wall, looking as if he was holding back furious laughter. "I nearly had a heart attack!"

Artie cowered backwards a little, sarcastically putting his hands in front of his face as if to shield himself from my words. I fought past his humor. "Why are you even awake? You were asleep five minutes ago. God, Artie! Don't ever do that again!"

He bit his lip, playing a little with his eyes. I took a deep breath, not finding any more air in my lungs to yell because Artie had scared everything

out of me. I honestly thought they had gotten me. Artie's humor dropped a little, and he eventually got to a point where his eyes looked to his feet, eyelashes flickering. Alas, he spoke.

“Sorry.” He looked up. “Not funny, huh?”

I shook my head, coming down and putting my hands on his shoulders. His eyes lightened slightly in amusement. “Not now. But come on, we've got doors to barricade.”

I could feel for him a little at that moment, the way Artie worked. He had an entire labyrinth filled with confusion of who he was and what to do, but I could feel the hardness in his head and the lightness in his heart. How he was so strong, but still finding himself. Sucking in humor and this shield to deal with things. And I then regretted getting after him so badly, for that was him coping with the entire thing. But I could not retrieve the past, could I?

Artie stood up on my words, a very faint smile playing on his lips. I was still frightened, unable to curve my very own into a sign of pleasing. But I left him a glance, with my eyes calm and light, a way of showing my forgiveness. And then Artie chirped up again, motioning with his hand and walking off with me.

“Barricades, huh?” He said as we walked off. “Everyone said we were going to start doing things after Maggie's speech. I guess we get to have fun with the dirty work.”

“At least we don't have to have to go along with Nat and Shawn.” I said with a smirk. “I didn't know about them.”

“Hah- neither did I.” He shook his head as the two of us took a left turn onto a separate hallway, what looked to be a science wing. “Heading to the J Entrance?”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not? We’ve got time.”

Artie didn’t respond after that. However, I did continuously throw looks at him until we made it to the exit. He had clenched his teeth together, eyes narrowed as if deep in thought. A hand tugged gently at his bowtie, which I couldn’t help but smile at, and I don’t even think Artie noticed how strange he looked in the face until he caught my gaze and coughed.

The J Entrance was right by the more ghetto end of the school as people called it- past the science wings and at one of the smaller parking lots. There were two doors beside each other, and I stood there for a moment, looking at my project. There were no bytes in sight, and they sure looked tough. I was ready to make a move, when I realized Artie had left my side.

My eyes wandered right, and straight away I heard a clatter. It came from the classroom a few paces over, and I curiously peered through the door. Artie was tussling with a rolling island by some lab tables, and a beaker had fallen to the floor. However, it was ignored. He weaved it through desks, but carefully, so that some spilled fluids on top wouldn’t run onto his fresh, white dress shirt. I smirked, walking in the classroom. I grabbed one of the desks, heaving it up besides an ache in my arms. Artie threw a mischievous glance at me as he came on by.

“Only a desk?” Artie teased, traces of sarcasm in his tone. “My, Kori. I think they’ll get us.”

I froze. “Hah! I’m not finished here.” With that, in my other hand, I grabbed another desk by a leg. I felt the burn, but I wasn’t going to let Artie win this joke. “Now, that has wheels. Pathetic, Artie. I thought you were better.”

As I began to walk off, smirking and lip quivering, Artie froze. His mouth gaped a little, lightness playing in his eyes. That was when he walked to the back of the room, hoisting up a large object that looked like a microwave, but was probably for holding chemicals or whatnot. He padded back over to the island, putting the box on top. He then continued rolling off, flicking back a curl.

“Sassy.” I mumbled, heaving my load out towards the doors. Artie wasn’t too far behind.

As soon as I got there, I laid one desk up against a door, Artie pushing the island to the other. As for the other desk, I stacked that over the first one. Artie took the box off of the island, and by the way he carried it, the box looked heavy. He then put it on the ground, right in front of the wheels. Artie pushed the island a few times afterwards, but it wouldn’t budge. The microwave thing had done its job.

Artie put his hands behind his back, squinting at me with a faint little smile. I laughed softly, shaking my head and walking back into the room. There was a wooden box filled with beakers, and I heaved that up, even though my muscles testified against it. Artie was close behind, grabbing some metal rods. I made my way out, dropping it behind the desks. I heard a clatter of broken beakers, but that wouldn’t matter. I didn’t plan on opening the case, and I’m not sure the bytes did either. Then there was Artie. He looked like he was organizing a puzzle with the way he leaned the metal

rods against the door, crossing them over each other and sticking the ends in little corners and divets he found. I chuckled, shaking my head.

“I don’t know Kori, my door seems pretty held up.” He shrugged, humor in his eyes.

I laughed, crossing my arms. “Yeah, okay. I doubt they’ll make it past me though.”

“Oh hush, my piping is absolutely perfect.”

“I didn’t see you picking up two desks.”

“Yes, well, I rolled over the island. Do you know how hard it is to maneuver those things?”

“Poor Artie. It must have been so hard to push that thing with all your muscles.”

“You noticed? Pretty swell, aren’t they?”

“You wish.”

“What was that?”

“The sound of burning.”

“No, I’m not kidding. What was that?”

Artie and I’s playful fight trailed off when all humor suddenly left Artie’s face, and he raised a hand, looking back and forth. Based off of his joke before, I’m sure this was a similar occasion. Just looking to scare me. This time, when I caught him in the act, I would kick his ass. Artie walked off a few steps, shoes dragging on the green and white tiles on the ground, representing school colors.

I debated calling off after Artie, but he was absorbed in whatever he was trying to do. His acting to get me scared was good, but he couldn't fool me twice. Not again. After a minute of him staring off in an awkward stand, I got tired of this. I wasn't going to wait around and let Artie be a tease when we had doors to cover. I stepped forward, sighing, letting my eyes roll. I was about to grab his shoulder when suddenly, a faint vibration went up my foot. I paused. It was so faint, and there weren't any more. I felt crazy now. My eyes shot around, eventually up to Artie who looked down at me. That was when I heard it. A very faint buzzing sound, just a gentle, extremely gentle hum in the air. And then we knew.

The two of us didn't speak, for we both knew the same thing. We set out at a gentle jog back down the hall we came from, making way past all the science wings. There were windows, but we didn't dare look out them. Not when the hum was gradually getting louder as we made our way to the auditorium. Did everyone else hear it to? I hoped they did- so they could get the warning. What about Shawn and Nat? They had run off- and I wasn't sure Rosie and Maggie had made it so far. Aaron- well, at this point, Aaron was the least of my priorities.

“See? I'm not crazy.” Artie said as he went around a turn.

“I didn't say you were.” I hissed as I caught up, running my hand along the wall so I didn't lean in too far.

“You were going to say I was.” He paused, letting me catch up. “It's ok, I'm not going to scare you again.”

I didn't reply. It was almost funny, how our light hearted joking had turned into us running off, fighting for our lives and praying to make sure

people were alive. I couldn't help but laugh a little, until I realized how cynical that was. It was crazy. What was even happening to me? How long ago was I just a simple minded blogger? Now I had changed into something else- a warrior, caretaker. Someone who felt like I had the weight of the world in my shoulders.

We finally made it to the auditorium, but the doors were closed and we couldn't hear any voices inside. I thought we would stop, but Artie kept going. We made it all the way down to the library, and then took a left. My skin was itching, for I then realized where we were going. To the heart of the noise. Right at the front entrance.

After a few more turns and trembling hearts, Artie fell to a walk. He leaned forward, putting a hand back to tell me to stop. He was creeping forwards now, pressed against the wall. The two of us hardly made any noise, and when we reached the end of the wall, he gradually leaned forward. I looked over his shoulder, and instantly, my heart sank.

It was easy to see what was going on outside of the door. Maybe three hundred yards from the entrance was, well, the simplest way to put it- the horde. There were hundreds of the bytes. All gathered together, standing and spitting at each other. It looked like they were feeding on something, and I wasn't sure I wanted to see what it was. I shook my head. There was no way we could make it to the door and not get noticed. The bytes would have to get lost before we could barricade the entrance.

Artie pulled me back, and I sat against the wall. I could feel my eyes begin to get glossy, frightened. Just earlier today, I thought things would be better. Maggie was talking, Rosie making plans- even Aaron wasn't making trouble. I was not expecting this, no way. I don't think Artie was either, but

he was much stronger than I was. I could see the hardness in his gaze, the strength in his thumbs, which he rubbed into his hands.

“Kori, I can’t lie. This is very bad, but you mustn’t worry. Remember how I told you to trust me?” He grabbed my hands in his own, looking straight into my eyes. “Don’t think about them. We have to find the others, tell them what is happening. I’m so sorry. I wish I could keep you safe from everything and I will to all my extent and I promise that- so don’t you worry.”

He then reached a hand forward, grabbing a few hairs from my mild streak of blue in my hair. It was frozen in time, really. That those few seconds where we connected would probably end up being the last sense of peace I had before all hell broke loose.

Artie lifted me to my feet, and very slowly, we began to creep towards the end of the hall, in the direction of the auditorium. No way could we allow the group of bytes to hear us or see us- there were so many, they could be among us within moments if that happened. But I knew I was safe. Artie was holding my hand, and we walked warily along together. He told me to trust him. And I did.

We had gotten maybe halfway down the hall when I heard a bang and some scuttling. We froze. That couldn’t have been the bytes- the noise was coming from the hall to our left, leading towards the deans office. But it didn’t mean the bytes wouldn’t have heard it. We were frozen for ten seconds or so, before what else, Shawn’s yelling, loud voice suddenly broke the silence.

“We found a radio!”

Artie opened his mouth as if to curse, but a sudden hiss coming from behind us and a wail prevented him from doing so. Shawn was loud. Easily heard from outside.

He shook his head, grabbing my hand and racing across to the left hall. I guess his voice was heard throughout the school, because to my right I noticed Rosie had suddenly appeared, running with a relieved expression on her face. That sure wouldn't last for long at this rate. While Artie ran on, I froze.

Rosie's eyes widened as she looked at me. Shooting a hand forward to tell her to stop, she skidded to a halt, corners of her mouth coming up. But they didn't last very long. When Rosie saw the urgency on my face, she slowly sank to a resting gaze, with more confusion than anything. I slowly padded up to her, hearing Artie dash off in the background. Rosie and I finally reached each other, and I shook my head, looking back towards the front entrance.

"Rosie, there's a horde in front of the school. I think they heard Shawn." I broke it to her, and as I hushed out the words, I could see the frightened look arising in her eyes. "We don't have much time. I'm going to get the others, get ready. You go with Nat and Shawn, put the radio to good use, alright? Tell Artie I'm fine."

Rosie paused for a second, then nodded gravely. "You're strong. You'll be fine. I'll- I'll do that."

I gave Rosie a quick pat on her back and rose to my feet. So this was it, then. I got one day of peace in the school and now everything was over.

Would we ever find somewhere safe? If for the rest of my life I would have to run- I wasn't sure how much longer I would want to fight. I knew I would grow tired, in more ways than one. It was only a matter of time. But for now, I had people who relied on me. I had to do this.

Rosie took off at a jog towards the hall, and I went in the opposite direction. I was dashing, though. Hearing a bump come from behind me, I knew a few of them had gotten to the door now. I didn't know if they were smart enough to get through doors- but the first one clearly must have been. If they all got here, we were dead, plain and simple. Escaping would require a plan. A back door, weapons- anything.

Maggie must not have been too far behind Rosie. They were close, and obviously together before all of this occurred. She had to be towards the auditorium- or on her way to the cafeteria for food. She would then have to know where Aaron was, and boom, everyone knows what is happening. The hard part came afterwards.

The auditorium doors came into view after a stretch of running. I skidded to a halt then, grappling for them, heart racing. They opened with a click, and I ran onto the downhill carpet. The lights were on, and everyone's stuff was strewn about the room, but there was not a soul in sight. Only my own breath could be heard in the room, but towards the pit was my duffel. I raced over to that, catching my breath. When all was well, I hoisted it over my back, and put the straps over my arms. It wasn't too heavy, as it mostly carried bags of chips and pills. My fire axe was another story. And that was when I remembered it was in the classroom down the hall.

I spat, quickly looking around the room. I saw a half filled bag a few feet from me, an ordinary school backpack but packed with food. There was

more on the ground, as if someone was here, packing it, but got shooed away. That was when I suddenly got a chill on the back of my neck. Maggie.

I realized not far from that was what looked to be a kitchen knife. Looked like the two girls may have gotten around to finding themselves weapons after all. I zipped up the backpack, putting it over my duffel. It was a heavy load now, but adrenaline was rushing through my veins and I had a job to do. I scooped up the knife, embracing it in front of me. I don't know why Maggie was driven out, but I would find her.

I jogged back up towards the door, wishing I could go faster, but weighed down by the medicine and food I was carrying. I also felt insecure with the knife, it could harm, but it wasn't as large or menacing as my fire axe. The way it sloped, sharp at the end and already red so I couldn't see the result of my battles- it brought a little more bravery to me. But I would get it. Axe in hand, I would find Maggie, and I would get everyone out of here.

I pushed the door open afterwards, hearing light bumping noises coming from down the hall over towards the room where my axe was. I furrowed my brow, taking off down there. The weight made my legs burn a little, and I couldn't wait for when I could peel the backpack from me, and I could be with Artie again and there would be no worries. But my worries were not yet gone. For when I heard a shout, choked voice, and bangs come erupt from the classroom that was another worry on my list.

As I went through the door, a scene entered my vision. A few paces in front of me was a middle-aged man byte, and large. He was muscular, but his plaid shirt and jeans along with facial hair, gruff fingers and worker shoes made me suspect he wouldn't have been the most inviting person to be around when he was normal. And there, plastered against the wall, was

Maggie. In one hand was a chair, and whenever the byte got close, she would bump him away. But I wasn't sure why. Right at Maggie's feet was my fire axe. In one slam, she could take him down.

"Maggie!" I shout to her, raising up my knife. "My axe is at your feet, take him out!"

At that moment, I realized the girl had tears in her eyes, and she was shaking her head. She looked so feeble, much weaker than she was earlier. But I didn't understand. The way she acted made Maggie seem so much stronger, like if there was one byte after her, she would have taken him down. But something was holding her back. The way she seemed too pained, the way she whimpered every time she had to bat him away.

"Do you need me to kill him?" I shouted to her then. At that moment, the byte turned towards me. But his gaze didn't last. He seemed much more interested in Maggie, surprisingly. "Maggie, I can do it, I--"

"No!" She shouted, walking to her side so that she began to put herself between the byte and I. "Don't touch him!"

I narrowed my eyes, taking a step back. The byte obviously was trying to kill Maggie, and she didn't even care. She just battered him off with the chair gently, and that was when I lost it. "Maggie! He's going to hurt you, why aren't you doing anything?"

Just as the words escaped my mouth, Maggie suddenly rammed the chair at the byte with much more force than before. He flew backwards, knocking over desks and becoming stuck. It began to try and rise out of them, but slowly. I thought Maggie would finish him off, but I was wrong. Instead, she whirled around to face me, eyes red. The chair dropped from her hands,

and her next words pained my heart so badly, my mind got fuzzy and I lost track of time. Alas, she spoke.

“He already has hurt me.” She cried. “He’s my father.”

We both froze. My eyes widened, looking back to the sprawled out byte on the ground, and then to Maggie. The byte was definitely roughed up. His skin was completely yellowed, cuts on his skin and green oozing from the crevices. But still, the findings were remarkable. The shape of his eyes, color of his hair and the even, delicate lips- all were much similar to Maggie Hansen, standing in front of me with pain, so broken and confused. It made sense, her inability to kill him. Even though he had hurt her so badly all her years, he was still her father, blood and all. But with this, I could not relate.

“Maggie,” I said in a hushed tone, taking a few steps over to her. “You can leave. I’ll deal with him. I know this is painful. God, I know how hard this is. The door is open.”

She shook her head. “The bastard destroyed me, Kori.”

“I know.” I said to her, at last making it to her body and putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Its ok, Maggie. You don’t have to-“

“But, that’s why I have to destroy him.”

My mouth dropped open as Maggie morphed before my eyes. She seemed so helpless before, cold. But her eyes didn’t leave her father’s as she crept over to the desk in the far corner of the room. There, she leaned down, opening a drawer and pulling out something silver and thick. As she began to come back, I looked at what she had. A metal baseball bat.

I could only stare as she waltzed over to her father, who was just beginning to rise to his feet from the splayed out desks he had fallen upon.

But Maggie was right there. She flipped the bat in her hand a few times, eyes cold now. Memories flashing before them. Once more, I could see into her world. Seeing what she was seeing.

Her father had just finished with her now. Maggie had been sitting in her room, shoulder now aching terribly after being shoved into the corner of her window. It was still raining, and much like the droplets falling from the sky, tears fell from her face. But her eyes were dead, not red or burning or anything. Just empty. Every ounce of happiness or hope she had was gone. He had taken that away from her. It had all been because of one stupid event, a lateness of cleaning up after her father's alcohol, or not quite getting to bed on time because her sadness kept her studies at bay.

Eventually, after a long hour of blankness on her cold, wooden floor, Maggie rises. Her salty tears had dried into the cracks on her skin, leaving behind stickiness and gloss. Later in the day, she had acting. Like always, she had a large part and everyone was expecting much from her. She didn't have long. She had to find a way to compose herself, block out the pain, clean herself up- all within the hour.

Her father had left to go do work for somebody, leaving Maggie alone. Her mother was still at the hospital, working from dawn to darkness, helping patients and making sure they felt at home. But she could never do that to Maggie. She didn't get in the way of her father, because she didn't want to succumb to the same fate. All the years of Maggie's life, her mother had known. And she had not done anything, for she was selfish when it came to her very own soul. And Maggie was always the one left alone to rot.

She went down the stairs of her home, plain with the walls painted white. Everything- eggshell white with wood floors, and the only fabrics in

the house were blue. So ordinary looking, but puzzles were built beyond the architecture. And Maggie knew this. Halfway down the steps, her delicate white socks touching the wood gently, she began to stomp. Nobody was there to tell her not to. Stomp, stomp, stomp. All the way down the steps.

There was a back door in her house leading to her backyard. It was nothing special. Dark green grass was growing from the dirt, a white fence wrapping all the way around. A shed and oak tree were at the far end, getting covered by the rain coming from outside. Maggie eventually made it to the door, then. And she stepped outside, right onto the mud and rivers of rainwater in her silky black dress and perfect white socks. The rain instantly ran onto her hair, making it messy and all over the place. She ignored all cold and dampness, and eventually made it to the shed.

There, she opened the creaking, rotting doors. All sorts of tools were inside, all rusty and unnecessary. There, in a far corner, was a metal baseball bat. Cobwebs covered it, for it had not been used in a long time. But Maggie picked it up, despite of the old dirt that got stuck to her pretty little skin and the webs that got stuck under her fingernails. And she stepped right out of the shed, bat lying limp behind her, running through the mud.

She went to the oak tree, only then at that point lifting the bat up. At that point she began to cry again, but her tears got caught up in the rain and it was hard to tell if she really was or not. But she had looked up to the sky, wondering, is this really my life? Is this my forever? To be destroyed to a point where I merely want to destroy myself? And then she began to flip the bat a few times, eyeing a spot on the oak.

She gripped her hands on it, pulling back and letting loose. The bat slammed into the tree, causing little bits and pieces of bark to come off.

Every time she hit it again, more bark. It reminded Maggie of her. How at every hit, a little more began to fall away. To a point where the raw of the tree began to show, and at that precise moment she dropped the bat. Sliding her bracelets down her arm, she eyed the symmetrical, light pink lines that raced across her skin. Raw. Reminders she had fallen apart.

And then, she let her knees fall in the slop, and she really, truly, began to cry.

I now stare upon a completely different Maggie. She was no longer broken down. She was powerful. There was strength in the metal bat that was hovering in her hands. Her father had just gotten to his feet now, the monster that nearly destroyed her. But this time, he really was a monster. Moaning. Lusting, truly wanting to kill her. And Maggie felt no mercy. She wanted him to pay. And so did I.

“Not even this will be enough.” She shook her head, bringing the bat behind her shoulder. “And how unfortunate it is now, that I cant make you feel what I did.”

And then, a whizz in the air. The bat came around with so much speed and force it was only a blur. Then, a splatter of red. Chunks flying everywhere. I had to look away. This was not my fight, or my kill. I could hardly bear to watch. I heard a thump, splattering, and then a clatter of metal against the floor. There were footsteps, a sliding, and then everything was over. I lifted my head. There was red soaked all over the floor, the crumpled body of Maggie’s father on the ground. The bat was nearby, and then there was Maggie. She was leaning against the wall, standing high, but it was like a part of her was gone. A very bad part of her, though. The rope that was tied around her heart, pulled tight, vanished, gone.

She made the next move. All the jingling bracelets Maggie had on were suddenly grabbed by her free hand. One by one, she took them off. Dropping them onto the floor, revealing her naked arms one at a time. I could see the faint little lines on her wrists, but the red of her father had begun to go up her arms and it was very hard to see. But when Maggie only had one left, a simple braid of silver that went around in a circle, I took a step forward.

“Wait.” I said to her, walking up in front of the girl who looked to the ground. “Hold on a second.”

“Yes?” Maggie said quietly, snagging her silver braid on a finger.

“I- I want to keep that one.” I said to Maggie, pointing at the bracelet. “For myself. As a reminder of how strong you are. And that I need to be strong too.”

Maggie paused a moment. She took a moment to look at the bracelet, and then me. Her gaze hovered for a second, eyes slowly wandering off in the direction of her father. And then she finally moved. The bracelet slipped to the very tips of her fingers in a delicate grasp, and slid over beside me. She then rolled up my sleeve on the pink sweater, placing the bracelet on my wrist. It was a perfect fit. I pulled the sweater back over to it, and looked at Maggie.

“I don’t know if you know, but the horde is nearby. Your father must have been with them. But we need to get out of here. I was sent to gather things up, find you and Aaron, anything.” I nodded to her, putting a hand on Maggie’s shoulder. “If you’re okay now, we have to go.”

“I’m great, actually.” Maggie shook her head, picking up the bat from the ground. “I know where Aaron is, follow me.”

I didn’t get the chance to reply before Maggie whisked both of us away. She charged out the door, halting before turning left and motioning for me to follow. I had no choice. Clinging onto my axe before making a run for it, Maggie slowed a little ways to pull the backpack I carried for her from my back. I didn’t think I was coordinated to continue running while we went through with that, but I guess adrenaline worked for me.

Maggie was beginning to lead me to a part of the school I had never been to. The halls became dimmer, hotter than the other ends of the school. Humid, almost. It was smelly, like sweat and mint. It got stronger and stronger as Maggie and I went on, until suddenly she took me to a dark gray door at the end of a hall.

She looked at me, then to my shoes, and pulled open the door. So that was where the humidity came from. Before my eyes was an indoor pool, a glowing sky blue color that illuminated the high gray walls. It was completely empty, not a splash of water on the ground nearby. For once, I was actually too warm now that we were in the pool. And I did not know why Maggie was leading me here, either. Aaron was nowhere in sight.

That was, until, she grabbed my hand and pulled me in the location of a door painted the same thick gray everything else was. It didn’t have a window through it or anything, so I didn’t expect it would take us anywhere important. But I trusted Maggie. She knew far, far more than I did. When we got there, the door was heavy, dull, and only led us to a dark hall where I could hear air blowing and a carpet on my feet.

It was dark, but Maggie led me through. She then opened what I suspected was a smaller door, suddenly revealing an indoor basement track. It went all around the room, a weight room in the center and chained bike rooms all around. Much like the swimming pool, everything was in place. It had been a Saturday after school ended anyway. Everything was cleaned up.

Maggie ran off on a hard left on the edge of the track. There was a bike room there, the chain fence covering it. But as I could see, it was open slightly. There was a rustling coming from inside of it. When we finally reached the front, I managed to look inside. That's when I noticed Aaron was sitting right in the middle of the floor, all bikes on the right of the room. There was a perfect circle of salt surrounding him, which I did not find surprising at all, and he had a paper and pen that he was mercilessly scribbling at without stopping.

"He's been there since we brought him in yesterday." Maggie said to me, pointing at Aaron. "Hasn't moved."

I stepped forward into the room. Aaron didn't look up. "Aaron!" I hissed to him, going all the way to the edge of his salt. "They found us. We need to get out of here right now. Ok? Come on."

Aaron didn't move or say a thing. He continued scribbling his messages on his piece of paper, the font so small I couldn't even see. That was that. I lost my patience, stepping forward into the salt circle. My mistake. Aaron lunged forward, pushing me back and gathering up the salt where it was smudged on the ground.

“If you didn’t get the memo, Aaron, we have to go!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. We couldn’t stay much longer. If we did, that was a death sentence.

“I’m not leaving.” Aaron mumbled.

I shook my head, started. “What?”

“I told you, I’m not leaving.” He said quietly. “They wont get me here. Satan has spared me, and I bear his protection. Go on, for he does not enjoy your presence.”

I furiously looked back and forth. Aaron hadn’t looked up once from his work until he said his final words. With that, he stood up, pulling something from his back jean pocket. If I wasn’t mistaken, it was a key. He strolled over to the door into the bike room, and before I could react, he slid the door closed. I grabbed at the chains, but Aaron stuck his hands through, slipped in the key, and locked the door. He had the key inside with him now. I tried to hard to jerk the door open- but it wouldn’t budge.

“Now go.”

I looked desperately to Maggie, who was a few steps behind me. Her eyes were said and confused, looking deep into Aaron who had gone back to his drawing. I ran my fingers through my hair, looking back and forth. There was no way I could get into the room unless Aaron gave up the key. But I had no idea how I could persuade him to come out, and we only had seconds.

One more look into Maggie’s eyes was enough. I now understood the sadness in them. That she and I both knew we would not be able to bring Aaron out- that we now had everyone else to get out of here, not just Aaron. But leaving him felt like a sin to me. Because I had promised not to let

anyone get left behind. But was it really me? Or was it all the visions Aaron had racing inside of his head?

“We need to get to the others now.” Maggie said in a hushed voice to me. “There’s nothing you can do. I am so sorry Kori.”

I could only nod, not even bear to open my mouth. The sheer thought of leaving Aaron down here until the horde found him... I couldn’t deal. That’s not what I should be thinking about right now. I had to make sure Artie, Rosie, Nat, and Shawn were all safe. We had to get out of here.

I was the first to make a run for the door. Maggie did not oblige, rushing behind me with the heavy, metal bat clattering behind her feet. I stole one last glance at Aaron, sitting in his salt circle, writing away words on his paper. Dealing with the demons in his head. That was the last I saw of him. Maggie and I had not stopped once the entire way until we finally made it back to the auditorium. There, we found Nat.

She had a fuzzy pink bag with her name imprinted on front, and was stuffing in bits and pieces of food. I could see a jacket, phone, and a pair of headphones in as well. By her side was a rusty looking pitchfork, most likely a scene prop she could use in her own advantage. Nat didn’t notice us right away. And when she did, I could see the worry on her face. But it didn’t make much of a different. Her wide, gazing features made her look at least somewhat happy.

“They’re almost through the doors.” She said to us, eyebrows going up, tense. “Everyone else got the radio to work but we cant find anything. Artie said we should go out by the language wing. It’s the farthest away.”

“Sweet bag, Nat.” Maggie said with a smile, tucking her bat into her backpack.

Nat laughed weakly. “I like to be in style.”

Suddenly, we heard yelling come from a classroom down the hall. I wasn't sure it was because of the bytes though, since I didn't heard any clatters, blows, or running. There was a moments silence. Nat looking all around, lips pursed together with an awkward smile, trying so hard to be the bright, peppy person she usually was. But it was hard for her at this exact moment. And I couldn't blame her.

At that exact moment, I heard footsteps come rushing from down the hall. I whirled around, waiting to see what it was. My fire axe was in my hands, ready. Maggie pulled her bat back out, and Nat had her strange, old pitchfork. But we were not to worry. I first saw a flash of white, and then sure enough, it was Artie's face coming running down the hall with a small radio tucked under his arm. I had never been happier to see him, alive, fine- and eyes blazing with relief.

Shawn and Rosie were right behind. I realized they both had small bags, and Rosie had her microphone stand she used the other day. Shawn was empty handed. Remembered the knife I grabbed earlier, I slipped it out from my bag and stuffed it into his hand. He looked at it in surprise, and then satisfaction. That was when Rosie spoke.

“We got the radio to work.” She breathed roughly. “It... We got on a channel. There's- there's a safe house in the Willis Tower downtown. Chicago. If we can get there, we're safe. Good and safe.”

“That’s far on foot.” I say to her, eyes darting back and forth. “You sure its safe?”

“Positive.” Artie butted in. “But if we want to make it, we’ve gotta go- now.”

“We’re ready. Do we have everyone?” Rosie looked around, eyes ending on me. “Wait, where’s Aaron?”

I could only shake my head. Rosie went from being hopeful, to an emptiness and painfulness embedded within seconds when she, and everybody else realized we already lost somebody. My skin chilled, and I let my arm drop so that my axe ran along the ground. But the booming was louder as I could hear. There was no time to waste.

“Oh.” Rosie said softly. But she knew she couldn’t mope now. We had to get out. “Artie, do you want to take the front?”

“Gladly, I-“ Artie began to say. But he was cut off. Cut off by a loud shattering noise, and suddenly, drunken yells.

They got in.

“Ah, move!” Artie called to all of us, running off with his golf club slung over his shoulder, doing up his cuffs.

I was right behind him. It was Rosie who ended up going in back. I would have offered, but Rosie had elected herself in charge here. She felt responsible for all of this. It would simply be an argument I couldn’t win. Shawn and Nat were together of course, Maggie trailing in back. I looked back every few seconds, making sure everyone was still clustered together. They were.

Artie took us up a small flight of stairs. My blood was hot, everything moving by so fast. My fire axe was held strongly in my hands, ready to swing. But my duffel got heavier with each step. The battle had only started, and I was already weak.

I looked behind me once to make sure everyone was still there. In doing so, I felt a weight in front of me. Breath leaving my body, I realized I had run into Artie who skidded to a stop at the top of his steps. In a flash, he slid out his golf club, sending it whizzing over his shoulder at the jaw of a byte that seemed to have gotten in. Now that I could catch my breath, all was much easier to see. If it was me in front, I wouldn't have caught the byte so quickly. It had been wearing tan clothing, plastered against a wall. Another point for Artie.

We bounced over the body, taking a left. Artie paused for just a moment because we were slightly strung out, but the rasps and groans coming from just below us pushed us on. We had made it to the language wing at this point. The door was just down the stretch of hall. There, we could escape. It was the back entrance. Hopefully, we could get away. Make it to the Willis Tower.

We broke out at a run down the hall. Our weapons were clattering as we made it through, tile after tile, but then- something was off. I heard a high-pitched wail. And then suddenly, Artie was jumping back. Fighting off two of the bytes with his golf club. I flew at one of them, burying my axe in his shoulder. Artie pushed off the other, but we froze. Coming down a side hall were maybe ten of them.

“Uh, we have company!” Artie yelled out to all of us. “Spread out!”

We did as we were told. Artie and I took the front, the others were splayed behind us. The bytes came on with full force. I managed to hack one off straight away, but there were six of us in a tight space. We were easily pushed back. Progress was made with our weapons, but not enough. It was too hard to get a good hit when we were shoulder to shoulder.

I realized Maggie had gotten battered back. There were two upon her, slowly creeping her closer and closer to lockers where she would have no hope of getting a hit. I knew what I had to do. I weaved from my front position, stretching across ground to get to Maggie. She pushed one bag with a front hit to the stomach, brow furrowed in concentration. She was doing well- but I wouldn't risk her getting hurt. With one big whomp I brought my axe around, burying it into the neck of the first byte. It went down easily, but my axe got caught again and I was forced to kneel and tug it out while Maggie finished off the other. She smiled at me as I arose, a silent thank you.

When the two of us turned back to the others, our little battle was nearly over. Nat was shaking a women's body off of her pitchfork, a disgusted look on her face, and Rosie knocked an already bloodied man off his feet with her stand. We were alright, and it was successful, but the horde was just behind us still. Artie wasted no time. He righted all of us, and slammed open the door.

"Down Ohio street- now!" Artie said to us, raising his club and pointing down the street.

I made haste down the road. I knew that if we went down Ohio, that left us to make a turn onto North Shore Drive- that later connected to the Kennedy Expressway. The Kennedy hit the city. If we made it that far, anyway. I prayed. Just if one of us made it. But I couldn't let someone like

Maggie die. Or Rosie. Nat, even Shawn... But Artie. I know in my heart I would live with a deathly burden if anything ever happened to Artie.

We ran along for about a minute, but I knew the bytes were still hot on our trail. In only a few minutes we had encountered a lot, and I knew there would be more. One look behind me proved it. Once we were two hundred yards down the street going as fast as we can, they appeared behind us. The mob. There were the same amount if not more than the amount we saw in front of the school. All in different stages of decay. Towards the front, the bytes only had the yellowed skin and bloodshot eyes. From children to adults. As for behind them, I could see those bytes well enough now. On their skin were some big scratches, gaping holes where they may have been bit or fed upon. Green sloshed out, running down their skin and turning brown where it dried. I held my stomach in, slowly heading down to a jog, and then a walk. That made everyone to slid to a stop in alarm.

I walked off towards the sidewalk. Houses were on both ends, lawns messy and abandoned. But above those were phone lines going across the street. Large ones, branching off. Tons of wires on them in a big mess of wood and electricity. I narrowed my eyes, putting my fire axe out in front of me. The dead were gaining on us now, in a slow, shambling jog. That was when Artie stepped forward.

“Kori, what are you doing? Kori?!” He shouted, running off towards me. “They’re- Kori! Come on!”

I shook my head, running along to one of the phone lines. I had made a promise to not let anyone get left behind, hadn’t I? Well, I was not going to let us get run down and killed when the sun hadn’t even gone down yet.

The bytes didn't tire. We did. So I knew I would have to do this, even if it meant cutting everything close.

I lifted my axe in a high arc, slamming it with all the force I had in my body at the phone line. Luckily for me, it was old, chipping, and even slightly rotten. My axe embedded itself in deeply, cutting back moist wood. Not enough. I pulled it out, once more cracking it at the wood with all my strength. But my aim was off, and it only brought out a sliver. One look over my shoulder. They were close, and everyone was cowering in fear. Unsure to keep going or wait for me. One thing was certain. They weren't going to stay here and get killed.

The axe dropped over my shoulder once more. I breathed in, cooling my body. Bringing fresh air in my lungs. My eyes rooted on the spot I would have to hit. The phone line wouldn't take much. And with every piece of energy I had, I swung my axe around for the last time. And my aim was true. The sharp blade buried itself in the wood with a mighty crack. I pulled it out. More cracking, splintering, hissing through the air. And then the phone line began to fall. Another came down with it from the pull on the wire, and they made a big mess in the middle of the street from a house to a house. The bytes stopped. Their pathway was broken now, and they were too dumb enough to go another way. I had done it.

"Okay, now I'm coming!" I yelled, shooting after Artie from the fallen phone lines.

He welcomed me back with a hand, and while I could see that everyone was grateful for what I had done, Artie's face had nothing but worry. I know I would pay for that stunt when we finally got away from here.

But for now, we were safe. As long as we kept running and didn't find any more trouble, we would be ok- for now at least.

The rest of the run was brutal. We didn't find any more bytes except for one, an old man that Shawn did the honors with. And as far as we could see, no signs of life. Maybe the bytes had already overtaken everyone except for us- minus the people in Chicago. Artie still had the radio with him, tucked in his pant pocket. It would be hard getting to Chicago. There was another town we had to pass through, and the Kennedy would be crazy. Who knew how many people would have been trying to get home from work when everything happened? The city had to be a nightmare as well. All those people... but I shook the idea out of my head. We had a long way to go.

After a long haul and dashing from the school, we slowed down when we all knew that distance had been put between the bytes and us. There wasn't one person among us who's lungs didn't burn and legs didn't ache, not even Artie. He was the first to take a seat when we succeeded in finding a house with it's door wide open. Maggie and I went in together to make sure it was alright, but the house was clear. Nobody home. And now that it was around four, we were all hungry and ready to rest.

Shawn voted to sit off by the window and keep watch. Nobody obliged. In my duffel, I pulled out a bag of chips and a small container of apple sauce. That would hold me over, as I couldn't put anything to waste. Who knew how long we would be wandering, if we even made it past a day.

But after a good, long meal, Artie said we should stay for the night. I did not oblige. Feeling limbs heavy again, I decided I would just take a little

nap. My eyelids got heavy. And as I laid on a couch in the finely furnished home, the last image in my head was an old, worn copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

When I finally awoke from my ‘nap,’ it was so silent and dark that I thought everyone had left me. But as my eyes adjusted to the light, I realized everyone was asleep and it was simply night. Raising my head, I checked my phone. It clicked back, saying it was 2:15 AM. Well, points for me in my strange sleeping habits. I turned it off, leaning my head against the couch again. My eyes were still heavy, and I closed them, wrapping my arms around my body.

The problem was that my mind was awake now. Had I fallen asleep at a time more like seven, I would probably still be sleeping. But my body thought it was morning. I tried and tried to fall asleep for maybe thirty minutes more, but it was no use. I simply got fussy and irritated. Opening my eyes again, I leaned back against the couch. I guess I could play the waiting game, or check up on Shawn. He said he would keep watch today, after all.

I gently put my toes on the ground and softly hit the ground. I didn’t want to wake anyone else up. They needed sleep just as much as I did. And now that I was focused, I could see their shapes on the floor. Maggie and Rosie were a few feet from each other. Artie was a little ways off, more towards the front door, cradling his golf club in his arms. I laughed a little bit. Even though he was asleep, Artie still was in defense.

But then I became curious. I didn’t see Nat anywhere among the sleeping bodies. Could she have decided to sleep farther off? Wrinkling my nose, I followed my gut over towards one of the far windows where Shawn said he would keep watch. I was on my toes, making sure not to make any

noise. Luckily, I was light on my feet and ready for anything. Because I had to skid to a stop to make sure I didn't run over two shapes beneath me.

I teetered forward, but caught myself. There, in the skinny little hall, were none other than Nat and Shawn. They had a blanket draped over their bodies, Nat facing the left. Her head rested on Shawn's arm, breathing softly, as I could see considering his hand was on her waist. I squinted at them. Of course, I knew about all of this- but Shawn was supposed to be watching. That meant all night- something could have happened. I wanted to wake him up and give the boy a piece of my mind, but that would awaken everybody else. Maybe I'll just take over the watch.

I carried on with my gentle little padding until I hit what looked like a kitchen. The floor changed to tiles, and I could see a refrigerator off to the side. But it was unusually cold. I put my hands to my arms, furrowing my brow as I looked to see why. Then, my eyes landed on a window straight out in front of me. It was wide open, the curtains blowing inward. I could hear a whistle from the wind, low and crying out. A sad tune. Well, that shouldn't be open. I took a step forward to close it, and just as I did, another thing caught my eye. Movement. Right beside the window.

A byte.

It was in the house, there was no mistaking. But it made no move to attack. It was a woman, a feeble looking one, and hunched over, arms crossed. She was grossly mutilated, skin dragging and more of a green than yellow. She simply looked like she was in to fare the cold. And after a second, she noticed me. But unlike the others, she didn't attack. Instead, she cowered back by the window, hissing and curling into a ball.

My eyes were wide, sleep happy and utterly weirded out by the situation. It took my mind a second to take the situation to heart, realizing what was happening. And when I did, I yelled, shutting the door to the kitchen and getting on the other side, breathing heavily. That caused Shawn to get up with a jolt down the hall, bringing Nat up along with him.

“What the hell, Kori?” He said in a morning voice, rubbing his eyes. “What are you even doing?”

“You let one of those things get in you... you... peasant!” I yelled to him, motioning towards the door. “You left the window open!”

Shawn’s face after I said that looked like a mixture of confusion and horror. Nat was all mixed up, looking from me to Shawn. That was when I heard rustling coming from the other room, and that was when I knew everyone else had probably woken up. After a bit, Shawn looked up at me, eyes getting wider and wider.

He put his palms out. “Look, I know I was supposed to keep watch. But when I went to Nat, I closed the window.” He told me. “Honest. I would never have left it open. If... If something got in, it would only be to-“

I heard everyone crowd behind me, but not until the most terrible thing I had ever heard in my life sounded from on the other side of the door. If I could describe it in any way I could, I would call it a Satanic screech from the fiery pits of hell. I fell to my knees, forcing my hands over my ears to block out the dreadful noise that could only have come from the byte in the kitchen. As I popped an eye open, I realized everyone else was doing the same. And then it stopped.

“Guys, what is happening?” Rosie said urgently from behind me. “What was that? Shawn?”

I couldn't answer. I was too dumbfounded to speak. But then there was Shawn. He repeated my earlier words, saying how I trapped one of the bytes in there. And then the scream. But all of our words trailed off when our eyes traveled to Artie, who was backing up slowly, shaking his head. Pulling his golf club from his back. I stepped forward, just as he looked like he couldn't take anymore.

“Artie? What is it?” I asked him, stretching and facing him.

“Everyone, get your stuff now. I- I can't be certain, but I think that one might just be signaling others.” He spoke to all of our shocked faces. “Come on, now!”

We didn't waste any time, or question Artie's judgment. I was upon the front room in a second. My duffel was right at the foot of the couch, and I slung it over my shoulder as the others got their weapons and gear. The fire axe came afterwards. I flipped it once, securing the weapon in my grasp. How I hated always having to be on the move! One could never get a blink of relaxation nowadays. I thought we would get the chance to stay here until we found daylight. I mean, we had almost made it to Charintrod, the town separating us from North Shore Drive. Maybe two miles, and we would be there. Charintrod had a bigger population than Winslow Woods. Bigger stores. It would be easier to last when we got there. If we got there.

When all had been gathered, Artie crept up to the door, looking out a built in window. The five seconds silence felt like an hour. I began to bite

my nails, rubbing my other fingers on the fire axe. That was when Artie turned back to us, biting his lip.

“They’re coming in all directions. But slow.” He said to us. I could tell Artie was trying to be strong, but his worry was showing through. “If we stay, we’re going to get boxed in and they’ll get us. But if we get out, make a circle. Fight our way down the road. Maybe we can fight a way through.”

I could tell the others were unsure. They didn’t move, just looked at each other. The small number we had against so many. Artie just looked upon them, nearly hopeless. If this could work, everyone had to believe in each other. And that was why I stepped forward, going beside Artie and nodding to everyone.

“If we want to live, we go now.” I said to them all. “We can do this. Alright? I believe in all of you.”

A chill went up my spine when I felt Artie’s hand suddenly go to my back. Almost like a half embrace. I shivered, though I accepted the warmth. He then spoke. “Alright? Alright. Come on then. Theatre power.”

Our last words were what won everyone else over. They agreed, hoisting up our weapons. “On five.” Artie said, and we waited.

His hand gripped on the handle of the door, and my heart began to race. I could feel my blood become cold when his hand changed from me to the door, leaving me despite of the fact I was surrounded by the others. My fire axe got slippery from my sweat, even though it was cold outside.

Five.

The anticipation grew as Artie threw another glance out at the door. I could hear them now, the dead bastards. My grip got even tighter. If they

wanted my flesh, they would have to fight me for it. I had no plan to die tonight. Nor let anyone else die. The power began to surge through my veins. They wouldn't get me.

Four.

The others seemed not so certain. Their eyes had fear, deathly anticipation. I could tell none of them wanted to show it, but it was simple that inside, their minds were racing. Fearful. I understood. It was six of us against a horde. I looked into the eyes of all. Maybe some of my confidence would lift their spirits. Not entirely, but maybe just a little. It was Rosie who took the most from me. She grinned gently when our eyes met, holding her microphone stand out in front of her like she should be singing a solo in front of hundreds.

Three.

And then we had Artie. He was a great boulder upon my fresh green grass. He was cool, contained. He turned the knob a little more. But as he did so, Artie turned around once to look at me. Just give me one little glance, and while he didn't say anything, I understood him completely. The gentleness in his eyes. The trust.

Two.

Then again, maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. There were so many out there. So few of us. My heart quickened. What if my images of the outcome were distorted by my confidence? We had problems taking down only ten of those back at the school- so how could we deal with one hundred? But then I remembered Artie. His look. Trust. Trust. Trust.

One.

Artie had completely twisted the knob now. The door clicked open. So this was it, huh? The biggest battle we had to deal with so far. I couldn't let anyone down. And I would let nobody get left behind. That's why I was here, right? To pull everyone together? Somehow I was not so certain. That I was drawn here by something much more supernatural.

The door flew open.

At a straight glance, I could see Artie was right. The dead were weaving in between houses, slowly making way across the street to where we waited to become victims. But one thing was certain, we would not die in that house. It took us only five seconds in total to make it to the road, and when we did, we all wrapped up in a circle. I took the left, Artie just a small ways in front of me. A look right would send my gaze on Rosie. I was set.

Though we didn't come unnoticed. The bytes turned their heads in our direction, hissing and spitting at us. Slowly wandering over to our circle. I raised my axe, ready. And just then, Artie yelled. "Alright, go on!"

We moved in a gentle jog down the road, not breaking form. After fifteen seconds, I could see the first blow spit the air. Nat had driven her pitchfork into the waist of an overweight byte, who fell straight away. Nat shook him off, keeping up with us. A few seconds later, a ring echoed across the road and a girl flew backwards from Maggie's crack to the face. I couldn't believe it. Artie's plan was beginning to work.

The next byte came to me. It was a woman, mouth gaping open and hissing in my face, trying desperately to get a bite of me. Well, I was prepared. I brought my axe to the side, swinging it around and hitting her head clean off of her neck. A little blood splattered on me, and I gagged.

That was when I noticed everyone was getting busy now. Nobody had the chance to pause. Our circle slowed. Right in front of me, Artie was pushing a byte back with his club just as another hurtled itself at him. Rosie battered back a byte that was twice as big as her. Shawn and Nat were side by side, hacking the bytes as a team. And there was Maggie, never breaking stride, cracking the metal bat on any skull she could find.

Back in my blogging days, I remembered a little something called fan art when people in a fandom drew pictures or whatever they wanted that resembled characters or scenes from that fandom. I read a few zombie apocalypse books in my time, and peered into their fandoms. Every time fan art was drawn, there would always be the pretty girl with long flowing hair and a machete standing beside a buff, hot guy with a glittering gun standing over a corpse with hardly a mess made. Much different from what we were seeing now. Guts were splattered across the pavement. Blood splashed onto our clothes. Sometimes, the bytes would get too close and scratch our skin, rubbing their green goop onto our bodies. It was horrendous.

Somehow, we kept up. We succeeded in fighting the bytes back, but they never ended. Every time I hacked a byte down, another took its place. Or two. Our pace got slower and slower as we worked down Ohio Street. Charintrod wasn't too far, but when fighting off zombies in the dead of night- it could take a while. We hadn't even made it a quarter of a mile.

A loud oomph came from my right. Rosie. Once I knocked another byte down, I turned to her. The girl had three on her at once, two being full grown adults and the other being a bold looking teen. Her microphone stand wasn't enough in this case. She shoved it into the throat of one, causing it to stagger back and put hands to the flow of blood. But one of the others

smashed a fist at her chest, making Rosie tumble over backwards. I had to break circle.

After dealing off another byte, I dove right and hit a byte with the bottom of my axe just before it lunged at Rosie. That gave her a little time to climb to her feet. I brought the axe back, finishing off the byte that knocked her down in the first place. The other came down at us, but Rosie batted him backwards, giving me enough time to whip my axe at their chest. Rosie kicked him off, and I whirled around to face her.

“If only you could sing someone to death!” Rosie yelled from the heat of the battle, righting herself and slamming her stand in the skull of a small, lithe byte.

“Rosie, you’re a soprano. Hit some high notes and you never know!” I laughed, kicking a byte back before taking a step back, making my way towards the circle. “Kill it with-“

My words were cut off. Suddenly, I felt a great weight slam me onto my back. It knocked me clean off my feet, axe flying two feet from my fallen body. I could hardly breathe, but I succeeded in rolling over onto my back to face my attacker. It was the same byte Rosie had pierced in the throat. Reddish green liquid was streaming down his neck, but she just missed her point. The thing was still standing, spitting with rotten teeth at me. And in its hand was a chunk of sharp pavement. I began sliding backwards, pushing a hand towards my axe...

But it had been just out of reach. My fingers hit thin air, feet pushing at nothing. And Rosie was just now seeing my on the ground, that the byte had pushed me out of the circle. I fought my way backwards, hands reaching,

clawing- but not quickly enough. I saw it lift a bloated arm, and my eyes closed shut. Excruciating pain went from my head in a fine line and down to my arm. I screamed. And just then, a loud thump was heard in front of me. I opened my eyes. The byte was now on the ground, lifeless. And Artie was hovering over the body, golf club raised above his head.

“Kori, Kori!” He yelled at me, kneeling down and putting his hands on my shoulders. “Listen to me Kori! Are you ok?”

I didn't answer. Instead, I raised a finger shakily to my head where everything was stinging and erupting in light. I pulled it away. Thin, red blood had now stained my fingertips. That was when I saw the blow that was on my arm. Just under my elbow, grains of cement were embedded in my raw, sliced up skin and was an indent on my body. I wanted to be sick.

“Kori?” He called again. I turned away, reaching for my axe. It wasn't too far off. When my fingers got there, it suddenly doubled, going to the left and right of my vision. My fingers touched the handle, but I couldn't see what I was grabbing. I pulled it away, my vision coming together for a moment. Putting weight on my foot, I queasily lifted myself up, rocking back and forth.

“Jesus.” I mumbled as Artie took my hand. “What the hell, man? Artie...”

A wave of dizziness overcame me. Just before I lost balance and toppled over, Artie caught me. And just for a second, put a hand on my cheek, muddy green eyes glittering and bringing my sight back in line. I got myself balanced again, stepping from his grasp.

“Don’t scare me like that again.” He said, shaking his head. And lifted my hand. And shot me a kiss.

Just before I drunkenly plunged back into the fray.

~

Day by day the memories grew dimmer. Words became less and less. A glowing orb of darkness had come over the infected, making them even more mutilated and dumber than before. But in those minds it was replaced with a greater desire. Hunger. So much hunger. They would go to greater lengths to destroy the people. Ran harder to find them. Fought harder. Harder. Harder.

But she, the witch, only became more clever. The more she watched and hunted, the more she began to understand the ways of the people. When they found her pack, they found run. But the people did not understand that she and the others did not tire. It would take hours, but they would always be run down. And she would always eat first.

In the maze of her brain, the little words still clumped together. She was much better than all, and she knew it. She tried thinking back, back before the darkness. What did they call the greater kind? Green? Lean? What was the word? She was the far superior. What would she call herself?

Then she got the word. Queen. She was the queen. All of the others were only companions, fighters she could use. They always listened when they saw her blade. It brought her power. On one occasion, she sent some off. To find food.

They came out without anything. But the way they moaned- she understood. Their hisses and gurgles. It had taken them far too long to come

back, but she knew why. Word to word. Her companions had learned something. From one companion to another and to another, she learned that farther off there was plenty of prey. A group of them all together. She learned there had been battles. Her own companions, cut open and left to die.

She hissed to all the others. They listened. She would not let the delicious, breathing flesh get any more of her companions. They were hers to command. She sent a few more off, to learn more. She would get the others. Once more, she began growing hungry. Her stomach snarled almost as bad as she could. They would not get away with this.

After all, she was hungry.

And she was the queen.

~

The next hour was the worst one of my life. We worked our way down the road, but the energy in our bodies was dimming. I was so dizzy, and the wound on my arm refused to stop bleeding. Every so often I had to rub a hand over it, make the blood flow stop. But that only rubbed the gravel in further, erupting in pain. My blows became less lethal. Sure, my axe continued burying itself into the bodies of the bytes, but sometimes it would take two hits. It just wasn't going in deep enough. I was running out of energy, and we had a half mile to go.

A sudden clatter caused me to turn from my work. Shawn had gotten spaced from Nat, as over time our circle became more of a mushy oval. Her pitchfork got caught in the gut of a byte, and it ran off into a lawn with it.

Her hands were empty. There was a moment where the glowing girl stared at her palms, shocked. Then, Rosie made the next move.

“Nat, you need a weapon!” She yelled to the girl, tearing into her bag with a spare hand.

“No, that’s okay!” Nat looked at all of us with this broad smile, eyes widening. “I’ll use my power theatre dance moves!”

A byte came her way. Every one of us had turned to face Nat, who rolled up her sleeves with a mischievous smile. He lunged. I contemplated burying my axe in it’s skull, but Nat bit her lip, leaned low, and shot a high kick at its head that only a professional, flexible person could have done. His neck snapped backwards, and before he could do anything about it, Nat kicked him over. My mouth dropped.

“Go theatre!” She said, bubbling as if she had been doing nothing the past hour.

I turned back, realizing two bytes had come in front of me. I hit one with my handle, giving me time. I swung it around, the axe putting a gash in the shoulder of the byte ahead. But it was nowhere near enough. I was so heavy, so dizzy. My limbs were numb and everything took a huge amount of effort. I staggered back, pushing him with the handle. Biding time. But my vision was getting fuzzy now. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could do this.

The byte lunged again, nearly knocking me off my feet. My fingers were sliding around the handle of my axe, shaking now. So dizzy. Fuzzy. It seemed to be vibrating beneath my touch, and it became harder and harder to fight. But I staggered forward again, pulling my axe back and leaving a blow that was enough to take the byte down. The other came at me straight away.

I parried its lunges and attempts to get at my face, breathing in and out, regaining any sort of energy to land a blow.

And I did. I brought my axe back, burying it in the neck of the byte. Not enough to go to the bone like I was going at the beginning of the fight, but it went down. At that moment, I wiped my brow, hot and sweaty. Instead, my hand only came away red from the cut on my head. The sight of it made my stomach light on top of my condition, and I stepped forward. I couldn't do this anymore.

I fell to my knees, using all my strength to simply hold my axe. More bytes crept towards me, and hell, let them come. I wiped my nose, gasping for air. Skin tingling, head ringing. And as I did, Artie whirled around. I didn't even get the chance to say anything. He just grabbed me by the waist and hoisted me up, even though I couldn't even find my feet.

"Don't you dare give up on me, dear." He told me, before turning to everyone else. His voice rose. "That's it, make a break for it! Run as fast as you can!"

Everybody dropped from their battles to face Artie. His voice echoed like a shotgun blast. They nodded, and made way down the road. We had cut down the horde considerably, but they still came. However, if we still had energy in our veins, we could make the last half mile. I had to find the heart.

I began to run, then realizing Artie had not let go of my hand. I made a swerving dash down the street, axe dangling by my side from my near useless left arm, and the duffel on my back felt like a dead weight. But nobody else around seemed to have it easy, either. Rosie had a hand to her chest, panting all the air in her lungs out. Maggie was slick with cold sweat.

Even Shawn was repeatedly slapping himself in the face, eyes seeming more distant with every step. The only one who appeared well off was Nat. But this was not surprising, for all her life, Nat never appeared less than happy.

Occasionally a byte would move fast enough to make it to our dash. When that happened, it would be Artie or Shawn to take them down. The two boys had made their way to the front, much taller and more muscled than all of us. They cut through any walls, weapons whizzing through the air. Some came at me, but I had no strength left to swing the axe around. I would simply hit them with the handle, batting them back until we continued running.

But my lungs began screaming for air. I wasn't as dizzy, but everything was bigger. The stars were flickering in the sky like Christmas lights and the street was bigger. It was slippery, strange. My feet scraped across it, the pavement rubbing on the plastic. My mind wandered. I felt like the great alter ego of Mr. Hyde in another classic deep in my heart, scouring the streets, hunched over, and blood splattered all over my skin.

“Keep going!” Artie yelled. “Charintrod is just ahead! There’s a bank! Go in there!”

It was true. I could see a few buildings bunched off in the distance, streetlights flickering. It wasn't that far. We could pull it off. The town now in sight was that last little piece of hope for me. I couldn't have done this if I didn't fight my way to this point. Like Maggie said, we sculpt our own hope from here on out.

Artie let my hand go just as the bank came in full view. It was a big, big, thick place with bulletproof windows and plenty of rooms. And the

horde was small now, hardly any of them were by the buildings. Thinning out the deeper we got. A second wind came upon all of us at that point. One more minute of running on our final legs. I couldn't believe my eyes. We made it here without losing anyone.

The last minute was, in fact, a breeze. We were so set on making it that my own body was number one before and I couldn't even control my body as it threw my legs out at each other. Right, left, right, left. I went on. The door was right there. Hardly any bytes were in sight. Only one came at me, and I wrapped my axe around and slammed it into the bastard's ribs. I spit on the ground, gripping my bloodied left arm and gritting my teeth just before Artie opened the door. Everything got a little fuzzier now. We could breathe in just a few moments, god bless, we had made it.

Artie held the door, everyone rushing in. Maggie went, then Rosie, and lastly Shawn. Nat was running up to everyone else, and she was just behind me. But a wave of nausea overtook me, and I stepped back, dropping my axe. Nat stopped. She turned to me, grabbing my shoulders.

"Come on girl, it'll be ok. Come on." She gave me a gentle nudge. "Dance it out, yeah? Grapevine it over, there, you'll be fiiiiiiiiINEEEEE!"

Some force ripped Nat from my shoulders. I looked up to see her happy, flashing face change to fear within one second. For the first time, she didn't look pleased at all. Her eyes shot forward, mouth changing to a scream. It was so hard to see. But hands were grabbing at her, wrapping around her sides and her neck. I lunged forward.

"NAT!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, kneeling forward and reaching for my axe. The others only then noticed us. Shawn was deep in the

bank, and he looked out, seeing what was happening. Artie understood. But he was farther off. Nowhere as close as me.

I saw something bite into her neck, and claws rip by her ribcage. My fingers reached over to my axe. But it was strange. It got blurry, and I couldn't see the little details and separate it from the ground. Then there were two axes in front of me. My hand racked at only pavement, fingers running over nothing. The axes got wider and wider apart. I threw up on the ground, putting my knees up a few steps, desperately grabbing at it.

But then there were four axes in front of me. Nat's scream got quieter and quieter, more pained, drawn out and getting lower. Not even human. That was when I heard footsteps beside me, Shawn yelling out. But I didn't know what he was saying. I fell over onto my back, looking up at the stars. They seemed to make the outline of my axe and I clawed out at them, trying to reach for it.

"Nat... Nat...?" I mumbled, trying to make sense of things.

And just then, a pair of hands closed over me, grabbing at my clothes. And I closed my eyes, accepting the hell that was pulling me up, up, up into the light.

“So give me back to Death,
The death I never feared.
Except that it deprived of thee,
And now, by life deprived,
In my own Grave I breathe.
And estimate it’s size,
It’s size is all that Hell can guess.
And all that heaven was.”

Freshman year, as an assignment, we were given a topic and had to find a poem to match. I was given the wonderful topic of none other than death, and the opposite side of life. In my mass library at home, I had several copies of Emily Dickinson poems. So Give Me Back to Death called my name from the shelf. I researched it, gutted the poem. I learned how Emily had written the poem as she was dying away from a terrible disease. Every line I deciphered it, word by word. And then, we were asked to stand in front of the class, recite our poem, and give the rest of the class our take. I got an A after going on about Emily seeing heaven and hell descend onto her and sweep her to the greater above. And just now, I don’t feel much different from her.

I didn’t really realize it, but I was mumbling the words, memorized from much long ago. Speaking. Shooting from my mouth. Is the greater above this darkness? Only words and thoughts that mixed in my brain? They escaped from my rosy lips, echoing. Why were they echoing? Was the

greater above simply a black room of nothing? I somehow did not think so. That was when I felt an itch come from nearby my thoughts. On my eyelid. I blinked it open, and that was when I knew there was more to the greater above.

Above me was nothing but gray, a buzzing light right in the center. I squinted, looking around. Just gray tiles. I guess I made it to hell then, if this was all there was. Or did I have to make it to heaven myself? As I said, we sculpt or own power.

I reached a hand out and regret it straight away. A little needle of pain shoots up it, which makes me curious. I lifted it in front of my face, seeing a pink sweater covered in red and brown, which I instantly knew what it was. And under the elbow it was wrapped in gauze, a little red leaking through. Seeing this, I groaned and turned over.

My body was completely stiff, but at least I realized hell was more than gray tiles. Around me were four gray walls, a gray door at the end of the room. The light on top continued buzzing, yellow and dull. Then, I felt the floor with my right hand. It seemed dry. Paper? It felt like paper. I turned all the way over, staring at the ground. Before my eyes were hundreds of hundred dollar bills, all beautifully flat and spread across the floor. My eyes shot open. Maybe I had made it to heaven after all.

I sat up, head feeling heavy and awkward on my shoulders. There, at my feet, was my fire axe. Perfectly clean and shiny. And on the other side of it were more clothes, a blue hoodie and another pair of sweatpants. So those were the colors of heaven then, huh? Blue and black? I didn't waste any time. I took the sweater from my body, making sure to keep the bandage on, and

then slipped the hoodie on over my naked body. The sweats came next. I felt fresh, at ease. Even my hair wasn't completely crumpled and gross.

“And now, by life deprived, in my own Grave I breathe.” I whispered to myself, folding up the hardened clothes and putting them in the corner of the room. I then gripped my axe, running a hand over the blade. It was still wicked sharp, red and menacing. I took an index finger, running it over the blade as fast as I could. And when I pulled it away, it was now a shiny red.

“So give me back to Death, the death I never feared.” I then mumbled, dropping my axe and studying my finger. Hell, it hurt. That was blood, and it was stinging now. Wasn't heaven supposed to be free of any pain? Then I looked up. “So give me back to death.” I mumbled one last time.

Everything came into a sudden realization at that point. I lifted the axe, rising to my feet. Before moving, I made little swirling pools on the blade, reciting the poem, but so quietly I couldn't hear myself speak. When the bleeding had finally stopped, I walked to the door, turning the handle. It opened with a click, and I had escaped hell.

Though, it wasn't much different out here. I found myself in a gray hallway, more doors on each side of the walls. But up ahead was a door that went straight ahead. Well, it was the odd one out, I guess. I strolled over to it, not going very fast as I was incredibly sore, and put my hand on the handle. It seemed warmer than the others, thicker. And when I pulled it open, I was right. It was the odd one. It had lead me to a staircase, leading up into a darkness. “It's size is all that Hell can guess, and all that heaven was.” I whispered, and walked in.

Climbing stairs had never been so difficult. I was awkward on my feet, body aching and a tightness on my arm while the gauze blocked a flow of blood. But I wasn't sure why. Had I hurt myself coming here? Everything was just a haze in my head, I couldn't shake reality out of the situation. But I succeeded in making my way up the stairs that got darker and darker, and at the top I found a door.

"Curious." I mumbled, gripping the handle and clicking that open like all the others.

This time around, I was met by a great light that flooded my vision instead of darkness. I had to focus my eyes and let them adjust before I could make any details in the room I had gone in to. But after a while, I could make things out. There was a big desk off to the left. All around were little things, islands and smaller desks, globes and chairs- and in big letters on the wall to the farthest right, read "Charintrod Bank."

"Oh." I said simply, standing there for a moment, dumbfounded. Then, movement came from my right, and I tightened the grip on my axe. I was ready to swing, but didn't have to, because the movement was only Artie.

I didn't even have time to say anything, or even study his face. He was walking towards me with a purpose, and the second he got to me I was suddenly scooped up by his arms and hugged. And I let him. I rested my head on his shoulder, letting him pat my back in the warm embrace. He held me for a full minute before pulling away, still, however- holding my hand.

"I was so worried about you, Kori." He said. "We weren't sure you would pull through."

I furrowed my brow. "What do you mean?"

Artie's eyes widened, shaking his head and his gaze hitting me dead on. He seemed surprised. "The horde, you lost a lot of blood. When you tried saving Nat- you passed out. I carried you inside and you'd been out like a light and feverish for two days until now."

And just like that, everything hit me like a ton of bricks.

Of course. The memories flooded back now, starting at that one treacherous night. How we had pulled out of the house, weapons swinging as we charged down the road. Then, the one byte that broke free. I remember the pavement that sliced along my head and then got slammed onto my arm. My eyes looked at the gauze on my arm, then a hand raised to my head. No blood, but I could feel a gash. Then, Nat. How she had lost her weapon, but used her dancing to parry the bytes backwards. We all had laughed. Fast forward, we made it to the bank by now. Artie was holding the door but I was slow. Everything was a blur, and I hadn't made it. Neither had Nat, because she was trying to get me in. I remember how she told me I would be fine. How she grabbed my hand and tried pulling me in. But then she got grabbed away. The bytes. And everything faded. I looked up at Artie, shaking my head, sweat beginning to form.

"Oh no. No, no, no." I looked away. "Nat. Please tell me she's ok."

Artie looked at the ground. "I'm so sorry, Kori."

Everything inside of me fell down, down, down. It suddenly became hard to breathe. I had promised nobody got left behind. And Nat, god! She was the happiest person I'd ever met. Even in the thickest she was smiling, eyes wide, so pleasant- I fell forward. Artie leaned up to me, grabbing me in

his arms. And then I began to cry. Because it wasn't fair someone like Nat had to die.

I stayed there for probably twenty minutes. It was my fault. I was the person who was closest to Nat when they grabbed her. If I could have just focused or reacted faster, then I could have saved her life. But I was too weak. Pathetic. And now she was dead because of me. Worse than dead, in fact. Eaten away down to the bone to fill the energy of our enemy. So now her happy expression was gone. I would never see her golden face again.

"I'm never going to see her again, Artie. Her smile. Nothing. She's dead. I couldn't save her." I choked, my tears wetting his shirt that he had kept surprisingly clean.

When I said that, Artie pulled away. He stared me up and down, and I looked back, tears streaming down my pale face and onto my chapped lips. I then realized he had his original bag sitting behind him, and Artie turned to it. He unzipped it, and straight away I saw some food, some medicine. But then, he pulled out a familiar looking bag. His camera bag. I hadn't seen it in days. He brought it in front of us, unzipping it. I was curious, so I wiped my tears away. The sadness still remained, but he then pulled out that camera of his, and sat beside me.

"It's not your fault, Kori." Artie told me. He turned the camera on. "You did everything you could do. And I disagree."

"God, Artie. You're too good, you know that?" I cried again. "Trying to make me feel better isn't going to work here. You're wrong and- oh."

I froze. In front of me, Artie had gone to the gallery on the camera. I looked in the top right, showing picture 108 of 111. There, staring at me,

was a picture of Nat. I could tell the background was the school, and she was smiling bigger than I had ever seen her. It was as if Artie snapped the picture while she was laughing. Nat's eyes had become glimmering sunrises, lips smooth and pink, cheeks turning red in her happiness. My tears stopped. I looked up at Artie.

“How did you...?” I asked, running a finger along it.

“I told you I liked snapping memories, remember? I figured all of us having a laugh would be a fine one to capture.”

I put my fingers on her rosy cheeks, mouth agape, shocked on the crispness of the photo and the relief it gave me. Yes, Nat was dead- but her bright hazel eyes looking back at me caused my mind to not quite believe that. As long as I stared in that photo, she seemed alive to me. Alive in my thoughts. And maybe, just maybe, Nat wasn't dead. That the thought of her in my head, that smile, was enough.

Sounds bouncing across the floor suddenly made me turn around. There, walking from a hall by the front entrance, were Rosie, Maggie, and Shawn. Rosie and Maggie were up front, nattering together, but Shawn was at least four paces behind. His arms were crossed, and his face was rough and unforgiving. I then remembered he did feel for Nat to a great extent, and the boy was headstrong. I wouldn't have it easy, and I knew it. This caused me to tense, but Artie was there, though he had clicked the camera off and put it away.

The second Rosie and I's eyes connected, she froze. Maybe it was my own tears or just the goodness in her heart, I don't know, but she flew from the pack and ran full force towards me. I stood up, biting my lip and unsure

what to do until Rosie finally made it over. And when she did, the girl held me tight in my second hug of the day, putting her chin on my shoulder. After a few pats on my back and sighs, she looked back, flipping her hair behind her.

“Those two days were too long.” She shook her head, wiping one of my tears away. “We were so worried, Kori.”

I nodded, knowing that if I opened my mouth, I would cry. I pressed my eyes closed, face tightening and getting hotter. But eventually, I loosened and backed up. Shawn was still a few paces away, looking at me in disgust. Eventually, he backed up, turning around and going back in the direction he came. I wrinkled my nose, looking down.

“He probably hates me. God, he has the rights to.” I whispered, looking at my axe I had left on the ground. Not quick enough.

“It wasn’t... It wasn’t your fault.” Rosie shook her head. “We all miss Nat. We loved her. But there was nothing you could have done.”

“Kori, why don’t you just come over here?” Artie said afterwards, taking my hand. “Take a break for a little while.”

Considering I had nothing to do and could hardly bear the gazes of everyone on my red eyes, I agreed to Artie’s request. He pulled me away from Rosie and Maggie, who appeared fresh, but little pieces of them missing. Just sort of gone. The last fight took a lot out of everyone. On the inside, really. And it had taken me as well.

Artie took me over to what looked like a staff room. We had to slide over one of the desks, and when we did, there was a door Artie opened for me. We went down a little hall, and Artie took me right. When we made the

move, I found myself in a room that was lit and smelled highly of coffee and mint. A table was in the middle, squishy chairs strewn all around. A table with a coffee maker was against the wall sure enough, green plants all around. Artie pulled out two chairs, and I took a seat.

He stood up to go over to the coffee maker. I couldn't see, but based off of the sounds he was brewing a cup or two. I could hear the splashes of cream and brew along with the stirring of a spoon, and after a little bit Artie sat beside me on the table. He scooted a steaming cup next to me, which I blew on and warily took a sip. Scolding coffee bounced on my tongue, and the only thing preventing me from burning my tongue was the cream.

Artie drank his cup in silence. He was very peculiar in the way he drank his coffee. I could picture him sitting in an old coffee shop downtown, at a little round table of his own. There, he had a laptop, typing away at some essay or whatnot while drinking hard iced coffee and playing Indies in his ears. All he needed was the setting and a pair of reading glasses.

After a while, I couldn't manage sitting there and saying nothing. Besides, Artie looked irritated. I wiped an eye, looking at him. "What's on your mind?"

He put his cup down, almost shocked by the question. But eventually, Artie turned to me, rubbed his fingers together, and spoke. "Shawn brought up that we should keep moving. We do need to move since it'll take us a day to get through North Shore- but you've only just woken up, and I can't agree to it. But I haven't told him the decision yet. Doesn't matter, though. There's no way I'm making you go so soon."

“It’s about me?” I said uncomfortably. “We’re still here... because of me?”

Artie grabbed my arm, for I began to lean away. “No! I mean, with Nat and everything, its hard. It’s not-“

I stood up. My cup of coffee was still full, but that could wait. I pushed my chair in, turning one last time to see Artie’s eyes glossy and confused and I almost regretted walking off on him, but not quite. It wasn’t that I was mad at Artie. I was mad at myself. Mad that this had to happen. So I turned on my foot, going back out the door while Artie sat alone and in silence.

I padded down the hall, putting a hand over the gauze under my hoodie. It felt dry and near useless, as I hardly felt much pain at all. There was simply a gentle throb underneath the layers of my skin, and a light numbing above my brow. Other than my confusion and tiredness, I could go. Maybe I wouldn’t be as good as I could, but I wasn’t going to make everyone stay behind and risk their lives just for me.

The big room appeared again. Maggie and Rosie were where I left them, speaking with worried expressions and tight lips. Shawn was back in the room as well. He had his back to the wall, eyes nearly shut in anger. And when I was heard, all of them turned to look at me. Eventually, I made it a few feet in front of them and paused, because I then heard footsteps behind me. Stealing a glance over my shoulder, I realized it was Artie who came after me, not that this was in any way surprising. He didn’t bring along his coffee, but based on the way his teeth were moving uncomfortably around his mouth, I’d say he took one last, quick sip and burnt his tongue.

“I hope you told her, Artie.” Shawn said with gritted teeth at the wall. “I’m not waiting her any longer.”

“Shawn, stop!” Rosie turned around, yelling at him.

My eyes darted back and forth, landing on Artie who then took a step forward and adjusted his bowtie. “Yeah I told her, and I’m telling you that we’re waiting another day. End of story, Shawn.”

I took a step back, getting a chill from the heat of the situation. My body was shaking, along with my head. This shouldn’t be how everything should go. And then Shawn stepped forward, rubbing his hands together, cold eyes looking even colder.

“You know, Artie? I remember all those years. The Friday nights and trips to the city. With the boys and the spirits...” He padded up to Artie who stood still as a stone. “You... you knew Nat for years. Me for your whole goddam life. And now, that she’s dead, you put everyone’s life in danger for the sake of a girl you met just the other day.” Artie, again, did not move. “The person who got her killed. You know what Artie? I thought you were better than that.”

Shawn was head and head with Artie now. And the chestnut haired boy hadn’t moved an inch. His eyes continued lying on Shawn’s, almost testing him. And then Shawn’s anger inside welled up much too high, and it overtook him. He put his pale hands on Artie’s shoulders, pushing him back. Artie staggered a few steps before raising a brow, brushing his fingers over his shirt.

“Stop it, Shawn!” I yelled. “He didn’t do anything!”

The boy turned to look at me. His anger turned into a smirk, and my heart began to beat faster. Artie, too, looked confused. But then Shawn turned back to him, took a step back, and threw a punch at Artie's face.

It took Artie off guard, no doubt. He tripped backwards a few more steps, putting a hand over his jaw where Shawn's punch landed. He clenched it a few times, then put his hand down and shook his head. Shawn kept his smirk, but Artie made no other move. Shawn struck again. He hit Artie in the same spot, and this time I saw Artie's air escape from his lungs as he leaned forward and stared up at Shawn. And again, Shawn brought his hand to a fist and brought it back. He swung, but the outcome was different this time. Artie caught his arm with both of his own, and pushed Shawn backwards.

Shawn was surprised. He brought his arm backwards as Artie stepped forwards, and Artie appeared impatient. I noticed that again, Shawn readied a punch. But just as he was about to let loose, Artie slammed a fist at Shawn square in the face. The boy fell over, running a hand over his now bleeding nose. And Artie continued standing there, shaking his head. But Shawn wasn't finished yet. From the ground, he lunged at Artie's feet, knocking him right onto his back.

Shawn climbed back over Artie, grabbing him by the shirt, preparing to slam his knuckles at Artie again. But Artie was bigger than Shawn, and rolled over, putting Shawn underneath him. Shawn was pinned down, trying to get loose. But Artie merely kept him there, not hitting him or anything. That was when I couldn't take it. I stepped forward, leaning into the grappling boys.

“STOP!” I screamed. “God, just stop! I’ll go today! If that’s what it takes, I go today!”

Shawn blinked, rolling out from under Artie. Artie, too, froze and stared at me. I tossed my axe in my hands a few times, looking around for my bag. Everyone came forward towards me, including Maggie and Rosie, when I found it sitting behind a desk and threw it over my shoulder.

“Right now.” I said, wiping my nose. “I’m not keeping everyone. Lets go.”

Artie got up, walking towards me. He put his hand on me, shaking his head and fingers wandering over to the healing gash on my head. “Kori, it’s not the best idea. Please. One more day.”

I shook my head, turning to Shawn. He was amazed, confused, but mostly delighted with a sick vengeance. I looked him up and down, and then turned back to Artie. He seemed so lost for once, and I could hardly bear to look at him. So I walked forward, right at the doors of the bank where sunlight leaked in. Out on the street, it was clear. Empty. No better time then now.

“I guess we go then.” Artie said, turned away without another word.

It took minutes for everyone to prepare because the reality was that I was the only thing holding everyone back. The bags were packed, weapons cleaned and sorted- and lucky us, it was clear out today. A warmer August day than we were used to. If this was a normal day, and everything was normal, I'd be on my way to school by now getting a ride from our driver. Ready myself for a test that I would need to ace so I could get into Harvard, my parents dream- or some other Ivy League school that I had no interest in.

Though I was a lazy blogger and reader, I did have to accept future. But in actuality, I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to create stories like the ones on my bookshelf, and blog it chapter by chapter while sipping some hot cocoa and reading classic literature in the intervals. Perhaps I would have written stories of people like myself, and people like Artie. Even people like Maggie, or problems like Shawn and friends like Rosie and Nat. Maybe one day when all of this stopped and Artie got me to the end, I could be a writer. Maybe.

I figured North Shore Drive would be one of the more pleasant ends of our journey. It was a stunning road, which started right alongside the lake and ventured inward past parks and trees. I couldn't imagine that there would be many bytes around North Shore Drive, unless they had a water fetish. I didn't, but there was something about putting your feet in the sand and lying against the earth. Just feeling the roar of the waves. I know we wouldn't get a chance to do that, but the memories of it all were enough.

At noon, we ventured out. Artie took the lead, Rosie taking the end. Much like it had been all morning, there was no movement. No bytes

anywhere in sight. We made our way over to North Shore Drive, and after a mile we hit the road. But by that point, Shawn had fallen behind and took the rear from Rosie. The road turned black, finely kept with wonderful landscaping on the edges and random buildings all around. Out in the distance, I could hear a gentle roar, and I knew the lake was nearby.

It seemed like an endless walk despite the wonderful scenery, honestly. There were no bytes in sight, and only newspapers blew across the road in front of us, speaking of current events from days past that don't matter anymore. And after a little bit, Artie called me up to him, and I quickened my pace. There, I pulled alongside him and gazed upwards. "What is it?" I then asked, shifting my bag.

"I'm sorry for what went on at the bank." He said, looking down. "I didn't mean for anything like that to happen."

"Well, I learned that if you had to grapple with a byte, you'd win." I shrugged, looking away. "Though, Artie. You don't have to stand up for me like that, alright? I... I'm stronger than you think. And... and... we did only meet a little bit ago. You don't need to risk your life for me."

Artie didn't reply. It was like he had something on his tongue, but he didn't know how to say it. We continued walking along, me confused at his current state of mind and not quite understanding what to do. I realized he lifted a hand to fumble with his bowtie and button off his cuffs. There were mud stains and a few patches of dark red, but Artie did manage to keep it surprisingly clean. I thought he would finally talk, but I was wrong. A loud scuffle from behind us made us two turn around.

Rosie had paused, hand slowly reaching into her bag to grab her stand that she had managed to hook onto it. That was when I began to hear something, like a child's whelp out in the distance. I, too, grabbed my axe at that moment. When everyone else went for their weapons, it occurred to me I wasn't the only person hearing it.

"What's that?" Rosie asked, looking all around.

"I think it's coming from over here." Maggie replied, walking a little ways from the road.

"What if it's a trap?" Shawn yelled, staying put.

"I don't think so." Rosie shook her head, following after.

It was a majority vote, as I went after as well. Artie and Shawn went up together with the group, and with each step the sound got louder. It was like weeping, or a scream. No matter what it was, the sound was very high pitched and it was coming from a cluster of buildings right next to a park we were walking next to.

My axe was poised and ready to swing at any moment. We managed to pinpoint the exact building, which was a fancy looking Italian restaurant with a big title reading "Sapore" out in front with abandoned, rustic tables in front of a wooden door. We paused before going in, Rosie appointing herself to be the first to go in. She pulled the handle, going in slowly with a hand on her stand. I followed in after, then Artie, Maggie, and lastly Shawn. The aroma of burnt food and a dash of lemon came into my nose, and I lifted my eyes. We walked through a narrow little hall into the main room, and straight away, figured it was not a great idea. Maybe six or so bytes were sitting at

the tables and banging on the windows. And the scream was coming from the kitchens.

“Shit.” I mumbled, grasp tightening. “Get them!”

I dove left, Rosie following after and the others parting ways. A byte in a torn up tux was standing by a table, and it hissed, leaping towards us. Rosie made the first move. She swung her stand around, slamming the byte into the table. It got stuck, trying to get up, but I finished it off with a chop at the neck before it got away. I heard the fight behind me, but there was still another byte trying to get us. It was a lady in a black dress, and this time I reacted first. I drove my axe into her shoulder, and while it clawed at the handle, Rosie drove her stand into it’s throat. I had to look away, keeping my teeth clenched together as the battle ended.

When I turned around. I noticed all of them were dead except for one, a giant man in an apron. He was trying to fight everyone off with a rolling pin, and was quick. Artie, who was at the head, couldn’t even get his golf club to hit flesh. It did too good a job of blocking the blows. But our advantage was Rosie and I, and how it hadn’t seen us yet. I slipped away, standing on top of a table. It got pushed back, closer... closer...

When he was under me, I brought my axe down. It crunched into the back of the byte, causing it to land in a heap, senseless and dead in the world. I tore my axe from the body, climbing off the table. Other than my arm that got a little sore after ripping my weapon right and left, I was fine and the others were too.

“Kitchen.” Artie saw quietly, pointing towards the doors.

Rosie and I went first, slowly creeping along the now tiled floor. The wailing was louder now, and sounded like a seven year old with a sore throat. We didn't know for certain, though. It could be anything. With my shoulder, I pushed open the door and found myself in the kitchen. Everyone came in behind me, and instantly I was disgusted. On the floor was blood splattered on the white tiles, bones spread out and only a little bit of insides left on them. Feeding over it was a giant, obese byte with a chef hat and frying pan next to him. He was covered in his meal, and over in the corner was a little girl, cowering with her back turned to us and a blanket draped over her body. She was the one wailing.

The chef raised up from his meal, blood and meat dribbling from his bloated chin. I readied my axe, and we all spread out. He grabbed the frying pan, rising upwards and hissing out. We thought we would have to attack, but that was false. He ran at us first, frying pan flying in all different directions. It ended up hitting Shawn square in the face, knocking him backwards. In retaliation, Maggie smacked him with her bat in the back and Artie slammed him with the golf club, but this one was stronger. Our blows had little effect.

I moved next. I brought my axe over my shoulder, and swung it around. It buried itself in the monster's great belly, and he yelled out, but stayed standing. The blood leaked onto his apron, but it wasn't enough. Rosie prodded a hole into him with her stand, and he didn't even flinch. I thought I wouldn't see the end of today until it suddenly fell over onto his back, and I looked down to see that Shawn had slit his tendons with his knife.

Once he was on the ground, I finished him off with an axe to the head. It was a sickening sight, but the ground was already red. And when I raised

my head, I realized Artie was walking gently over to the little girl who was still wailing. We all went up. He then put his hand to her shoulder, and leaned down.

“Hun, it’s ok. We just-“ He started, but she whipped around.

She was no human. The little girl was one of them, a byte. Her eyes were rotting and her skin was all bloated, dry, brown hair mangled. Artie jumped back before she could bite him. We all stepped back, upset and stunned that our rescue mission just turned out to be worth nothing. I turned around.

“She’s making a ruckus.” I said, looking away.

“Disappointing.” Shawn then mumbled, and walked to her with his knife.

~

From what she had heard from her companions, they fed at the great battle in the direction of... She couldn’t seem to remember. What were the directions? She tried remembering what a map looked like. Where the little hands pointed. And then she remembered. Her companions fed north!

Not all of their stomachs were full, they only got one. But it was something. That meant there were more coming. This made the queen pleased. She was ready to rein them in, to eat the people. And she had all the power! She had the shiny blade that reminded all around her that she was the all powerful. Nobody could cross the queen and come out alive, she made sure of that.

On that day, she ate well. There had been a young meal that some of her companions found. She was the one who killed it herself, sickeningly

laughing while she gutted it, gnawing on the ribs and ripping out meat. When she was pleased, she had walked off with a meaty bone and let the others eat. For now, food could be scarce. But if her companions were right, it would only be days now until the people came. The food would last them a long time. And she would reign as the queen.

There was a lot of gray where she was now. Her companions had moved to a different area, not too far from where they started. The buildings were taller and the roads harder. There were more of her kind. When they did not join her, she had her companions finish them off. It was a wonderful, oh, again with the words! What did she call them in the past days? Court? Sort?

Oh, she remembered what she called them then.

Her game was a wonderful sport.

~

After a full day of walking and two miles being the only thing separating us all from the Kennedy- we all decided it would be a swell idea to settle right on the beach at the water. The restaurant bytes were the only ones we ran into all day, and we would have someone keep watch. Artie volunteered, and none of us obliged.

I found a nice little spot a few feet from Rosie and Maggie where I could face the water and watch the waves lap at the shore in a sense of a lullaby. Artie had laughed at the lake, joking how it was pretty to look at, when in reality Lake Michigan was thirty percent water, seventy percent shit. I had agreed, and we all got a laugh out of it. We went to bed in high spirits.

The only annoying thing was the chill in each speck of sand, but I had warm clothing.

It took me a mere minute to get settled, using my arms as a pillow. I stared out at the water, just a humming glitter since the sun had gone down. And like I did every day, I checked my phone, prayed for wifi that never came, and put it away. As the waves came up, I just got exhausted, and before I knew it, I had fallen asleep, the water masking away any dreams I might have.

The night was alright, though uneventful. I didn't dream, there was just this itching feeling in my chest I couldn't shake away. My rest became irritable. I rolled around a bit, kicking out the sand in my sleep. My mind began to come back, the waves not being quite as relaxing anymore. And when I couldn't take it anymore, something compelled me to wake up. And when I did, I got a chill. Shawn was nowhere in sight, or Artie.

I got up right away, but didn't wake Maggie or Rosie in the sake of their relaxation. My heart beat wildly, looking around to where they might have gone. It wasn't a byte, I knew that. If it was, Artie would have signaled before it got to us, and it wouldn't have left us alone. This left me at least a little comfort, but not all. I knew how things were left yesterday.

It was still dark, but I saw little imprints in the sand leading across the beach in two sets at a run. I put a hand to them, examining the details. The ones on the right were larger than the ones on the left, and bigger strided. It had to be Artie. I tried fumbling around for my axe, but it was too dark and I was running out of time. My compulsiveness sent me running in the direction of the footprints without any preparation at all.

They got choppy, and extended again. I followed them step for step, running at least two hundred yards before something ahead caught my eye. Something that glittered and shone in the night, maybe Shawn's knife. I wasn't sure. I slowed down a bit, going along the beach until I could hear feet against sand, then silence. Curiously, I rubbed my eyes and ran a little farther again. Then, my eyes got adjusted to the darkness and I could see what went on ahead. And it was nothing I wanted to see.

Artie was standing closest to me, arms raised up in the air. He was breathing heavily, and Shawn was maybe eight feet from him, a small pistol in his hand and positioned at Artie's chest. My heart dropped, eyes nearly shooting out of my head. Artie turned to look at me, and that was when Shawn clicked a bullet into place and looked at me.

"Oh my god, what is happening here?" I said, raising my hands too. I looked at Shawn. "Shawn, what the hell? Where did you get a gun?"

"Shut up!" He hissed, keeping the gun pointed at Artie. "Doesn't matter where. Get out of here, Kori. Get out or I'll shoot you too!" He moved the gun a little towards me. "Hell, it almost makes more sense to kill you instead."

"Kori, get out of here. Please." Artie said calmly. "You shouldn't be here. Shawn- don't do this. Let her go."

He shook his head, smiling menacingly. He was no longer the same boy I met at the auditorium with humor and potential. He was ruthless. Confused. Broken. I almost couldn't hate him, that I felt pity more than anything. That the event that hit all of us plagued him to deep troubles he had rooted inside, troubles that Artie was unfortunately in the middle of.

“She died because you took along a useless girl you don’t even know. She’s dead because Kori couldn’t keep up! I thought you were different Artie. Guess not, huh?” He stepped forward, finger hovering over the trigger. “I thought I could trust you to get us through this. And instead you are just as useless as her. Not the same Artie I knew, huh?” He put another hand at the pistol.

“SHAWN!” I screamed, throwing myself in front of Artie. He tried to move me away, but I obliged. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Nat was a friend of mine. We did everything we could.”

“And not enough.” He shook his head. “Not nearly enough.”

“Then what are you going to do, kill us? Leave us to rot so Maggie and Rosie have no one else, so they too will become lost and lonely and die like Nat?” I cried out, shaking my head. “Shawn. It doesn’t have to end this way.”

He paused, gun slowly dropping inch after inch. Eventually, he put it on his belt, head tilted with all the pain and anger in the world looking right into our eyes. I couldn’t help but sigh in relief as Artie’s hands came down to my shoulders, and Shawn backed up. We made it out for now, but Shawn wasn’t done. He shook his head, pointing with a finger instead of a gun.

“I’m leaving. Not for you. For Maggie and Rosie. And the next time I see you, don’t expect the same results.” He turned around. “Maybe you’ll know her better next time.”

“I know her better than you think I do!” Artie called out, kicking sand and walking to the water. I stayed put. Shawn got smaller and smaller, walking out into the distance with his bag over his back and pistol and knife

tucked in his belt. After a few minutes, he completely disappeared from view and I accepted the fact that this moment was most likely the last I would ever see of Shawn Hacker.

When I looked left, Artie was sitting at the shore with his head in his arms. I walked over to him, shaking my head and confused out of my mind. I didn't even understand what he was saying. He knows me better than he thought he did? And now we had three gone. Only four of us left. It all seemed so awful and terrible and confusing that I lashed out louder and harsher than I probably should have.

"Artie." I said, standing up. "Talk to me. God, you better talk because it sure seems like I don't know everything I think I do. What is happening?"

"Kori, just trust me. I need you to trust me. It's hard, it's just..." He pleaded with me, turning around.

"Trust you?" I shook my head, kicking sand off to the side. "I don't even know anymore! We just met and I've already been to hell and back. I don't know who to trust anymore because I sure learned a lot lately, no? Look at how Shawn ended up!" I was steaming now.

"That's not true." He shook his head, looking back out the water.

"Oh? Then what is it Artie?" I asked, walking up beside him. "Enlighten me."

He paused, sighing and running his hands through his hair. The silence made me cool down a little bit, catch my breath and wait for what he had to say. But it was hard. I didn't know what to expect and I didn't think Artie was expecting this either. It wasn't every day where you have a gun

pointed at your chest and everything comes tumbling down. But I had to know. Artie would tell me.

“That first day.” He finally started. “When everything happened. Don’t say I didn’t seem familiar because I know you knew me from somewhere, right?” He stood up, looking into me. I thought I saw a tear forming. “The reason why I brought you with me and never let you go. The reason why I told you everything even though you thought you never knew me.”

I looked away. I couldn’t lie. “I did know you from somewhere.”

“Then tell me, Kori! You know and I know you do!” He said, desperate. “You know more than you think. A year ago. The last day of summer. Where were you, Kori?”

I yelled out. “I don’t know!”

“The party, Kori!” He fell to his knees. “The damned mask party.”

My blood turned cold. Looking into Artie’s gentle green eyes. The locks of shiny brown hair. The softness of his touch, everything. It made sense now. I was right. He was familiar because he was the boy who changed my life a year ago.

And my mind took me back.

It was the last day of summer before my junior year. On that day, the wild teens of Birch Street host a party every year. I had never gone to them, but I heard them every time. There was always loud music coming from the streets and laughing, and in the morning it was always a mess. But I would sit on my bed and read, ignore the people outside. The themes changed every year. Once it was safari, there was another that was winter wonderland, but

on that day it was set as a mask party. One could only enter if they had their identity hidden behind a mask. I had no intention of going, as I never did any year. But I had a few friends who thought otherwise, and dragged me out.

I remember my outfit very clearly. I wore a short, light blue cocktail dress I found in my closet and I went out and bought a blue and gold mask at some cheapo store. It covered my face, only showing my hair, eyes, and mouth. I seemed completely out of place, dreading leaving the house. But it worked, because my parents were out and the cops were dim on that day. So along I went.

I stuck out like a sore thumb the second I got there. Teens were all around, chatting with red solo cups and shots and it was already crazy. People danced to the music, and I didn't know who anyone was considering the masks. I just sort of weaved around, trying a sip of beer and ditching the cup before I even swallowed. I was ready to slink back to the Glowan Estate when someone caught my eye. A boy in a dark green and silver mask strolling towards me.

I thought of turning around and ignoring him, but something pulled me in. The softness in his green eyes maybe, or his gentle smile even though I had no idea who the boy was. But now I do. It was Artie.

He had gone up to me, looking back and forth and taking my hand. Unlike most of the other boys there, he didn't seem intoxicated or wobbly, curiosity the only sin inside of him. I froze, not entirely knowing what to do. My excursions with men were few and far between. Luckily, Artie had made the first move.

“You have wonderful eyes.” He had said to me with a grin. “Unfamiliar ones. Mind heading off someplace quiet with me?”

Being myself, the foolish and boring Kori, I had replied to him. “Sorry. I don’t have time for a boy just waiting for another girl to fuck.”

I remember his exact face. Confusion and hurt. It caused me to not run off at that moment, and linger a little while longer. He had looked down, at that point letting go of my hand and adjusting his mask. I looked up.

“I know the crowd here, believe me.” He had sighed, stepping back. “And I’m not like them. But I keep my stand. You do have very beautiful eyes.”

And everything came together, if only I realized it! Artie had told me the truth that year and I was oblivious to the clues until now. He was right. He wasn’t like the others, even if he looked like that on the outside. And what he said made me feel sorry. And one of the greatest decisions of my life was what I said next.

“I’m... sorry.” I told him, grabbing his hand in turn. “Maybe we should go off somewhere quiet.”

I remember his smile, like a boy who finally got what he always dreamed of. Not mischievous. Or forceful. Just Artie. Happy, strong, and honest Artie who seemed like the happiest kid on earth because I said exactly what he hoped I would.

We trotted off towards the trees on a bench on someone’s lawn. I sat first, adjusting my dress and Artie took a seat next to me, looking relieved and curious. I never knew what he meant in his expressions until now. That maybe, just maybe, he had always watched me leaving from the Glowan

Estate and never get the chance to talk to me. That now that he recognized my warm eyes, he found a chance- a chance to talk to the girl who intrigued him so.

“So what is it, then?” I asked, biting my lip. “Someone like you doesn’t just call a, a wallflower like me over just because.”

“I see your eyes around these parts but have never known you.” He shook his head. “And I always wondered, what’s a pretty girl like you doing so quiet and insecure?”

I had furrowed my brow, looking away. “I just... I’m not this kind of person. Who even are you?”

Artie shook his head in return, pointing to his mask. “Gotta follow the rules of the party. You’ll know me one day. Maybe tonight.”

“Then who am I?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“An interesting girl who I want to spend my night with.” He had told me, and then the conversation took off.

The way he had told me that I’ll know him one day. It took an entire year, as I never went on to do anything like that night again. And I feel that the moment I knew Artie was right here, tonight. Sitting under the stars with the water lapping at our feet without any of our problems that plagued us during the day. Right here, right now, was when I knew Artie. And I only wished it had been sooner.

The day had gone on. The night got louder. Artie and I spoke on end, feverishly sending words to each other. We spoke, asked questions, though nothing along the lines of our names or houses or anything truly personal. I knew the little divets of Artie, but nothing I had learned on this expedition.

Just the little things, small facts that filled in the cracks on his skin. And the questions stopped when he asked me if I'd ever kissed anyone before. I shyly responded no, but in the moment, I caught a rebellious wind. And right then, I asked Artie if he wanted to show me.

I think the question took him by surprise. But he smiled, wiping his brow just above the mask. And he did not oblige. That night, Artie had kissed me on the lips under the stars and it was nothing I had ever felt before. I told him again. And suddenly, we were on the grass, giggling and kissing like the happy fools we were because suddenly, nothing mattered anymore. Not my life at home. Not what was expected of me, or what I would do tomorrow. Just Artie and I, hands linked, lips pressed together, smiles as large as the moon.

I had to leave eventually, since my parents would be home. I regretted not staying with Artie, but as I left, he told me once more I would know him soon, and that he would still be there for me. He smiled as I walked off, playing around with his mask as my dress was whisked around in the moonlight. I had no way of knowing for certain, but I suspected Artie stayed there the whole night. Facing the houses and putting his mask over his heart, dreaming, wishing he could capture that moment forever.

But here I was again, on the beach, sitting next to Artie like I did that one crazy night. But this time the both of us were close to tears and Artie held me in desperation, forgiveness. And a tear trickled down my cheek. As I came back to earth, he asked me. "So?"

"So..." I said back, breathing heavily. "That night I fell in love with a wonderful boy named Artie, but I never knew it until now."

He pulled me close the second I said the words. Like everything was lifted off of his shoulders, and I bet it was. He encased me in a hug, then brought me back and kissed me right on the lips as the tears really came, and minutes passed and suddenly I had my head on his chest and we were lying on the sand. I listened to his heartbeat, hand touching hand, and his thumb was rubbing into my palm like it always did. Eventually, we went back to camp. But when we did, Artie still held me close. Keeping me safe, hand on my heart. And I trusted him. I truly did. And I always have.

A light buzzing noise is eventually what wakes me up. However, I had no intention of moving. Artie was side by side with me, still asleep, arm resting over my side. I grabbed his hand, looking out over the sand. A little ways off was Maggie, fiddling with our radio out on the grass. She looked deep in thought, and Artie and I were comfortable. I decided not to move.

It was amazing, how much happened last night. I was aware that many things had changed in that matter of minutes. Everything came together, all the things I had been oblivious to all this time. But now Artie was mine, and I was his. I always wondered about the boy I met on that day. And now he was lying beside me, our breaths equal and comforting. Now that I had him, I would never let Artie go. I gave him my heart and he gave me my life.

I stayed there until Maggie shut the radio off. Artie ended up fumbling around, and flipping over to the other side on the sand. I sat up, looking around. It was so quiet. Now that Shawn was gone, it was down to four of us. Rosie and Artie were the only ones sleeping now, so I got up. Maggie noticed me right away, so I sat beside her, the two of us in silence for a moment. After a minute or so, she was the first to talk.

“Where’s Shawn?” She asked, not looking up from the radio.

My body froze up, not expecting for that to be the first thing Maggie would ask. I didn’t quite know what to do until I noticed Rosie had turned over in her sleep. There, I got up, tapping her on the shoulder, then to Artie. They rubbed their eyes, going up to a sit. Rosie looked a little more surprised than Artie, but they were alert and waiting for me.

“Christ, that felt wonderful.” Rosie put her hair back, yawning and turning to me. But she then looked around, confused. “Is Shawn somewhere?”

“Ah...” Artie began to speak, but I held up a hand, telling him he better not. This would be a hard thing to break out.

I cleared my throat, letting the sand sift through my hand as I took a seat next to Artie. Maggie scooted closer to Rosie, the two of them looking back and forth. When they started noticing his bag and weapon was gone, I could see the worry begin to rise. That was when I knew I had to start talking.

“Last night, Shawn decided to go his own way.” I said as Rosie gasped, putting a hand over her mouth. “We had no way of stopping him, and I don’t know where he is now. It’s just us now.”

There, I said it. But I had no mention of the gun leveled at our hearts or the words fought between us all. I also did not mention the sudden realization I had with Artie, or what became of it. That would lead to too many questions, too many problems. At this rate, it was better to keep things simple among us all.

“Only four of us.” Rosie breathed. “Oh god.” She looked away, hand on the sand. She seemed shocked more than anything.

“He wasn’t himself.” Maggie said after, calmer and looking away. “Not after Nat.”

“Anyway, we’re close. You can see the skyline.” Artie pointed out. Far off, we could see ghostly outlines of looming buildings. “We could

make it in three days if we really go hard. We... we cant really live in the past. We need to look at objectives.”

Artie looked at me after that, and I smiled weakly. I looked back at everyone else. “If nobody has objections, I think we should get to the Kennedy.”

“The quicker, the better.” Rosie said, standing up and walking over to her bag.

Nobody objected. I walked across the sand to grab my duffel, and slung it over my back. My axe was lying half-buried in the sand, and I pulled it out without another thought. As I did, I felt hands go on my shoulders. But I did not need to turn around. I knew that touch from anywhere. Artie. I smiled, reaching backwards and putting my fingers onto his. He gave me a little kiss on the cheek, and walked off to grab his golf club.

I waited for him to come back, body warm even though it was getting colder day by day. It was something curious, to feel loved. It was alien to me, but settling. Wonderful. It was the reason I had a warmth now rooted deep inside, and I wasn't sure what to do or how to react but I knew I wanted it to stay.

After a minute, we made way to the street. This time around, we had no leader and nobody behind. We were just a cluster now. Nobody spoke, though Artie would occasionally run a hand through my hair, which made me smile, every time. But it was so quiet. Nobody said a word on the final two miles of North Shore Drive. Maggie sneezed once, I said bless you, and that was it. And then, we found ourselves looking down on the Kennedy.

We were above it, being on an exit that ran down to the road. The Kennedy was huge. It had four lanes on the end we would be walking from, and went right into the city. And straight ahead was the massive image of the Willis Tower. But it wouldn't be easy. There were abandoned cars all along the road, some smashed into walls or run onto grass. There were plenty of exits along the road, big green signs above the roads indicating where people should go. If things were normal, which they clearly weren't, people would be battling traffic to make it downtown. Drunk drivers would weave and buses drove low and slow to make it to the Windy City. I had been there many times. But Chicago invaded by zombies was very different from the Chicago I knew.

None the less, we walked down the exit, leaning backwards so we didn't tumble down the smooth road. When we got to the bottom, I stopped, as did everyone else. I tapped my axe a few times, breathing in and out. We hit the hardest part of the great adventure.

"We made it this far. Swell." I said, biting my lip and looking at everyone. "Anyway, fair reminder it might get a little bumpy. It's a huge population, and I bet it's corrupt in there. Just... you all, are amazing. That we made it here. God, lets just go."

I turned around, but a small hand grabbed me. It made me turn around, and I found myself staring at the sweet, gentle Rosie I had known all my life. She stepped forwards, pulling me into a hug. She smelled like sugar and mints with a combination of sweat and nature. Her pink sleeves tickled my cheek, and when she pulled back, Rosie said very soft words to me.

“You’re my best friend, and now my zombie apocalypse survival partner. I think those hours of blogging paid off.” She smiled, patting me on the back. “Crazy how things can change, but our friendship never will.”

“Never.” I said back.

“Ever.”

Our eyes locked, faces smiling. Maggie and Artie looked on, resting themselves before we went on. Once Rosie and I pulled away, I nodded the rest of us on, and our feet hit the flat surface. It was so quiet and bare, it didn’t even seem real. It was as if us four were the only people in Chicago.

We had pointless discussions as we walked on, varying from the lack of chips in bags to hair dye [I was most made fun of there] and all the way to a five minute duck game. There was not a byte in sight, but we did have to put our noses in the air every few minutes when we found a body sitting in a car. But at this point, it was nothing unusual to us. We had all seen a fair share of our hacking and death lately, and as awful as it was, we were used to it.

The green road signs passed us as we went on and on. At one point, Artie had us stop in front of one so he could bury out his camera and take a picture of everyone bunched together on the abandoned land. We took a break to look at it, teasing each other about the little details. My hair appearing on fire from the sun. Rosie’s giant smile. Maggie’s basking pose. Artie simply being Artie.

After a little, we got on the topic of music. Considering we had two and a half theatre kids among the group, Artie being a once-was, I was amazed we had waited until now to finally discuss it. Maggie started first,

speaking of her love for Wicked, but Rosie steered the conversation towards general pop music after a little while.

“You know what I can’t stand though? That mainstream crap. How do people even call that music? It’s just a bunch of dudes saying ‘Oh nice chest, nice ass, come to my room.’ It’s awful. True music is under appreciated.” She said, shaking her head.

“You know who’s great?” I added. “British people. Oh, and Bon Iver. Don’t even get me started on Bon Iver, that dude can sing.”

“You’re kidding, I love him too!” Maggie yelled, turning around. “Wouldn’t it be something if we could play music? Right here, right now?”

“You kidding? Lets hit it.” Artie called out, clapping his hands. He faded into a rhythm. One that all of us picked up right away. And my heart began to race.

Clap, clap, clap, clap. Clap, clap, clap, clap.

Maggie was the first to begin. She cleared her voice, preparing to dive right in. I had heard her sing. She was a mirror opposite of Rosie, but they both had the same wicked talent. Maggie was a smooth, gliding alto who could turn songs into a dreamy mist. Rosie was a soulful soprano who could hit any note you asked of her. I- I didn’t sing, but maybe I could give it a try.

“I heard, that you’re settled down, that you found a girl and you’re married now.” She began to sing, everyone smiling including Artie who continued clapping the beat.

“I heard that your dreams came true, guess she gave you things, I didn’t give to you.” Rosie started up, giving it her all. “Old friend, why are you so shy?”

“Ain't like you to hold back, or hide from the light.” I said next, weak in comparison to the others but stronger than I thought I could.

To my surprise, Artie began to sing out as he clapped. And he wasn't bad, not at all. He had a soothing, gentle voice that made the words fly up into the air. He did the entire second verse, nailing it right to the finish. “That for me, it isn't over...” He smiled. “Smash it!”

We sang along, going all out with the chorus. We weren't as loud as we could have been, considering bytes could be hiding and we didn't know it, but we harmonized and worked through the song. I had closed my eyes, imagining the lyrics I had heard oh so many times in my head. We went on and on, blasting out our ‘someone like you's’ and our ‘sometimes it lasts in love, and sometimes it hurts instead's’ until I thought my voice would crack. Maggie and Rosie went like a team, their voices opposing and mixing to come out as a fantasizing harmony. Artie and I had closed our eyes, singing the final part together. But it was weird. It seemed quiet. At the very end, we opened our eyes to see Maggie and Rosie just standing there. And I understood why. There was a big wall of cars in front of the road.

It looked like a barricade, all of them flipped over and stacked up upon one another. They weren't on the grass so we could go around no problem, but it was weird. It didn't make sense. I walked right up to it, laying a hand on a blue Subaru. It was off and dead, as were all the other cars. Everyone else came up then, looking at the wall up and down.

Suddenly, movement caught my eye from the side of the wall. I turned, only to see a skinny looking byte come flying down from the grass and lunge for Maggie, who didn't notice it at all. Seeing this, I tore my axe from my bag and dived forwards, cutting into him before he could make the move.

I lifted myself from the ground, Maggie leaping back in terror. We all did. He had come from nowhere.

More movement from the left. Two more came from around the wall, coming for us. Artie and Rosie dealt with that one, bringing their melee weapons up and around to finish them off. No, no, no. We had gotten so far. We were all smiles, and so close... This couldn't possibly be happening now... But Artie broke the news.

“Alright everyone, we’re getting attacked. Back up! Be ready!” He called out, flexing his hands on his golf club.

I wandered towards him, since I was pretty out on my own at the right of the wall. When he saw me, Artie leaned forward and held me once, eyes blinking in desperation. He kissed me on the forehead, gritting his teeth afterwards and stroking my cheek. He stepped back.

“Don’t make me worried. You’re strong.” He said, looking over at a byte that was running towards us. “Be strong!”

I nodded, flinging my axe around to a big female byte that had stormed over to me. Rosie and Maggie were together, smashing the dead as they came over the wall. The wall was good. It prevented the bytes from coming at us in full force and straight away, but there was still a good amount of bytes that deemed us a delicious snack. But not as many as the first horde we had to deal with. Not quite.

Two fit looking women stormed me at the same time. I had to step back to aim my blows, and I smacked the first one to come with my handle so I could get more space. The second got my blade to the neck. When the first came back, it was gifted with my blade to the chest. Both went down

straight after. I breathed heavily, looking up only to see two more take their place. Nobody else was having an easy time. Even Artie was being pushed back by three, mutilated businessmen.

My axe came down at the feet of one of the bytes, but they were coming too fast for me to do full out swings. I had to settle for bashing and prodding, but none of the blows were lethal unless I got lucky and landed a blow at the side of the head. Occasionally I could catch a swing at the neck, but not often. Two minutes passed and the battle was no easier. We had moved back at least ten feet, the bytes never ceasing. There were tons of them dead at our feet, but more would take their place. I would take down one man, a lady would come and take his place. When I brought her down, what a surprise, a young couple that came at me at once. They didn't end and my arms began to ache, especially at the gauze. I couldn't forget that battle. And I wasn't about to let this one end the same way.

A roar was suddenly heard out in the distance. We all looked up to see what it was, but the bytes didn't stop for it so neither did we. I was breathing heavily now, the noise getting louder and louder. Rosie had gotten separated a little ways from Maggie, and she was far left now and dealing with bytes that were much bigger than her. But she fought hard. There was a newfound light in her, and I could tell. She had fire. Poise. I almost couldn't believe she was hacking down bytes because just a few minutes ago she was killing the high notes on Adele. But my gaze was turned around. There was a sudden screeching noise on the other side of the wall, and I heard a smash. I knocked over the byte I was dealing with, and then looked out. We all did.

There was nothing at first, and then the wall shook. There was a loud bang, bang! And then the cars began to topple over one by one. I jumped

backwards to avoid being hit, and when I looked back up, a big white city bus had crashed through the cars and spread them all across the road. I heard a yelp, and then saw it swerve off the road.

But not before it hit Rosie.

She was barreled back into one of the fallen cars, the bumper smacking her chest and a wheel going over her leg once the bus passed through. It finally stopped on the grass, and when I looked at the window, it was a drunken looking byte that was now dead at the wheel. I shuddered, stunned, but then I looked back at Rosie. Her back was on the same blue Subaru, a hand on her side and leg broken in front of her. My eyes shot open, screaming out. "No! No!" I yelled, jumping forward. But then a group of bytes went at her, and I lost her in all of them. "ROSIE!" I screamed again.

I looked back for help, but Maggie and Artie were spread out among the road and couldn't hear me. I looked back. I was not letting them take her from me, not like Nat! She was my best friend. Tears stung my eyes, and a newfound adrenaline was found in my heart. I gripped my axe, and leaped forward into the mob.

They became interested in me right away. I was smacking and slicing with my axe right away, taking out as many as I could. In back of the whole mess of legs I could see Rosie trying to push them all back with her stand, but she looked like a mess and her mouth was open in pain. She would not have to deal with this, and I promised that. I promised it, damn it!

In retaliation, I kicked a foot in the chest of a byte that fell at my feet. I brought my axe around again, burying it straight in the face of a byte that stood between Rosie and me. It went down, but two more came at me, once

more separating me from my pained friend. I yelled, bring the blade into the ribs of one. I couldn't get it out in time for the second, so I kicked the other and pulled. I didn't aim, but when the axe flew out, it smashed into the other byte. And before I knew it, they were all dead at my feet, the only other ones out left by Artie and Maggie who were fighting for their lives.

“Oh my god, Rosie!” I cried out, leaning down at her and dropping my axe. Now that there was nothing standing between us, I could see the full effects the attack had on her. Rosie was clearly in pain, breath short and sweat falling from her brow. Her leg was broken, no question, twisted at an awkward angle. But on it were two bite marks, and my heart dropped. No. No! I know what Artie said. I needed to be strong. But not Rosie, god, not her! I forced myself to continue looking at the wounds. She was clutching her chest, that looked beat in and painful. On her shoulder, another bite. And another on her side. I shook my head, putting a hand on the blood. But there were so many. I got lost in my head.

She breathed faster and faster, and then put a hand on my arm. I looked at her. “Look, Kori. I know what they did to me.” She wheezed, crying out in pain for a moment before composing herself. “You can't let me turn into one of those things.”

“Don't talk like that!” I cried, putting another hand over one of the nasty leg wounds. Rosie shuddered. “We're getting you out of here. I'm taking you to the city. Someone can help... We...”

She shook her head, eyes closing in agony. She suffered a large and painful breath, and then spoke again. “I know you think that Kori. I- ah!” She gripped her side tighter. “I wish that could be true. I do. I really, really, do. But Kori, listen to me.” She weakly reached into her bag, revealing a

small, dainty silver blade. “I don’t want to be one of those. Alright?” She put it in my hand.

“NO!” I yelled, running my hands through her hair. “Rosie, no! I’m not doing that! I cant... I cant do it...” I broke down, crying into my hands. “You have to be ok.”

“K... Kori.” She said quieter, body shaking. “I’m sorry. You... You’re my best friend. You always will be. Remember? R... remember what we said? That’s not going to change.” She got hotter, yelling in pain again. “You need... You need to get out of here. Take care of Maggie. And... Artie. I know how he looks at you.” She pushed the blade into my hand again, and I warily took it, tears obscuring my vision.

“Oh god, Rosie.” I sobbed, leaning forward and kissing her on the forehead. “You’re my best friend. Always. Oh god, no! Rosie, I cant!”

“Please?” She asked, putting her hands on my fist that was closed around the blade. “I’m not going anywhere, really.”

Rosie pointed at my heart, poking it with her finger and nodding to me. The blood seeped further throughout her wounds, the sweat getting worse and worse and I knew at that point I could not get her out of here. She was in pain, dying... Though I could not accept it. My tears dripped onto her body, and my fingers closed tighter on the knife. I nodded, and she smiled weakly.

“I love you, Rosie.” I said, looking into her fading blue eyes.

“I love you, Kori.” She nodded, energy escaping her body. She had to choke out her last words. “Best... friends...”

With that, I felt her pull on the knife we held together. I had no choice. It pierced her skin, right at the left of her chest where she had the biggest

heart in the world. It drove all the way in, and she looked at me for a second, that sweet little smile engraved on her face as she let out a shudder and went still. I could no longer see, the tears were such a hurricane on me. But I made myself close her eyelids, choking out breaths as I kissed her on the head again, her gentle hands no longer having pressure on mine.

“I’m so sorry.” I cried out, pulling her away from the Subaru. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Rosie was delicate, a shape of sugar and mints. I lifted her up into my arms, her still body nothing I couldn’t get a hold of. I walked her up to the bus, walking to the middle where I gently laid her down. Her light hair splayed out in strands, lips still curved upwards. I stormed back to the front of the bus, rolling the driver out and leaping off to her bag. I grabbed her music stand, and her pack, and went back inside. I found a blanket in the midst of her supplies, and laid it out over her. She looked asleep, really. Just like how she was on the sands.

“Bye, Rosie.”

I walked back off the steps, pushing the doors shut. I still had her music stand in hand, and I pushed inside of the two bars over the doors. It went through the two of them, looking it closed. Nobody would be getting to Rosie now. She could sleep for as long as she wanted.

Artie and Maggie were still facing off with a much smaller group of bytes. But they managed to work their way around the wall, and the amount of them was lessened considerably. Artie whirled around to me, looking at my eyes while he grappled with the spawns of Satan. “We poked a hole, we gotta go!” He yelled, and motioned for me.

I ran after blindly, axe dangling from my hand. Tears falling away.
Everything in my heart gone, gone, gone.

I caught up with Artie and Maggie after a minute. Everything was numb, and there was still a struggling group of bytes chasing after us. However, we hit the end of the Kennedy. Entering the city now. But I could hardly tell, since the tears were stinging my eyes and there was this pain in my heart that I then understood I don't think I would ever be able to shake. Maybe if Artie and Maggie turned, they could see that I was having a hard time. That I felt as if I should drop dead any moment. But they were making a pathway, weapons swinging right and left and parting the seas.

There was a building that looked much more inviting than the rest off to the right by an advertisement for salt. It looked like a simple business building. Maybe five stories tall and well kempt. Artie was steering in that direction, sliding onto the sidewalk and under a bridge. I skidded after, tripping like crazy every step of the way. He ripped the door open, Maggie at his heels. I was a few yards behind, flying inside before Artie looked at me. The second I did this, he looked at me in complete terror.

"Is Rosie coming?" He demanded, looking out the glass door. "Where is she? Kori?"

My head shook, and never stopped. I went onto my knees, letting my axe wall as I dug my fingers into my skin. "Close... the door."

He let it go. I didn't think I needed to say she didn't make it, as Artie and Maggie's faces read it all. Their pupils widened, blanking out at me. I couldn't bear to look at them. My head dropped, and I cried out again, rubbing my reddened eyes and raking my trembling nails on my pants. After

a moment, I could hear Maggie choke and walk off a few ways. Artie stayed rooted to the spot.

“They got her.” I sobbed, hardly finding the will to speak. “The bus hit her and they all went on her at once.” I breathed heavily, rubbing my eyes again. “I didn’t let them take her. She’s just sleeping. She’s just sleeping, Artie.”

I heard him walk over to me. Sit down and suddenly it was his shoulder I was crying on. I couldn’t take it. First Nat. Now Rosie. My best friend in the world was gone. All I had left was Artie and Maggie now. Artie said no words. I could tell he was as distraught as I was. After all, he was the one who went to school with Rosie and saw her every day. He rubbed a hand on my back, and after a little while I couldn’t find the will to cry anymore and I just sort of laid against him, eyes squeezed shut.

A few bytes banged at the doors, but Artie had bolted them shut. They wouldn’t be getting to us now. I could hear Maggie bang a hand on the floor, but no crying came from her direction. If only I was at a point where I could stay as strong as she was. After a bit, Artie grip softened. I heard him sigh and shift, running his fingers into my hand. I looked up, and our eyes connected.

“You’re right.” He said blankly, looking down. “She’s only sleeping.”

I nodded, squeezing back with my hand. I then heard footsteps behind us, and when I looked around I realized Maggie was coming towards us. Her bat was dragging at her feet, bag on the ground in the middle of the room, which was carpeted, and dull. Her eyes looked dim and dead, empty, lost-but not sad. Despite of the grayness they now had, I could see a gentle

flicker underneath. Just a little bit. A small pinch of something she always seemed to carry with her.

“Guys?” She said softly, rubbing a hand on her shoulder. “I... I have something to say.”

I nodded to Maggie, and she cleared her throat. She frowned, then let everything out. “I’m not staying.”

Artie furrowed his brow, looking around and exclaiming quizzically. “Well, what do you mean? We’ll... be leaving soon... It’s just not safe at the moment.”

“No, not like that.” She shook her head, gloomily looking about. “I was listening to the radio. God, I don’t know how to put this... I was listening to it. The people on there said there was a safe house in Evanston. My mom was working there when everything happened. And I know she... she sort of abandoned me all my life, but... She’s all I have left. I want to give her another chance, be with my family. She might be up there.” She breathed in heavily. “It took me a while to think about it, but Rosie said I should try and find her. But now that she’s gone I think she’s right. And... I’m giving it a go.”

My body froze. Maggie couldn’t even manage to look at us in the eye. I could tell it took everything she had to say that, especially at a time like now. She looked like she might break, but Maggie was a rock. She wasn’t going to let herself do that. And I admired her, I admired beyond words. That despite of everything, despite her pain and hardships, she was still hoping. Hope. The one thing Maggie thought she lost belief in. But now she made her own. Listening to the radio. Making it this far.

“You guys were absolutely amazing.” She said, nodding and walking over to her bag. I could see her sniffing now, sticking her bat in. “I was honored to fight along you. And now that they’re all distracted, I think I should sneak out the back. Just so...”

I did not allow Maggie to finish. I silenced her ramblings with a rise to my feet, running forward and slamming my body into hers. My arms wrapped around her chest, and Maggie hugged back right away just as we did back at Winslow High. Her breath was short and choppy, using everything she could to be strong. And she was.

I backed up, just as Maggie composed herself. “Thank you. So much.” She nodded to me. She then turned to Artie, nodding to him as well. Then, Maggie’s dark eyes looked at me one more time. “You look after him, alright?” She smiled faintly. “You be strong.”

Artie and I watched Maggie go. She wiped her eyes, tying her dark hair back and backing up slowly. She smiled one more time, and then turned around walking back towards some offices. Eventually, she went around a turn, disappearing from view. But Maggie never really disappeared. She taught me that. Even though she felt invisible, she existed in an illuminating light that squeezed past darkness. For all I knew, she still was in the room. With each of her tracks, Maggie left behind many things. Hope, strength, fire. And I knew that she would be ok.

But Artie appeared beside himself. He had risen to his feet, but was clutching his stomach and looking like he was hiding back an unimaginable pain of all this change and loss within minutes. Rosie and Maggie were gone, just like that. But Artie did not appear sad- only confused, sickened. And I remembered what Maggie said. To look after him.

I walked up in back of Artie, putting my hands on his shoulders. He shuddered, but then accepted my touch. I began to massage them into his tight, tired muscles and eventually he softened up. Breathed normally. The exercise brought me at rest as well. I found myself just blending into him, humming songs and bringing Artie down onto his stomach. I continued rubbing my hands all over, and he looked to the side.

He whispered quietly. “Why did I wait a year for this?”

I leaned in, answering back softly and surely. A quote bounced in my head from one of my old books on my shelf, now abandoned but still in my mind. “When it’s dark enough, you can see the stars.”

~

She was pleased, very pleased. Her companions hadn’t eaten in a while, and they were growing restless. But not long ago a boy had wandered straight into her wonderful army. He... he fought? No, he fought a little. Wouldn’t give in. He had something shiny that she, the queen, had as well. And she was the one that eventually finished him off. He screamed and wailed, and she went to the throat first.

When she got to eat, she let her companions feed. But something caught her bloodshot, rotten eye. In his... boat? No, his coat. He had something she tried to remember but couldn’t quite think of. It was in the shape of that one letter back from the old days, an L or something like that. And there was a small little chink coming out from it that she didn’t want to hit quite yet. She tucked it away, grinning menacingly and looking all about.

But apparently one of her attack attempts had failed. She sent some of her companions off onto a big wide stretch of gray. And when they finally

returned, they delivered her the bad news. No victory. They got away. They only pulled one down but they could not get to her and eventually left. This displeased the queen greatly, and she brought her shiny stabber down on the first minion of hers she saw.

But from what she heard there were more. Hiding out. Slowly advancing into her presence. And she had grown irritated and tired of the people who evaded her and thought they were better. Hah! She would show them who the real queen was.

She selected about ten of her companions, the most rotten ones in the pack. They all had the same, sly smile and the dead eyes and she had a plan. None of her kind seemed good enough to bring the others down. But she knew she was better. Faster, stronger, brighter. She could get them. And she would make sure of that. After a turn and a sun, she set off with her companions trailing at her feet, hissing with no mercy.

And she would feed that night.

~

“Ready?”

I nodded to Artie, who had his golf club braced out in front of him, standing at the door. I was in the same shape, my axe clean and firm in my hands. It had been an hour since we made it in and Maggie had left. In that time, the bytes wandered off and left us with a clear view out the door. We knew we had to carry on, despite of the troubles in the past. My mind was ready.

Gradually, Artie pushed the door open. We looked out both ends, seeing nothing and hearing only our breaths and the wind. We made it out a

few steps, making our way back onto one of the small Chicago roads that a Kennedy exit brought us to. Ahead were some of the smaller buildings, none incredibly high and only holding minor business. An old shoe place and bakery were the first in our sights. Feeling a new wave of hunger at that point, I pulled out a granola bar from my bag and bit into it, offering one to Artie. He accepted.

We made our way down the road, Artie swinging his golf club around and slicing the air. We didn't talk, at least not loudly, for who knew what was lurking in the dark, hidden alleys? I wasn't ready to run into another angry horde. Not when Artie was all I had left. Though I had confidence in him, and myself, I wouldn't put lives at risk for anything. Both of us seemed to keep this in mind until we hit a little intersection. Artie made us turn right, even though I thought it might make a little more sense to go straight. But he probably knew the city much better than I did, with all of his 'adventures' he had back in his old life.

"Shouldn't we go straight?" I asked quietly, looking back at the dead traffic light and a flipped car in the middle of the road.

"Nah, trust me on this one." He said, flashing a quick little smile. "This is the more... enjoyable route."

I laughed. "Hah, ok."

He looked at me, shaking his head with nothing but humor written all over his face. In return, I had to laugh, not entirely sure what Artie was up to. Eventually, he bumped me on the side, causing me to pause and poke him with the handle of my axe. We played at each other a little, but I won the

fight in the end when I grabbed his granola bar and finished it before Artie could.

After that, he pulled me a little closer and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, causing us to stagger a little drunkenly down the road. His body was strong and warm, and eventually I leaned into him and let my cold hands warm up on his jacket that he got in our travels. When everything got too silent, Artie began to hum the rhythm to Someone Like You that only over an hour ago, all four of us were belting it out with nothing but joy. It was amazing how quickly things could change.

I thought we would keep going since it wasn't all that late yet, but after a mile or so Artie screeched to a halt, pulling himself a little ways from me and pointing out to a great white building out in front of us and on the left. I looked at him quizzically, but Artie only smiled and grabbed my hand.

"I think we need some fun. Let me show you something!" He exclaimed, pulling me off to the building.

I had no choice but to oblige. "What are we doing?" I asked, jogging up to the front door.

"You'll see!" He said, pulling open the white door. "Just wait a second."

He brought me inside, and the smell of chocolate and flowers flooded my senses as I entered a small room. There was a desk out in front and some chairs scattered all around, but it was a very open place. The walls were painted lavender and pictures of people jumping across stages and twirling were hung up all around the walls. That was when I realized where we were.

I shook my head, not entirely knowing what the point was, but Artie brought me through a door on the right, and into a very contradicting room.

The ground was smooth wood, all of the walls being mirrors. There was a clothing rack out on the side of the room, and a small stereo a few feet from it. Artie had brought me into a dance studio. I wasn't sure what purpose there was, but I didn't question him. He definitely had reason for doing what he was doing, though I didn't catch what it was yet.

He let go of my hand then, bouncing over to the rack. He shuffled through many different pieces of clothes, but paused at a smooth and thin silver dress that was right in the middle. He pulled it off, hanger and all, shaking off any dust there might be. I didn't know his plan until Artie walked forward and put the dress in my hands. I look at it, confused, but then he nodded me onwards.

“Put it on. You'll look wonderful.” He said, adjusting his bow tie that he still wore all this time for god knows why. “Go on.”

I shrugged, smiling and walking off a few steps. I suppose I should go along with whatever Artie had planned. I took off my hoodie first, letting the blue, worn piece fall on the ground. Then came my pants that clung to my legs from sweat and made me desire to wear something as loose and beautiful as the dress. My shoes came off, and while Artie was turned, I put it over my body. It was a perfect fit. The dress was shiny and shimmered when I moved. The bottom was loose and thin, so when I turned around it floated around my body and went still only when I was at a complete halt. I felt like an angel in it.

It was stretchy and loose enough that I could zip it up in back without any problem. But I wasn't quite done. My hands went up into my hair that I kept in a braid for our entire trip. But now, I took out my tie, and let it fall in back of me. I shook it a bit, running the tangles out with my hands. And then, I was done. But I didn't have to say anything. Artie sensed it too. He turned around, eyeing me. I realized he now slipped over a tail style coat that he buttoned with his big, soft hands and I then realized that it looked like both of us should be at some formal affair.

He took my hand, and walked me over to the hanger again. He reached a hand into a box on the ground, digging around until Artie managed to dig out a fake rose. I laughed, looking at how ridiculous Artie appeared in his suit and the plastic and fabric rose. But at the same time, he looked wonderful. It showed off his strength and fine figure, bringing out his classiness and, how could I lie- his wonderful, expressive, and kind face.

“Do you know how to dance?” Artie asked me, kneeling down by the stereo, fumbling with it.

“Not at all.” I shook my head, shyly putting my hands behind my back.

“Nonsense.” Artie replied, turning the radio on to an acoustic number. “Anyone can dance.”

It started up, and a relaxing guitar playing began my little adventure with Artie. He came up to me, sticking the rose in his mouth and I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head at him. He smiled back mischievously, and then grabbed my two hands and put them at his shoulders. I kept them there, and he then put his on my waist, making me shiver a little and take a moment to accept his contact. I breathed shortly, clueless to this all. And

before I knew it, Artie began to sway and move the two of us across the room, just gently walking along and stepping forward, side, back, forward...

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” I said to Artie. He paused.

“Hush.” He said, and suddenly grabbed my hand and sent me twirling off to the side. He caught me, and I instinctively turned back inside and his hands grabbed mine. “Look at that. You’re a natural!”

I laughed, going through the move one more time before Artie marched us over to the edge of the room. He had me lean back, one of his hands supporting my back, and I kicked out feeling the fire from the dance rising. The music was getting a little brighter now, feeding our restless minds. When I did this, Artie nodded, leading me through more and more. The dance was gentle, and I realized that I was not having a problem with it at all. I could do the really basic stuff and not lose my feet.

The music got very slow and quiet for a second. He pulled me in very close, and began to sway. Artie leaned in, and kissed me right on the top of my head. I thought we would just stay like that for a second, but he suddenly whispered words into my ear.

“Prepare yourself.” He said quietly, and I jumped back, confused.

“What do you mean?” I asked, furrowing my brow. “We only just-“

The music changed and cut my words right off. It got loud and fast paced, a beat echoing throughout the room that seemed to match us step for step. Artie grabbed me and we moved powerfully across the room. His steps landed on each of the loud booms the music let out, me following after on a much more gentle scale.

He began to pull me through things I had no idea I could do. He slid me under his legs, twirled me harder than ever before, lifted me- our energy was feasting on the music, and everything turned into a blur as we raced across the room. One second we were on the top left corner, and within seconds found ourselves on the down right. My body was turning numb, sweat trickling from my forehead. But Artie was a rock. His hands stayed firm and cool, guiding me through his dance that had no direction or routine. He was probably even making all of this on the spot, running me through his little test and not ceasing until I came to a point where my mouth was wide open and smiling.

After a minute or two, the music slowed into an easy rhythm and began to get quieter and quieter. We calmed down as well, and went back into our gentle sway. But both of us were giggling and Artie had me hugged to his chest, so when the song finally ended the two of us toppled over backwards laughing and teasing. I landed on Artie's chest, smiling and out of breath. I leaned my head over him, and Artie pulled the rose from his mouth and fitted it into my hair. I reached my hands over him, fumbling with Artie's bowtie and eventually making my way down to his jacket.

Artie had as good of hands as mine. He kept them at my waist as I began to take out his buttons one by one, scooting the tail back and pushing the black jacket from his arms. When I did this, he moved just for a second to take the hot piece of clothing off and move back to me. He grabbed me again, and moved me so that I was laughing over him and Artie was a smooth and classy wreck underneath me. He eyed me with lust and fire, and I did the same, breathing heavily and moving my hands to his that were splayed out at his sides.

“Did I ever tell you, Kori, that you have beautiful eyes?” He teased, entwining his fingers into mine.

“I think you did...” I went along with him, grinning widely. “One time, a while ago.”

“Then come here.” He said.

I leaned in, and Artie’s fluid fingers moved back to my sides and ran over the silk separating my body from his. Mine moved to his shoulders, and he pulled me close and we kissed and kissed, moving across the floor smiling and joking and I swear, I had never, ever, ever felt like I did right then.

Ever.

Artie and I didn't move from the dance studio, and I didn't even care. I would stay there for as long as he wanted. Even after our 'contact' and heat, we continued to lie on the ground and just talk about everything. We ate, shared stories, revealed some of our silly little secrets. And when it got dark, I revealed to him my phone I always kept with me, but like always, no connection. But I didn't care anymore. Artie never moved and he was my greatest possession. When we hit sadder kinks in the night, he would stroke my hair and kiss me on the cheek. And I looked back to what Artie said earlier that day. Why had we waited a year for this? And I was truly the only person to blame for that.

We pulled out some blankets in a dance closet and made a little bed in the little of the floor. When my eyelids got heavy, he turned off the light, and laid down beside me on the ground. He wrapped his arm around me, holding me close until my eyes shut and I drifted off into a nothingness.

However, I didn't sleep very long. When the sun came up and leaked through the windows, my eyes came up with it. For once, Artie had awakened before I did. When my eyes opened, the first image I saw was him sitting against the wall with this smug, dreamy little smile fiddling with the plastic rose. I turned onto my stomach, looking at Artie who noticed me right away. He raised a brow, and I sat up, adjusting my messy hair and putting it back again. As I did so, we looked at each other, Artie looking as guilty as a little kid.

I went over to my clothes, slipping off the dress and putting my sweater back on. "Artie, why are my pants across the room?" I said with a dash of humor, walking across the room to retrieve them.

“Hah, don’t ask me.” He shrugged, grinning. I rolled my eyes, picking them up on the floor and putting them back on.

When I had everything on, leaving the dress on the floor, I walked over to my shoes that were flipped and loose. I stuck them on, tying up the laces. I was midway over to my bag on the floor when I looked at Artie. He looked dazed and smug, back still against the wall and legs now splayed out in front of him. I chuckled, shaking my head and going over to him instead. I offered a hand, which Artie took graciously, and raised him to his feet.

“We’ve got a tower to get to, Kori.” He pointed towards the door, heading towards his own bag and picking up his golf club. He blinked, waiting for me to finish up. “I hear they may have wifi.”

“Shut up.” I laughed, shaking my head and grabbing my axe. There. All good. “Maybe there’ll be some cameras over there too.”

Artie stopped, taking in my joke with narrowed eyes and a shaking head. He eventually fell into a smile, and walked on. We made it to the door, which Artie opened, and once more we were in the chocolately, floral room. Before we exited, Artie fumbled with his camera bag and took a quick picture from the front door. Then, he made me sit on the desk and stare out into space. After a click on the camera, I walked off, and we made it outside.

It was as empty as it was after the horde yesterday. The thought then gave me a sickening feeling inside, of Rosie, Maggie... though Artie had done a very good job of bringing my thoughts elsewhere. Now was not the time to lose myself. I had to be happy, stay positive if we were going to make it to the Willis tower in the next two days. It was a clear outline in the sky, but getting there was the problem. Once we got deeper into the city, the

streets would no doubt be crawling with bytes and the city is no easy place to maneuver in.

Artie steered the two of us onto a main road that appeared to go straight for a while. I did not oblige. But the walk was incredibly eerie- having there only be two sets of footsteps now. There was nobody extra, no new companions- it was now exactly how the journey was when we began. Artie and I. but the difference was the air that now floated among us. Before, I was clueless, and Artie had an aching heart. But now, walking through the abandoned streets of Chicago, our hearts were at rest and minds ready to fight. I felt so at ease. I allowed my body to sway as we walked along, closing my eyes and imagining the old music I used to listen to play in my head. I hummed along to it for minutes and minutes, and on some occasions Artie would pick up on what I was playing and would sing along with the lyrics. He really did have a wonderful, soft voice. If he had stayed in theatre, the boy would be well off. But as he said, it was ‘not his calling’. And he was mighty fine at photography.

After thirty minutes of our song playing and gentle walk to the crisp morning air, a sound broke the silence. Coming from just ahead, there was an extreme boom and a wail, and both of us fell to the ground, covering our ears. It was like the ground was breaking apart and god slammed his foot onto the earth. When I got the will to look up, I could see smoke wafting upwards and red flames trickling up and then stopping. If I had to guess, I’d say it was an explosion. Looking over, I realized Artie saw it too, and shook his head.

“Was that an explosion?” I asked him pointing out and putting a hand to my ringing ears.

“Yeah... yeah.” He shook his head, clearly having the same issue as I did. “Lets go around. That sound is just going to attract more bytes.”

Almost as if on command, a thin and frail looking byte came running out from the shadows. Artie was on him within the second. He flung his golf club around, knocking the man on the back of the head and leaving him sprawled on the ground. I looked desperately back and forth, shaking my head and jumping forward while Artie made sure it was dead.

“What if someone is signaling? Or over there?” I pondered, looking out to the rising smoke. “I don’t think the bytes are smart enough to make an explosion like that.”

“Maybe not, but its going to attract them none the less!” Artie said in all seriousness, and when we looked out, we realized two small looking bytes were running across the road, hissing and spitting but paying no attention to us at all. It looked like the bytes were being pushed from their hideouts. “I don’t want to run into trouble.”

My expression dropped, hold softening on my axe. “It just... a chance. Maybe there’s people heading off to the same place we are. I don’t know. I just... you never know.”

“You really want to go there?” Artie said cautiously, lifting his club just as another byte staggered into view. That one too did not mind us.

“Yes.” I said, unsure.

“Then I guess I’m not going to stop us.”

I looked at Artie just as he said the words, and he motioned off for me to follow him. I warily walked forward as I looked at the smoke continue to rise up, but once I got side by side to Artie, he began to walk forward

carefully. And then, he grabbed my hand tightly and led me on. It was clear to see he didn't like my idea based off of how tense he was, in the hold and walk and everything.

But I knew that I should stick to my guns. The bytes were too stupid to make an explosion like that. It had to be natural, or healthy people like us. Not to mention, we were so close to our location now. In a day or two we could make it there if nothing plagued us. It would be wasting time to go around the area of explosion, hours we couldn't waste. We had come so far. Done so well. We would be safe once we got to the tower, and I would make sure Artie made it. I broke my promises on everybody else, but I would not break my promise on him.

We got closer and closer to the rising smoke. We ran into many bytes running around the perimeter, but very few cared about us. When they did, Arte or I would give them a quick blow to the head and keep walking. And eventually, the smell of gas entered our senses, which made Artie even more cautious. I was shaking a little, not sure what I got myself into, but still carrying on. But the air reeked, and it felt heavy. I even got a little light-headed the closer we got to the smoke.

Just before we got to the source of it all, three bytes stormed us. I was confused, as they looked completely different from the other frightened ones that had run off. These looked mad, hearts set on slaughter and hunger just like the hordes we encountered. But these looked even more rotten than the others. Their skin was sagging yellow, teeth getting clouds of brown and eyes practically blood red. And they seemed to want us.

Artie took a step to the side, whacking his golf club at one the second as it came at us. It fell, but was not dead. Another charged at me. I braced

my hands on my axe, ripping it through the air and sending the blade into the chest of the first byte to get to me. It wailed, putting its spidery hands on my axe in vengeance. It continued to try to bite at me and kill me, but my blow was too powerful. I shook it off, and the thing fell onto the pavement and began to writhe on the ground and bleed out. Artie had just smashed the skull in of the first one he dealt with, but now the other byte was running after him and ready to sink its teeth in his shoulder. Like hell it would. I was too far off to make a blow, but Artie was unaware. I did something very risky then. My grip loosened on my axe, and I brought it over my shoulder, swinging it forward and letting go once my arm extended. It then flew through the air, sinking itself in the shoulder of the byte and making it wail in terror. That was when Artie realized it was there. With great surprise, he whirled around and smacked his golf club right on its temple. The byte didn't stand a chance after that. It fell over, dead for the second time in its life.

I walked up, digging my axe out of its shoulder and shaking off the sweat I gained from that battle. Artie looked dazed, wiping his brow and looking at me.

“Nearly there.” He nodded, grinning weakly. “Nice throw.”

“Thanks.” I chuckled, catching back to him and leaving the bytes in our wake.

We walked forward a few steps. Just then, I realized where the explosion came from. Before my eyes was a gas station. One side of it was completely black, crispy and smoking. There were still a few flames trickling on the ground in lines, but nobody was around. It looked like it was

set fire to and abandoned. I narrowed my eyes. I was so sure someone must have done it, or something...

Artie and I went forward to investigate, but didn't dare getting too close in case of a second explosion. But everything was really as it seemed. Half of the station was blown off and there were no people or bytes in sight. The smoke had dwindled mildly as the minutes ticked by, just filling my lungs with the heavy gas. At that point, I was ready to tell Artie it was worth a try, and that we should continue on to the tower and leave the gas station as I began coughing a little bit. I turned around, looking at Artie who was oddly frozen on the ground at rooted at the spot. I looked at him funny, but then he began to speak.

"Mother of god." He said quietly, shaking his head.

I furrowed my brow, confused. I came up beside him, seeing that Artie was focused on the building in front of us across the street. His eyes were glowing, looking crispier and greener than ever in surprise and even a little confusion. I looked where he was. Across the street, I saw a new looking brick building that was a fine, modern design. On the arch going out in front, I saw in heavy letters, Barnes and Noble. A shiver went up my spine. Right there, in front of us, a book store. A freaking book store that probably had a lot of the books I kept on my shelf back home.

"Can you smell books from that far back?" He gradually began to smile, stepping forward and taking in the place. "That's crazy. That's fate."

I, too, stiffened into a smile and walked across the road with him. We began to ignore the gas station, gazes only on the book store. It was actually funny, how it was my idea to check out the explosion and now suddenly we

found ourselves at the grand castle of books. There was still even a light inside, not barricaded or anything, just looking completely new. Artie went up to the door, me right at his side, and he opened it without a problem. Not even locked. My heart soared, the smell of paper going straight to my head.

Artie wandered in a few steps before stopping. The place was huge, books all over. Up front were some sale books, and rows and rows of new releases were on the first floor with a coffee shop and magazines. Stairs went upwards to sci-fi, realistic fiction, fantasy, anything I could get my hands on. I wanted it all. Had we not have the expedition of making it to the Willis Tower, I would stay here and read as much as I possibly could.

“Where do you think we’ll find Gatsby?” Artie asked, looking all around.

“Upstairs.” I mumbled in awe.

I made my way forwards, taking my time on the way to the stairs. If I saw an interesting looking cover, I would grab it and walk along a few steps, reading the back of it. Eventually, my hands got full and I put them all in a little pile when I finally reached the stairs. Artie was right behind, camera in hand, clicking pictures of all the covers and of me walking along the sweet smelling store.

I hopped onto the first stair, rushing up as fast as I could. I was like a little kid in a candy store. Books were an escape for me. They were the worlds I couldn’t physically live in. When things went wrong in the real world, books would always wait for me just where I left off. I could hop in, enter the main character’s shoes... It was unbelievable, what they could do

for me. The possibilities were endless. And here I was, swimming in them. Artie fulfilled his promise to me.

“Here, over here!” I called, reaching the top.

Artie raced right after me. I weaved through the mystery section, stumbling over fallen novels until I hit a classic literature shelf. It was in the brightest end of the store, right across from a window where the cold sunlight leaked in and struck the spines with a glow. I blocked it off, turning around to the shelf. It went alphabetically. I was looking for an F, for Fitzgerald. I was at D, but carried on slowly. E... Almost. There were a few novels, but then I hit the F and became immersed in Fitzgerald’s work.

But I did not see *The Great Gatsby* straight away. The sun glare was feisty and he had so many other lovely works strewn across the shelf. I was ready to get mad, fumble through them all, but suddenly Artie hand snatched in front of me and pulled it out. I turned to him with crazy eyes, looking to see what he got. And then, Artie turned it around so I could see the cover. And there it was.

A face was in solid dark blue, leaking a yellow tear onto the setting below with flashing lights and colors. I ran my hands across it, looking right at the text on top. In great yellow letters, it read *The Great Gatsby*. I felt a warmth spread over my body from my head to toes. After everything, Artie kept his promise. He had found me a copy of the *Great Gatsby*. He tucked it into my arms, and I hugged it close to my chest, not daring to let go.

“I promised you, didn’t I?” He smiled, motioning at the book. He appeared utterly joyous. “Go on, give it a little read.”

I looked up at him, and then pulled it forwards. I flipped through the first few pages, going to Chapter One. My eyes skimmed the pages, and I then realized Artie was sitting against the shelf now, knees up and watching me intently. It was as if he were waiting for me. And then I realized just what he wanted from me. Well, he had done so much for me. There was nothing I wouldn't do for the boy.

I sat up against the window sill, going back to the first page. Artie leaned in, waiting for me. I cleared my throat, grinning to him before looking back down at the words.

“In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.” I started the reading calmly, saying each word very simply. “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,” he told me, “just remember that all people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”

I paused there, having recited the first two mini paragraphs from the novel. But Artie looked at me funny when I looked back up, and I too gave him an odd look. He then lifted a hand, motioning for me to go on. I pondered his request for a second, and then gave in. I put my head back down in the book and carried on.

“He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way...” I began to read, and then took off from there.

My words carried on and I did not stop again after that. I was unusually quiet and reserved in the first few pages, only reading it out loud and nothing else. But after those few pages, Artie and I became immersed in

the story. I gradually began to speak the words much more clearly and crisper than before, annunciating each one to the best of my abilities. We would hit dialogue every so often, and when I did, I would speak in the characters voice and act how I thought they would. Eventually, I was no longer Kori but instead Nick Carraway who was telling the story of it all.

Artie became a passenger as well. He slowly came up to me, eventually ending up right at my feet. He continued leaning in, listening and eyes glazing over and entering their world instead of ours. Minutes past, and he got up and persuaded me to let him read the dialogue of Tom, saying that he, too, wanted to be somebody. I let Artie sit right beside me, looking over my shoulder at the words. When his parts came up, I moved the book a few inches, and let him read on. He was ridiculous, but funny, putting on his best wealthy ass accent he could. After the end of the first chapter, he then insisted that he read for Wilson as well.

There was no way I could oblige for any of his requests, and we put on a little show for the both of us. After a bit we began to stand, acting out all the parts and dividing them evenly between us. We staged it all, laughing and teasing as we went on with it. When I narrated, I hopped on top of a chair on the floor and spoke out to our imaginary audience. We did not cease once. It was a massive play we put on only for each other, and when we took a break to catch our breath Artie said we should make a production when things get back to normal. I agreed, and began right where we left off.

“I want to see you.” Artie said, putting on his Tom. “Get on the next train.”

“Alright.” I read from the script, walking a circle around Artie’s façade.

I changed places right away, switching characters in a heartbeat. “I’ll meet you by the news stand by the lower level.” I read, waiting for Artie to poof back into the shoes of Wilson and emerge from the shadows. But he stood blankly where he was. “By the news stand...” I said, eyeing him. “Lower level...”

He stayed rooted on the spot. Finally, I let the book fall at my side and I walked up to him. It was his first time breaking character at all, and just a few seconds we were having a good laugh about his business talk going on in the same scene. I put my hand on his shoulder, waiting for Artie to say what was going on. But he did not. And suddenly, he leaped forward, rummaging through his bag. I gasped in alarm.

He pulled out his long, silvery golf club and shot back up to his feet. I looked around, surprised at what he was doing. Artie backed up a few steps, pushing me back against the window.

“God, Artie!” I yelled, squeezing past him. “You aren’t killing Gatsby yet, and even if you were, he used a god damn gun!”

He shook his head, and just at that second, a furious looking byte shot from the turn and came at us in a mad dash. He had his teeth wide open, clawing the air with more speed and ferocity than all the others had. But Artie was right there, popping it in the head with his wedge. It fell over, still alive, but dumber than before. It writhed on the ground, but before it got to its feet, Artie smacked it in the back of the head and finished it off.

“Oh.” I said.

I lunged for my bag, sticking *The Great Gatsby* in before even grabbing my axe. I zipped it up, making sure the book wouldn’t fall out. God,

it wouldn't get a scratch as long as it was in my possession now. I threw it over my back, realizing how light it was now with our eating of food and thinning out the supplies as we went along. But my axe was as heavy as always in my hand, ready to be thrown or smashed against anything that moved. Artie motioned for me to follow him, and I did just that, weaving around the chair on the floor.

We crept silently, for the two of us had no idea if there were any more of the bytes in the store. Artie's hearing was much more acute than mine, so it made sense he heard the first one. But if it caught us unarmed, I didn't even want to know the consequence. We spent too much time enjoying ourselves and fooling around. We were so close. Now, we just needed to lower the gap.

Going around a turn at the sci-fi section, another byte charging at us caught me by surprise. Like the others, it was unusually bloodthirsty [that being said, they all were] but there was something especially evil in those red eyes and sharpened claws. Claws! Looking down I realized that its nails had in fact been sharpened to a fine point. Had it done that on its own? I didn't wait long enough to find out. I swung my axe around, burying it in the neck of the brute. He fell over backwards, blood spurting onto the carpet.

"Let's roll." Artie looked at me, dashing for the steps.

I followed right after, only four feet or so behind when he hit the first step. But he paused, confused. I looked down and instantly saw what it was. Down at the ground was a byte, the worst looking of all. It was a woman, probably one in her thirties or so if she was normal and healthy. She had on a torn up leather jacket and ripped jeans, stained red with none other than blood. Like the others, her nails were sanded to sharp ends and were splayed out in front of her. But she did something astonishing. When she noticed we

paused, she brought her teeth up into a crooked smile, showing off the rotten teeth on her mouth that looked as sharp as her nails.

Never had I seen a byte display emotion like that. I couldn't help but gasp as she continued grinning like a wild fiend and crept forward a few steps. And then, she reached behind her back. I wasn't sure what she was doing, but when she brought her hand back around, I noticed it. She was holding a long, glittering knife with blood stained all over it. The bytes had never used weapons! But then again, this one wasn't like the others. She was like Satan in her own special way. I backed up a step, now seeing we were stuck on the steps with her waiting at the bottom.

And suddenly, I felt something grab me from behind. I kicked out, yelling as I was thrown onto the floor, dazed. When I looked up, there were two byte faces staring down at me, teeth making their way down to my throat. I still had my axe in hand, and rolled off, but dizzily and confused.

“Not today!” I hissed, ramming my axe into a foot of one of them from the ground. It went right through, making the byte topple over, crippled.

I heard rustling and banging coming from the stairs, and I had no idea what was happening over there. But Artie was standing at that point when I got pulled away, so it had to do with him. But now, I had another byte on me and it had wrapped its dead hands around my foot and began dragging me away. I fought back, escaping its grasp after a good three seconds of being pulled on my back. I finally managed to get up, bringing my axe into its chest as soon as I got the chance. It split open, only leaving the cripple crawling after me.

I finished it off with a smack on the neck, but not before another byte came out from the shadows and ran at me. This time, I wouldn't take being knocked about. I sidestepped right as he came at me, widening my grasp on the axe for a more accurate hit. He came at me again, and I waited. One, two, three...

On three, he was parallel with me. I let it loose, and the axe crashed right into the side of the brute. It yelled out in terror, insides pouring from the hole I had created. My hand moved to my mouth, sickened at what I was seeing. But he wasn't finished yet, and was sitting miserably on the floor. Pity for the bastard made me lop off the rest of its abdomen, and allowed me to catch my breath and rise from the floor.

My eyes shot straight away to the stairs where Artie and I stood moments before. There he was, a dead byte at his feet, but my stomach dropped. His club had fallen down to the first floor, and he was grappling with the leader, evil female byte that blocked our pathway. She had the knife in one hand, the other trying to pull Artie up into her. Artie tried to resist, pushing away with all of his strength but based off of his face she was unusually strong and would not give in.

I raced across the top floor, grip tightening on my axe as I made for the stairs. But I was not as quick as I hoped to be. For suddenly the female byte got the advantage of the fight and brought Artie down the steps, closer and closer to the first floor. I made it to the first step, blood racing. But I froze. For suddenly, I heard an awful yell and looked up to see Artie limp in the satanic one's grasp, leaning right over her shoulder. She cackled, pulling the silver blade from his insides slowly and bringing it out in back of her.

Artie coughed, and she let go. He fell forwards straight away, tumbling down the rest of the stairs and landing on his stomach at the bottom.

“ARTIE!” I screamed, lifting my axe and eyes shooting from my head as I saw him fall away to nothing. No! He had to be faking, to get away! He would get up any second now, get his club, turn around and kill her. I knew it. I waited for him to do so, but not before going down the stairs, readying to swing my axe and kill her.

That was, until, she reached back into her bag of tricks and brought out a gun.

~

The boy was weak. He may have taken out one of her companions before her very own eyes, but he was a fool. As he did that, he went straight for her, the queen herself! Hah! She was no ordinary killer. She was used to watching her prey suffer, think for a second they could get away. This one was no different. As soon as he ran to her, she knocked the stick he had straight from his own hands and left him defenseless.

She could hear the girl taking off her companions one by one from above the stairs. That didn't matter. They were only to serve her on this one adventure. Besides, the girl would not be able to get past the queen herself! She was no better than the boy was. She could kill the boy, meaning she could kill the girl too. But she would make them feel pain, hurt, all before she would feast upon them.

And there! For just a second in her grappling with the boy, he had let up to breathe. Just a split second to take a breath and fill his... His what? What were they? She would be eating them soon. And then she remembered.

Lungs! He filled his lungs for a quick second to get more energy in their fight, but she was clever. She knew he was vulnerable at that second. And when he did this, she put all her strength into pulling the boy into her chest.

And when she did, she let loose with her beautiful stabber, slicer, annihilator... and it went through his skin like butter. Instantly he weakened, becoming a coughing mess. She had no other use for him now, and she let him go. He fell away easily, now only having the girl to destroy. And she was right where the queen wanted her.

The girl was just as foolish as the boy. She yelled, coming running down the stairs with some red thing in her hands. The queen had planned this out, and remembered what she had gotten from one of their kind. In her jacket, she untucked the L shaped object she stole off the boy she watched suffer and bleed out. And when she put it out in front of her, the girl froze straight away. For the last time, the queen smiled, putting a finger on a little chink on the object that was sticking out. She pushed it.

And it fired.

~

I closed my eyes, waiting for the hole to appear in my chest and feel the astonishing pain her gun would bring. But it did not happen. I peered back, seeing the satanic one suddenly stagger backwards and drop the gun. Staring harder, I realized her neck was now soaked with red and she began to clutch it, walking off towards the door. But she did not make it far at all. At the front exit, she collapsed, not moving.

She had shot herself.

My eyes widened at the mess all over the bookstore, staring at the most evil thing I had ever seen now dead on the floor. But I could not focus on her. There, on the ground, Artie still laid. He did not get to his feet, sneak up behind the woman, and finish her off with a clubbing to the head. He was in the same position he was before, and I realized his white shirt was now leaking with crimson on the very bottom.

“No.” I mumbled, shaking my head and walking forward. “NO! NO! NO!”

My walk turned into a sprint, taking the steps two at a time until I bounced onto the floor and skidded a few ways. Artie was a few paces to the right, and I fell to the ground and lunged at him. There was still a gentle breath coming from him. I wasted no time at all. I grabbed Artie by the shoulders, flipping him onto his back.

My stomach dropped straight away. His teeth were clenched together, short breaths escaping from him. Sweat was run all over his forehead, and his eyes weakly opened the second I moved him. But that was not the worst. I looked down at his stomach, tears escaping my eyes at that point. Right at his abdomen was a gaping, straight wound that came from the knife. It was deep, impossibly deep and was nothing I could just stitch up. It had already bled plenty, making his buttoned shirt rubbed with the scarlet blood that seeped all over him. I gasped, putting a hand over it, desperate.

“Artie, come on.” I said to him as the boy raised a hand up in pain. “I’m getting you out of here. The tower isn’t far, you said it yourself, alright?” I cried out, pushing harder now. “Come on, Artie. Come on!”

He gasped out in pain, and with my support I got him to a sitting position. But he looked miserable. His eyes looked empty and pained, his skin hot and blood continuing to leak. I pulled him up to his feet, finding an impossible amount of strength I wasn't so sure I had. I tucked my axe in my bag, making Artie lean up against me. And he needed it. There was no way Artie could stand on his own, and even though he wasn't doing all the work, he looked as though he could hardly stand.

“Kori...” He mumbled as I began to walk him towards the door.

“Hush!” I said back to him, stepping over the crazy woman and opening the door. “I'm getting you to the tower!”

He didn't argue with me, but his face got even more miserable as I brought him onto the road. A few bytes were standing around the still smoking gas station, but they scattered once they saw us. I grabbed Artie's hand that was over my shoulder, giving it a squeeze and my breath becoming short as well. I had adrenaline, but everything was difficult and Artie's warm blood was now seeping onto my own skin and making me hot.

My eyes got cloudy now, stinging from the tears that threatened to come. But I pushed them back. No way in hell was I letting go. I was not going to cry. Artie would be fine. I would take him to the Willis Tower, and they would take care of him. They would stitch up his wound better than I ever could and they would ice his head and play music and everything would be fine. We made it to the middle of the road now, and I looked ahead.

The Willis Tower was out in the distance, looming, the highest building in the city. But it was still a distance away. Not right in front of us, or a few blocks off. It would take the entire day to make it. But I would not

give up, I would run with Artie, and hold him and never let go. He was holding the stab wound, anyway, masking some of the bleeding. He would be fine.

“Kori...” He began to say again, slowing down and feet scraping the ground.

“No, stop it!” I said to him, walking us another block. Artie had gotten heavier now, not really knowing where he was going or what direction we were facing. “We’ll be there soon. It’s just ahead.

Artie looked up, staring at the skyline and he halted. I did too, just for a second. Because it looked like he was truly studying it, taking the city in all of its greatness and the massive height of the tower. He then walked forward again, but he was wheezing and sputtering and his hand was sliding off of the slickness on his abdomen. I looked down, realizing it was no better than before. More blood ran off of it, leaking down to his hand and staining his cuffs. I had to look away, shake it out of my mind. We would make it, we would make it.

“I’m going to get us to the tower, and they’ll help us.” I said to him, voice cracking. “I love you with all my heart. I’m not letting you go. We’ll make it, alright?”

But my voice weakened as we went along. I noticed tears were sliding down my cheeks without even realizing it. My voice was cracking now, racking into sobs I couldn’t hide. Seeing Artie in pain was killing me more than him. But he would be fine... I would make sure Artie would be fine. I made a promise and intended on keeping it.

We merged onto another nearby road that would get us to the Willis Tower. Stores were as abandoned as the streets, bytes only coming out occasionally. And when they did, they would let out a hiss and scatter back into the shadows. They wouldn't get us, I would make sure of it. As long as Artie was with me, I would keep him safe.

His weight on me got heavier as we walked on and on. Artie was hardly even walking now, just dragging along with this terrible grimace and short, choppy breaths. I had to wait a second, prop him up against me, and keep going. But after a few yards I had to do it again. He was sliding off of me now, and I noticed he wasn't even holding his bloody wound anymore and it leaked without mercy. I tried holding my own hand against it, to make it stop, but among walking Artie down the road it was too much. I had to stop, prop him up again, and just walk as fast as I could. But Artie then ceased to move. I looked up at him, realizing his eyes were fading and his breaths were now few and shallow. I stared at him desperately, but then he mumbled again.

"Oh, Kori..." He said, and then toppled over right onto a patch of grass that was landscaped on the square.

I yelled, trying to catch him as he landed but having no such grace. He was on his back, hair among the grass and his hands on his awful wound that didn't cease to bleed out and suck out his life. I was sobbing now, eyes red and the tears flying down my face. I grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to lift him up. But it was no use. Artie wouldn't rise.

"I'm getting you to the tower, Artie!" I called to him, eyes stinging. "Come on, you have to get up."

“Kori, please.” He said weakly, choking on his own breath. “I can’t go. I’m sorry Kori. I’m so sorry but I can’t do it.”

“Yes you can!” I yelled to him, shaking Artie by the shoulders. “Come on, just a little farther.”

“Look at me Kori.” Artie lifted a hand to touch my cheek, gasping and doing everything he could to stay conscious. “We made it so far. But I can’t make it to the tower. You have to go.” He grabbed my hand, and my tears began sliding down and mixing with his blood. “You’ve gotta move on. Promise me you’ll keep going.”

“NO!” I yelled, furiously putting my hands on the stab and trying to block the flow of blood. “I love you. I’m not going to let you stay here and die! I watched Rosie die in front of my face. I’m not letting the same happen to you!”

Artie blinked his eyes closed right then. He shook his head, and right then I realized his breath was much softer and he had no more grip on me. He was just a gentle fallen angel, shaking his head back and forth and being the cause for the rainstorm of salty water that came from my hazel orbs that were the reason Artie spoke to me in the first place a long, long time ago. I brought a hand to his cheek then, and his eyes fluttered open, and I took them in. The dark, rich green with flecks of brown and blue that were always my reassurance, my guiders. And then he spoke, much softer this time.

“I love you so much.” He said, his eyes too becoming watery and glossy. “And that’s why I’m telling you to go.”

I shook my head furiously, and seeing this, Artie kept going. “In love we cannot be selfish. When I’m... When I’m...” He cringed, a hand

wandering over to the flow of blood. “When I’m gone you have to save yourself. Don’t worry about me. Save yourself. Get to the tower.”

I couldn’t even see his face anymore. Everything was blurry and numb and the only thing I was sure of was Artie’s weak hold on my arm. I tried shaking my head, but couldn’t find the will to move. There was nothing but a haze over us, and I was crying too hard to notice anything. I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t even believe that I was alive and living through this moment.

“Don’t cry.” He said, using all his strength to put a hand to my cheek and wipe away some of my tears. “You be a fighter. You get to that tower and read the rest of the book. Get yourself to where it’s safe. Its only for a little while.”

I didn’t move, just tried to fight back the tears that threatened to fall. But Artie was blocking them, stroking me like he always did. I could not do such a thing. The only person I was sure I loved was dying at my feet, and he wanted me to move on. Not cry. Make it to the tower. I then in return brought a hand to his hair, which was one of the only untouched parts about him. I ran my hands through it, shaking my head and gasping out breaths.

“Such beautiful eyes.” He sighed, and suddenly his hand fell from my face and landed in the grass.

My eyes widened, and I looked and realized his eyelids slowly began to close and his breaths fade to nothings. I was screaming now, shaking his shoulders, kissing him on the head. But Artie would not wake up. When I looked down I realized he had stopped bleeding but so had he with his breathing. I shook my head, not daring to accept this.

“Artie? Artie no!” I cried into his chest, burying myself in his warm skin. But it was already so still, quiet, gone. “I love you. I love you Artie! Wake up, wake up...”

My words turned into nothing but sobs. Artie was not coming out of it. He was silent and still on the grass, his eyelids not opening, his lips not forming his warming smile he always gave me. His hands didn't run through my hair and he didn't kiss me on the cheek or hold me close when I most needed somebody. He was completely and utterly gone.

And behind me, coming around the turn, I began to hear a massive amount of footsteps. All charging around and coming straight towards us. My eyes widened further in terror, and I shook Artie harder. He had to leave. They would get him, destroy his wonderful, innocent body... I was yelling, wake up! Wake up! But he did not move. The footsteps came heavier now, closer and closer.

“Artie.” I cried, kissing him in the forehead again and again. “I have to go. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.” I stood up. Vision a blur. “Like you said, its only for a little while. We'll see each other soon.” I backed up. “Bye, love.”

I backed up further, the steps nearer and nearer. Artie was still and cold as ever on the grass, and I realized all this time he had his camera bag slung over his shoulder. That, too, was laying at his side. I could imagine him at a park instead. Taking pictures of the clouds moving across the sky. Taking those little moments so he could keep them forever, all those little memories his and his only. I blew him a kiss, putting my bag over my shoulder, and then whirling around and running blindly onto the road.

And I couldn't help but think one thing as I ran off down a side road, escaping the mob that was coming towards me. Artie's memories. His pictures. I suddenly realized all along what he meant by doing it, what the importance truly was. Because I then realized memories do not last forever. That he took his pictures so no matter what he could go back and remember that place in time or that person he met or thing he did. And now Artie was a picture. The front of the album, deep in my heart. An outstanding memory, the best I ever had. It all made sense now. And as I ran, I kept mumbling one little line. The one thing I think he wanted me to know all along.

“I'll never, ever forget.”

Everything felt like fire. My hands were itchy from the blood and my legs and shoulder were burning from supporting Artie. And even then, I failed him. I completely crushed the promises I made, to keep everyone safe and not let them get left behind. Every person among us was gone. And Artie, my most important thing in the world, was gone too. Just like that. In a snap, one unfortunate event stole him from me. And I failed.

I refused to look back at all. I knew what I would see. Artie, dead on the grass, being ravaged by the terrible beasts. Just the thought made me wail, clutch my stomach and once more become blind by my leaking tears. I fell once, legs too shaky and numb to carry me through my run. I forced myself back up, wiping a hand over my eyes and flying left onto a dark alley. I couldn't stay on the main road at this point. But straight away, my move was regretted. Three big bytes were clustered together, digging through the trash. I gasped, skidding to a stop just as they noticed me.

I tried backing up, but only continued hearing footsteps on the main road. I couldn't turn around. But I did still have my axe, and as I sobbed, I pulled it out and went forwards. The bytes seemed confused by my move, but after a little, advanced as well. I raised it high above my head, shaking and convulsing as my fingers began to slip from it and fall to my side.

It swung, but the only thing on my mind was Artie. His face. His once smiling mouth that I knew I would never see again. And as I brought the axe through the air- I weakened. It hit the first, but only enough of a blow to leave a small little gash on its shoulder. All I managed to do was anger it. My head shook, pulling at the axe and trying to get away, crying out.

My fight was completely gone. When I tried pulling the axe away, my fingers that were slick with blood and tears came off of the slippery handle and it clattered to the floor. I was left defenseless. The byte I wounded began to run at me, the other two looking at the ground to examine my weapon. I couldn't stick around. They would kill me. I knew they would. It was so clear I wouldn't be able to defend myself, not in the shape I was in or with my traumatized mind.

I ran forwards, shoving the byte before he could sink his teeth in me and dashing past the two other bytes. Once more, something I left behind. My axe was still on the ground, blood hardened all around it and left alone. But I could not grab it. That would be a death sentence for me, not that it mattered anymore. Nothing mattered anymore. Not when I had nothing else to live for.

"What have I done, Artie?" I cried into my arms as I made it to the end of the alley, bytes chasing behind. "I'm lost. I'm so lost without you."

I took a right, making way onto another road. This was much similar to the one I was taking Artie on, buildings being the only thing between us now and the barrier of heaven and hell. By now, my lungs were burning too. I spent so much energy walking him along and crying out all my air that my chest hurt and my heart faded by the second. Once more, my legs gave out on the road. I toppled over, but wasn't able to get up straight away. My hair popped out of the braid, falling over my shoulder and touching the cold ground. My hands were rubbed completely raw from digging into the cement, and my pants were thinning at the knees. I didn't find the will to rise after that. I cried into my arm, looking down. I could hear the bytes running after me, probably just escaping the alley now.

“Get up, Kori.” I said to myself, wheezing and looking upwards. “Artie said you had to get to the tower. Get up.”

Using everything I had, I pushed myself to my feet. Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed the bytes were maybe ten yards from me now. I couldn't fight them, for I now had no weapon. All I could do was run and hide and pray they wouldn't find me- but I would let them take me in a heartbeat if Artie didn't make me create a final promise, to get to the tower. I couldn't keep my promises to anyone else, but maybe, just maybe, I could keep his. In Artie's loving memory, I would try.

My feet skidded behind me as I lurched forward, stumbling down the road. The buildings had gotten considerably bigger now. They towered high above my head, and I realized I made it to the much bigger part of Chicago, deep in where everything was large and crazy. And I couldn't help but imagine it was much more populated over here. But I knew I couldn't think like that if I wanted to escape. Not now. I rubbed my eyes, dashing forwards. Outrunning the bytes. I could do it. I was so light on my feet, I may as well be on a cloud. I hardly felt my legs at all, a shiver then going through my body. They were so numb, so cold that of course they didn't matter anymore.

The bytes got smaller and smaller in back of me. I choked out a sob, forcing myself to weakly smile. See, Kori? I told myself. You outran them. You can keep going, come on, faster! I kept running until I got too forward again, sliding forwards and having to spring back to my feet. Maybe I could just run the whole way. I could make it fast, couldn't I? That's what Artie wanted. Artie. Artie. Artie.

I coughed, furiously looking left and right to see if there were other bytes coming from the shadows. I could see their outlines, dark and

lumbering, yet they didn't seem to make a move to get me. Something was wrong now after the event at the book store, and it wasn't just me. The bytes seemed out of order, disorganized and confused. Like they were waiting for a command that never came. Or maybe, if I wanted to ease my heart, Artie could be pushing them back from above.

The three bytes behind me eventually stopped chasing. I was left alone and driving forward on the road, and up again I saw a sparkling dark blue and cut off. A bridge. Well, that made sense. The Chicago River separated me from the tower. If I could get across that bridge... The Willis Tower wasn't far ahead. It was much more visible now, not far at all and so close to being tangible. A little farther. I could go farther, that's what Artie wanted after all.

My legs carried me to the bridge, and I panted, catching my breath as I looked across. It wasn't long and at my speed I could hit the Willis Tower before it got dark. I stepped onto the road, looking down at the gross, green water hazily washing down. But my act was short-lived. I looked up again at a sudden sound of crackling and splattering. I felt cold water bounce onto my cheeks and cover my clothes, and when my eyes rose up, I noticed it had begun to rain. Rain was in fact an understatement. It was pouring and I could hardly see in front of me. I only saw little flickering shapes moving, slowly getting larger. I rubbed my eyes, trying to block the rain. They were not any friends of mine. Down the bridge happened to be ten or so bytes, all with their eyes on me. They were walking slowly towards me, testing me- and as I stepped back, that was like a spark. They ran.

I whirled around, dashing off but slipping as I went from the rain. There were other bridges I could hit- that wasn't the only one. But the

problem was that all of those bytes looked especially hungry and I was defenseless. My lungs burned even though I had adrenaline, but it was leaking now slowly. Everything was hard. At every turn, my hope was crushed.

“I’ll make it to the other bridge, Artie.” I said under my breath, rubbing my eyes and making way down the road as the bytes went around the turn and hissed after me. “I’m running, I’m going. Just as you said.”

With every step I made, jolts went up my legs harder and harder. Bang! Bang! My gym shoes were beginning to do not much at all, and my feet ached with every move. My ankles felt like they would burst and my bag got heavier and heavier. I looked over my shoulder, slowing a little bit to get a glimpse at my attackers. There were six women, four males. They looked like they should be in an office building instead of the streets. The women wore dresses and the men wore suits. But the difference was their sagging, yellow skin and beat in, red eyes. The green dribble coming from their mouths didn’t help, either. I thought of all of those things I’ve killed now. Part of me didn’t feel so terrible. Because now, I almost pitied them—they were miserable beasts slowly rotting away and I blocked them from doing that. But the other side of me looked back to Artie. They had killed him. Just as they did to Nat, Rosie... And I wished my axe was back in my hands.

When I turn around, the rain is much thicker and I was all out of sorts from looking at them. I didn’t even see the trash can that was shining silver and short in front of me. I gasped, trying to stop, but I was too late. I slipped in the now wet street, crashing into the can and flipping onto my back. My bag fell from me, opening on the ground and spilling the contents

everywhere. I whimpered on the ground, looking forward after feeling a then astonishing pain in my ankle. My body reeled forward, looking at it. It didn't look oddly bent in the haze, but it was now burning and the spidery, aching warmth was climbing up my leg that made me want to throw up. But I forced myself to turn back over, looking at my bag. All my food was all over the place, not that I had much left at all, but a little piece of paper was now on the road. I saw little scribbles of black on it, and I grabbed it with a raw hand.

I never put any paper in my bag, and being so tight in the moment, I flipped it over just to glance, throw it over my shoulder, and take off again despite of my new, gnawing pain. But I found I could do no such thing. The font on the paper drawn in pen was light, gently, curly. I had to read the entire thing.

Hey Kori. Hope you don't mind, but I ate another granola bar. They were pretty good. Found a pen at the studio so I'm writing this so that you don't kill me. Oops.

~ xoxo, Artie.

Rain splattered onto the paper, already making the pen wash away into the white. A chill went up my spine then. He... he had to have written that only this morning. We had enjoyed the bars, very much... And I felt a great emptiness inside of me. If I read this when he was alive, I probably would be a great tease, hit him over the head, and smile as he laughed. But now, that could not happen. He was gone. It didn't matter anymore. And I thought if it made him happy- he could eat all of my food he wanted. This, of course, would never happen. And just that thought made me cry out and slam a fist onto the ground.

But the bytes were, in fact, gaining on me. I tried to tuck the paper away but it was turning to mush and seeped through my hands. I couldn't even get my bag together. On the ground was *The Great Gatsby* and in a final retaliation I shoved it under my shirt and squeezed it there. I stumbled to my feet- and painfully- desperate to escape the monsters coming for me. My feet went one in front of the other, trying to run, but my right ankle was killing me with each step and I was doing more of a flat hobble. I didn't put distance between the bytes and me but at the same time they weren't getting any faster.

I threw up a little bit in my mouth from the excruciating pain, inside and out. Every step made it worse and worse, but I promised to Artie I would make it. There was another bridge a few blocks up ahead. I could cross that. Then it was a straight run to the Willis Tower. There had to be people around here, right? I wouldn't have to go farther now. I imagine Artie's voice calling me out in my direction. I just had to follow his outline.

"They won't leave, Artie." I muttered, feeling a sickness in my stomach. "They won't stop. Won't stop. It hurts, Artie."

After an absolutely terrible minute, I made it to the bridge. It was still pouring and blurry, but I could tell this one had no bytes waiting for me. I stepped onto it, clenching a fist to keep my mind off of the terrible pain in my ankle. By now it was an extreme heat, making it feel like my skin swelled up to fill my shoe and the bone was splitting apart in little tiny pieces. Halfway over the bridge, it gave out, and I fell onto the ground. The rain on the cement leaked onto me, not that I wasn't wet enough already, and skidded towards the edge. In a few feet was water and was now rough from

the wind and weather. A few feet and I would be in, fighting for breath, sinking under...

But the bytes were now rounding the corner and I was running out of time. I made it back to my feet, desperately making way for the end. I ran harder and faster, even though my throat was dry and everything burned. My ankle got worse and worse with every charging step. But I began to put on distance.

The Willis Tower wasn't far off at all now. A few roads, and there it was. If I could fool the bytes... maybe I could make it. That was my plan. I dove right, making way for a further off, narrow alley instead of the main one in front of me. The rain masked me, and I flew into the opening, and was relieved to see that no bytes were in sight. The others weren't coming after me. I heard their footsteps go in the other direction, towards the main alley, then stop as if unsure, testing. I sighed in relief. I fooled them for now.

I walked forward into the gray. But this was not the gray I could walk right through that fell from the sky. A large chain link fence that went maybe nine feet up went across the alley, a large lock wrapped around it. I walked up to it, giving it a shake. Nothing. At that point, I felt the consequences of my actions. If my ankle wasn't broken while I was running, it was now. I could hardly breathe everything burned and I could hardly stand. I was dizzy, and felt terrible. And if things couldn't get worse, I heard the footsteps gradually come in my direction.

My body leaned up against the fence, and after the terrible run I just had, I began sliding down and eventually sat up against it. They could come, and at this point, I wouldn't care. Everything hurt. I tucked my knees up to my chest, falling to the left, lying in the cold, wet ground. I then began to cry.

I racked out sobs, my salty tears mixing with the raindrops. I shut my eyes closed, letting the coldness turn my entire body numb. Let them come.

“I’m so sorry, Artie.” I said, crying out the words as the footsteps got nearer and nearer. “I didn’t mean for this to happen, baby. I’m sorry. I’ll be seeing you. I’ll be seeing you, love.”

The air around me got colder and colder. The rain got harder and the wind got stronger. I could have chosen a better way to die. I suppose it would be nicer for me to go in a big, white bed surrounded by everyone I loved. Artie. Rosie. Maggie. Nat. But what was the purpose? In a split second, I would go from alive to dead. For a split second, it didn’t even matter. I would go and that would be it.

I shook my head, murmuring as the steps came up to me. “The death I never feared.” I started up again, thinking back to that poem that never left me. “Except that it deprived of thee, and now, by life deprived,” I cleared my throat, feeling a pinch of the next part. “In my own grave I breathe.”

Once in my younger days, my mother spent more than ten minutes on me in a single day. Now that I was fading out, my life was sort of reappearing to me piece by piece. Why this memory came to me, I’m not sure. But it began to play in my head. That one day, the one time my mother did something.

It was autumn and it had been a bleary one. It was as if the seasons went straight from summer to winter. The leaves fell much too fast and the temperature was either too hot or too cold. On one day, the leaves were nearly gone and it was colder than it ever was. I was nine or so, a very different Kori than what I was now. Besides always having my books [and I

would always carry one around with me] I was not yet introduced to the perils of life or truly growing up.

At the time, I had thick, brown bangs that hung over my head. My headbands would be gray or stony blue, and on this occasion I went with blue. My mother selected for me to have on a long, black buttoned coat that was itchy and went over a gray top and tights she dressed me in. My shoes were fancy little red ones instead of my choice these days of converse, and they had not a single scuff. My mother dressed much like me. She, too, wore a long black coat but hers was velvety and softer than mine. She had black tights, and brown boots, and this blankness on her face. When I came home from school, she told me I forget my studies, and get in the car. Since she never told me to forget my studies, I, confused, obliged.

She brought me into her personal Benz and seated me in the front seat for once. I could hardly see out the window and it felt much too big, but since I never got that opportunity, I took it graciously. Clicking my belt in, she started the car and drove off. But it was unusual, because she almost never brought me places without my rich father who made her feel like a celebrity. He always seemed too good for people, even me. Maybe he never felt like I was his own, or worth his time because I had been adopted when I was one. My mother could not have children, but she wanted someone to dress up and bring to dinner parties with her when it was older. Boy, wasn't I a disappointment for that cause?

We drove longer than we ever did. My mother never brought me far because I would get carsick from reading. But we went for well over an hour, me pestering her with where are we going, how much longer? But she never replied. She was a very bland person, for that matter. Never sad, never happy.

She was static and plain but had a doll face and long blonde hair, so it was no surprise my father ended up with her in the first place then. Now that I truly reflect on it, he never loved her. He only loved the thought of her.

It was over an hour before she took a turn and slowed down. I was groggy and sick after finishing my third Narnia book a third through the drive and just wanted to go home. But my mother rolled down the window, talking to someone before getting out of the car and opening my door for me. She pulled one of my dainty little hands, leading me under an eerie black arch as I hear crows yell out and cry in the background. It smelled awful and rotten, and after a little bit of walking I realized my mother had brought me to a cemetery.

I didn't know why. I didn't see the purpose. I just walked along with her, weaving around the rows of headstones and growing grass. I was young and had not yet grasped death, and the names on the stone didn't mean anything to me. I was bored and tired, so I decided to see the oldest grave I could find. I successfully found a little boy, dead from the flu in the 20's, before my mother brought me to a stop in front of a different stone.

This one was much more extraordinary than the rest. It was twice as high as the other graves all around us and it was a smooth, gentle eggshell white with indentations and designs all around it. It looked fresh, and the ground below our feet was all cut up and seed was laid down. I looked at the stone, which read William Down, and a death date that went to only a week ago.

“That's your grandfather.” My mother said simply.

I can't deny her words surprised me, but they had no affect. I met my grandfather once in my life, two thanksgivings ago. He looked fine and must have been attractive in younger days, like my mother. But he was bland like her except for an extraordinary talent to play the violin. Now that I think of it, my mother had been disappearing the last month. Worrying, never at the house. But she never told me he was gone, that it was my grandfather that was plaguing her.

"Sorry." I said simply, tapping a foot on the ground. I didn't know how to react. "Why did he die?"

"Ah... a..." She began to say, before looking at my innocent face and deciding for the better to keep it simple. "God decided."

"Why does God take people away if they make others happy?" I then asked her, confused.

My mother, poor woman, was caught off guard again. "God just has a time for everybody."

I shrugged, looking back at the grave. I think a person's headstone can tell a lot about a person when they were alive. It was obvious looking at my grandfathers that he was wealthy and a fancy man, probably one that wore suits on every occasion and I know for fact he did. His gray hair was always combed and gelled despite of his age, and he was always looking shiny. The white and size of the stone was, in a way, him. The bible quote on the very bottom in a small font was the winner. Even if I didn't know my grandfather, I could look at his grave and know him inside and out.

"Did you love him, mom?" I asked her, putting my hands behind my back and ceasing to kick the ground.

“Very much.” She said simply.

I looked at her, confused. “Well, then why aren’t you crying?”

She took me by the hand, keeping her face as flat as it normally was. She began to lead me away, patting me on the head. Her words after began to fade, not in the story but in my own conscious. My mind was changing. But I heard her. The final words.

“Sometimes its better to be strong than to be sad.”

My eyes shot open. The rain didn’t seem so loud anymore, or the wind so harsh. But around the turn, I could see the first byte slowly coming forward. Not seeing me yet. And I reflected back on the story. Being strong. Strong...

I quietly began to rise, throat and lungs no longer on fire. And as I did, something on my body clattered. I gulped, looking down at it. And there, on my wrist and having squeezed past the cuff on my sweater, was the silver braided bracelet Maggie gave to me.

“For myself. As a reminder of how strong you are. And that I need to be strong too.”

My mind was completely dumb for just a moment. My eyes absorbed the bracelet, the crisp lines and shiny color. Its last purpose was to keep Maggie’s scars from being revealed to the world so people could judge her and look past her secrets. But now it was mine, and I was forced to remember its old purpose for me. It was my reminder to be strong. All throughout my journey, I needed to be strong, right? I was still shaking, but no longer confused as I brought myself to my feet. I was lifted, more like. By Maggie, and Rosie, and Artie.

The noise startled the bytes and sent them staring in my direction. I was found, but ready. They began to run after me, but I had a power inside of me that they didn't. I had strength. Grinning and shaking my head at them, touching the silver braid one more time- I turned around to face the fence. My foot burned again but I had the will to ignore it. My hands grabbed at the metal, and I put my feet onto it too. The bytes were nearly upon me, but I began to climb. I left them in my wake, arms reaching and trying to grab my legs. I kicked at them with my good foot, and made it to the top.

As I sat up there, catching my breath, I gave the bracelet a little kiss. Its power given by all of my friends was beginning to save me. I spat at the bytes then, swinging myself over to the other side and beginning to climb down but carefully so they wouldn't grab me from the other side. With two feet left I dropped, another flash of pain going up my leg. But they were too dumb to look around and go another way. And I had made it.

"I did it, Artie." I breathed, as I turned and ran. "I'm doing it for you."

I was alive but barely breathing. I was just so tired and so in pain, but I had the will to move. There was nobody in my way. The Willis Tower wasn't far at all. If I made it down a few more roads, I would be there. I could see it in entirety now. I would be safe there, just like the radio told us. The rain began to dim, but so did my energy. Now that I got passed the bytes, nothing was chasing me and I began to slow down. I was so tired now. Up ahead, there was an overturned truck with clouds of cotton and blankets all spilled out. That looked very comfy right now. I survived, that was good.

I slowed to a walk, limping over to the white mess. After a bit, I was hobbling and ready to keel over. Everything got fuzzy and warm. I would

just sleep for a while now, and then I would make it to the tower. Nothing was going to get me now. I was strong, stronger than any enemy.

At last, I made it to the pile of cotton and let myself fall. I took the stress off of my legs and closed my eyes straight away. It was wonderfully comfy, and the world faded away. I made it. I got past them.

“Sweet dreams, Artie.” I said.

And then nothing more.

A smell of rotten food, voices, and cold is what eventually brings me out of my slumber. I right away only feel a numbness in my foot, no pain, and my stomach is completely empty. When I open my eyes slowly, its day and I know I must have slept for at least twenty four hours. When I look to my sides, I'm not in blankets and cotton. I'm lying splayed out in trash bags, some filled with food. Thankfully, I find *The Great Gatsby* to still be under my shirt, and it's soggy but still alive.

I want to rise, but I can hear talking a little in front of me. This makes me get a chill, and lean back in the trash. Talking...? Bytes don't talk.

Bytes don't talk.

The very thought of it makes me do a double take and look back in front of me. There are three men standing a few yards in front of me, all in the same sort of clothes. They looked to be in thirties, but gruff, wearing hats and big furry coats. Two had bats, and the tallest one was holding a shotgun. Their skin wasn't yellow and their eyes weren't red. They appeared completely healthy.

"I don't know, what if she's been bit?" The shotgun man said. "She's so pale... There's a lot of blood on her. We don't know if it's safe."

"If she got bit she'd be turned yellow and sagging, dumbass." One of the bat boys said. He was lean and had a soft, kind face. "She's just a kid, she doesn't look bit to me. Come on."

"I don't want to take any chances!" Shotgun man said. "You think she's safe? Go on. Touch her."

The skinny man huffed and puffed, slowly padding towards me as the other two men stood and watched. As he did this, I moved in alarm. I scooted backwards, and that sends the men leaping back as alarmed as me. I guess they thought I was still sleeping. I looked at them funny, throwing my glance back and forth. The shotgun hovering at me feet didn't make me feel all that comfortable, either. I tried reaching for a fire axe that wasn't there, and the skinny man then came at me again, put holding his hands out gently.

“Shh, girl, are you bit? You ok?” He asked, tucking his bat behind him. Shotgun man rolled his eyes.

I shook my head. He started up again. “Alright. What's your name? You ok? Who's blood is that?”

I gulped, tears beginning to trickle from my eyes. I didn't know these men and I didn't trust them, except for skinny man. But it was certain that they weren't infected and I was more than certain I was alive as well. I bit my lip, contemplating whether to answer at their bidding. In the end, I did.

“Kori.” I said quietly. “I'm Kori. I just... I'm fine. I'm sorry. I'll be off, I need to get to the Willis Tower.”

I began to get to my feet, but a jolt in my ankle sent me back down. At that point, the skinny man came onto the trash bags beside me. He pushed my hair back, grabbing my hand and helping me up. I staggered upwards, face turning red and eyes even redder. I wiped at the tears that slowly fell, and he looked back at me.

“No rush, girl. We're going to the same place. You're safe with us. But you don't look so good, you ok?” Skinny man asked, helping me walk out from the trash bag mess.

“I just lost somebody.” I said, mind totally blank.

“We all lost people, too.” Shotgun man said as he put his gun away.
“We hope to find them at the tower.”

I wanted to oblige, say there was no way, but skinny man spoke again.
“Oh, sorry for the late introduction, Kori. I’m Dan. Bastard with the shotgun is Cal and that over there is Mitch, but Mitch don’t talk.” He pointed at the quiet man with facial hair standing off by himself. “I heard they got working water at the tower. You can get that blood cleaned off of you.”

Once more, I shrugged and limped off a few paces. Cal looked at me funny, probably thinking on how someone like me would get a broken foot, but Dan kept my hold and allowed me to keep some weight off of it. I gulped, then using a hand to rub off the dry, caked blood on my arms that was a remnant of Artie. But his memory and picture were in my heart. And that was all I needed to keep me going.

“Alright, come on.” Cal said, turning around and making way down the road. “Its just ahead. I need a shower.”

As I walked off with them, I wasn’t surprised they made it this far. They were grown men, fit men. They all looked like they had seen a fair share of crazy stuff, even Dan. Cal looked like a fighter. Dan had intelligence. And Mitch just had a tough air about him. Though I met them within the minute, I felt safe. And the tower was so close. It was at the end of the road now.

We went off, making way slowly because of me. Dan stayed with me the entire time. He kept telling me little things in my ear about Mitch and Cal and he tried to joke about his journey thus so far but I didn’t hear any of

it. My mind was all over and I was exhausted still. My foot was enough to keep me off focus of anything and the blood was the ultimate distraction to me. If my eyes began to close in discomfort, I would move my fingers over to the little braid and be reminded it would only be minutes now until we hit the entrance.

Dan was a curious person. If we was my age, a senior in high school, I could see him being that awkward lean kid who people liked anyway because of his cheesy jokes and wit. I could see him doing a sort of an art group or be head of some big name club. He probably was a helpless romantic, as I could see in his blue, dreamy eyes, and if I could guess was a fan of Shakespeare.

After a while, the Willis Tower was large and just ahead of us. There were barriers of tables, bags of sand, and whatever people wanted wrapped all around. There were a few people leaning against the barricades, looking out with binoculars and guns. When one looked at us, Cal waved, speeding up to prove he wasn't diseased like the rest of us. But that was obvious. The guards didn't make any move to intercept us or raise their guns. They allowed us to come, and I was relieved. My mind was at ease now, relief spreading all throughout my body. A block, and my promise would be complete to Artie. That I made it to the tower, and was safe.

Dan grabbed me around the shoulder and nearly lifted me off of my feet the rest of the way. He seemed as happy and relieved as I did, and wanted to keep up with Cal who lusted to make it through the doors. I let Dan move me all the way up to the barricades, where Cal instantly began to talk to one of the guards who now that I could see, was dressed for the job. He had a helmet and bulletproof vest, and under that, I could see the blue

shirt and it struck me he must be a police officer. Now that we made it, god bless, I could listen.

“Yeah, they spread so fast that they completely overrun everybody. This is the only safe house we know of around here... Apparently New York is in a state of war with the bastards. Well, its calm in here. Is everyone alright?” He asked, tucking his gun away. “We have medics. But if someone’s been bit...”

“Just a broken ankle.” Cal looked back at me. “No disease.”

The police officer shrugged, opening a little gate that was enforced into the barricades. We were let in, and I was shaking now. I was cold but my insides were warm. I made it for Artie. I made his promise. I would be safe now, and everything would be ok. I bit my lip, uncomfortable and itching to get inside. I just wanted to sleep for days now.

“We’ve gotten people from all over.” The officer exclaimed, examining us one by one as we made it inside. “Whatever the hell is happening hit everywhere. Countries lost connection. Its crazy, man. The few people that make it are usually in bad shape. We’ve had to reject a lot of bitten people.”

Cal nodded along, handing his shotgun to the officer who checked it and handed it back. “We’ve had our hands full, but we’re fine. Just a little stuffy. Just had a big group come last night.”

I could now tell Cal had ceased listening to the officer. He looked as though he was itching to get inside, get food, see if his friends were alive. I was the same. At that point, I stopped listening as well. I was tired, cold, and hungry. My heart was split in two and a bracelet and a beautiful memory

were the only reasons I was here standing. The trio thought they might see people they must have lost somewhere along the journey. But here I was different. The people I lost were lost for good.

After five minutes or so of droning exercises and cop talk, he led us to the front doors. After a little check and pause, he opened them up and led us inside. At first, its quiet, and I realize everyone in there looked at us all. It was full, and I'd never seen so many healthy people in a place at once. They were leaning against walls, sad eyes and beat in faces. Some sipped tea in their jackets and scarves, others ate chunks of bread.

The refugees were simply lost souls. After a bit of looking at us, possibly praying we were someone they knew, they went back to their gentle murmurs and drinking. A few people stepped down from upstairs, but otherwise everything was plain. But it was safe. I was safe. I made it for Artie. I would be alright here. I rubbed my hands into my eyes. I was safe.

“They might be here.” I heard Dan say, walking forward and stepping about. “You said you lost someone Kori. You think they might be here.”

I shook my head, looking blankly. “No, he... he...”

I would have finished, but something caught my eye to my left. When I turn I realized there's hurt looking people laying down and against the walls, and people in white were working at them. Medics. The officer said they had medics. I stared at them all, not helping but think how lucky they were to plainly make it here alive. My fingers then wandered to the silver braid. Like me, they were strong.

But something could not pull my eye from it. One nurse in particular. In her hands was a towel that appeared wet and she had gauze in the other.

She had this slight smile and a kind eye, and she looked like she was talking slight words to the person she was working on. But this person was not replying. I could look past some of the people blocking my view, but I saw enough. I could see a boy with a nice, fit body leaning against the wall. He has a scar on his collarbone, and doesn't wear a shirt because he has a bandage wrapped all over his abdomen and it's stained slightly. He's a little hot and sweaty, but awake and alive. And I notice he's staring right at me, eyes getting glossy and widening bigger and bigger, the color of dark, muddy green with flecks of brown and blue. His hair is the color of bronze and shiny as gold, and curls slightly but is still in impeccable shape. And his lips are soft, gently smiling with reassurance and I know that face. I know it and I've always known it and it's the only one I've ever wanted to see.

Artie.

Some time in September

*I'm alright now. After getting here a week ago... I'm truly alright. I'm not a wreck. I'm not in pain anymore and I'm at peace. The food is fine and nights are warm. And I owe this to Artie. He was who made me promise to get here and I did. And that week ago when I got here made everything ok again. Because there he was. Hurt, but alive. I couldn't believe it at first because the day before that, hadn't he been dead in my arms? But he wasn't, not quite. When I left, the footsteps weren't what I thought. People found Artie on his dying breath. They brought him here. Sure, he was holding on by a thread all through that night and everyone thought he would die- but he's Artie. He's stronger than anyone I know. And when I got there the day after, he was just coming back to consciousness and the second we saw each other I ran forward and I held him and hugged him for as long as I knew and I just let everything out and he would pat me on the back, kiss me on the cheek. Telling me how strong I was. I didn't leave his side until he was able to get up and make it to one of the upper floors where it was quiet and the tea was nice. And ever since then, when I think back to the awful days leading up to this and begin to form tears, he holds me tight and never lets go until I'm fine again. And when he wakes up in pain I'm right there as well, to stroke his hair and hold his hand, blowing kisses until he's alright again. We're all that we have left. Artie then found a pen and paper for me and said I should write down whatever is on my mind every night before we sleep in each other's arms. Writing was a dream of mine, after all. I said I would. Artie and I also began to finish our production of *The Great Gatsby*. He taught me to trust and be strong with all my heart and I know I still owe*

him. And I say, before I write off tonight, that Artie can eat all the granola bars he wants.

Kori