Valley of the Shadow of Death

by paxbanana

Summary

Dina, Ellie, Sarah, and Joel are caught up in the cycle of hatred. There is power in giving yourself over wholly to the task of destroying evil by taking on its guise, even if you have to give yourself up in the process.

Notes

I'm not guessing where the game will go. (I think a few conclusions in this story are remarkably wrong too.) However, the themes, characters, and groups that have been hinted at so far really grabbed my muse. So here we go again.
Ellie woke up with a gasp when Tommy pounded on the door of the faded pink house she shared with Joel. Joel swore as he tromped downstairs, and Ellie looked outside into the darkness. Joel finally shouted, “I’m coming, goddammit!”

Over a rushed, standing breakfast, Tommy announced the reason for his arrival. “Nearly forty head of cattle wandering down Broadway.”

Funny how one open gate could bring things to a standstill in Jackson.

“I have patrol,” Ellie protested out of obligation. When Tommy fixed her with his stern stare, she didn’t protest again. Patrol had never been considered anything more than a volunteer side job, and today Ellie’s real task superseded Jesse’s armed route.

The patrol, including Jesse and Dina, was sure to leave on time, and Ellie would have to catch up later. Part of her was glad for the reprieve; she hadn’t been on patrol with both of them since she and Dina got together a few months before. Dina could joke her way through the situation with her ex, but Ellie was sure it would be painfully awkward for her. Jesse was still cool towards her; she didn’t want a regression.

She pulled on her work boots instead of her patched sneakers and tied a bandana over her mouth. Ellie’s work horse was already saddled by the time the sun came up enough to illuminate the herd kicking up dust and mayhem in the middle of Jackson proper.

No one could get to their tasks safely like this, and the dust would choke them for a week. Ellie whistled to the dogs and followed her boss, Jerry, as he directed the horsemen and dogs. They gradually herded the cattle back into the fields that butt up against Jackson’s residential streets.

It took nearly three hours to finish the task. Jerry’s small crew of horsemen joked with each other about which of them left the gate open. When they turned to Ellie, she rolled her eyes. “I was with Dina yesterday and last night.”

Deepak whistled a catcall, confusing the dogs, and laughter rang out from the men. “Of course your girl’ll defend you.”

“Later,” Ellie called as she turned her horse in the direction of the barn.

The matter of what fucking moron left the gate open would have to be handled without her. She tended to her horse before she jogged across town to the wall. She didn’t bother to change out of her hot work boots, but she did peel her gloves off and pulled down her bandana.

She checked out her pistol and a half-full magazine of .22LR at the wall and was on her way to the rendezvous point for midday.

Though she made it on time to their check station at midday, the patrol was nowhere to be seen. Ellie waited for fifteen minutes before the itch of unease set in. She told herself she was being paranoid but began to scout anyway. She found the blood only a few blocks away, and her unease crystallized into fear. Then she saw Lori, another patroller, dead in the street with an arrow through her throat.

The blood trail continued, and Ellie followed it as quickly and quietly as she could for another quarter mile. Then she came upon them. Ellie took a sharp breath as she studied the scene. Her
stomach dropped and her throat tightened as she accepted her reality.

There were several bound and bloodied figures huddled against a lamp post. Surrounding them was a group of people wearing brown coats. There was something irregular about them that filled Ellie with deep unease.

They were uniform in a way she hadn’t seen since Boston QZ. It was like a hillbilly set of FEDRA checkpoint soldiers, all done up in the same way, moving with the same military precision.

Ellie’s breathing went heavy as she watched for their captives to move. She tried to put names to all three of them. The rest of the patrol, bound and gagged, was moving enough to mean they weren’t dead. The smallest… Fuck, Dina was alive. Alive if not entirely whole.

Ellie counted six enemies. She stared at the braids and bald pates. They didn’t look like typical marauders, but they were the ones here. Within a minute of Ellie’s arrival, they put Weston in a noose, yanked him up off the ground by his neck, and set a bucket beneath him. The tips of his boots balanced on the bottom of the bucket as he panted in fear. A second noose was thrown over a lamppost, and it was clearly for Dina.

Ellie didn’t have time to get reinforcements. She hadn’t checked out a rifle from Jackson, and goddammit why had she let herself get complacent? Why had she been thinking of this patrol as a time to get away and take a break? Fucking chickenshit moron.

She drew her switchblade, flicked it open, and crept through the tall grass that broke through the cracked concrete. She made a soft noise as one man glanced in her direction, and his brow furrowed as he approached. He was small enough that she maybe could…

Ellie sprang out of the grass and seized him by the neck, pressing her blade against his skin. “Let them go!”

The bigger man that carried a giant hammer lumbered forward. He didn’t slow even as Ellie yelled her threat. The man in her arms jerked, and Ellie slammed her blade into his throat before dodging away from the flailing swing of the big man. She pulled out her pistol and put a bullet in his skull before turning her gun—

“Enough,” came a quiet command. Then fire punched through her shoulder and another buckled her leg. Ellie cried out. She’d panicked. She’d fucking panicked. She collapsed in the grass and tried to move away, but two enemies seized her by the arms, flinging her gun away. One of them hit her in the head, and her sight faded momentarily. She came back to awareness with blood and saliva dripping from her mouth onto the dusty ground.

“Emily, shall we prepare her too?”

There was a woman crouched over her. She pushed Ellie’s head back and studied her silently. Ellie focused on her face with effort and stared at the scars on her cheeks. What had caused them? Emily asked her, “Are there others?”

Ellie spat blood in her face. Emily’s chest rose and fell as she wiped her face, but Ellie’s sight went out as the world dimmed around her. They’d hit her in the face again. She shook her head, turned and latched onto the hand of the man beside her with her teeth. She needed time.

Emily drew her knife, pinning Ellie with a withering stare—such an out of place normal expression for this situation—and approached Weston. Ellie couldn’t think of anything at all to say except, “I’m infected!”
Their captors stilled and turned back. “I’m infected,” she said again, panting hard. “My arm. Under the tattoo. I just infected you, bitch. And you!” She sneered at the man was oozing from the bite wound.

Emily sheathed her knife and nodded to her men; they threw Ellie on her back onto the ground. The arrows jerked inside her, and her head swam. She screamed despite herself. They yanked up her sleeve, and Emily stroked the skin under the tattoo and tilted Ellie’s arm back and forth as she studied it. The movement strained the arrow in her arm even more, and Ellie groaned in pain.

“How long ago?” Emily’s eyes glittered with naked lust.

This wasn’t the reaction she’d wanted, but it was buying them time to figure out how to get out of this mess. The hands clamped on her arms didn’t slacken with shock. These men were disciplined. “Five years,” Ellie said, her gaze darting back and forth to find any weapons in reach. None, just a machete strapped to the tall man’s back.

Then Emily yanked her attention back as she raised her voice to intone, “Blessed are they who are marked by the Lamb! The Holy Spirit is within this one. Another to enter the flock.”

This was some kind of fucking joke. A nightmare. This couldn’t be reality, not when the three men around them all intoned the same words as the woman, and all of them chorused ‘Amen’. Ellie’s gut dropped. She gazed at Emily in horror as she sank back down on her haunches, her eyes glittering in joy. She hissed with apparently pleasure. “You dare cover the Mark of the Lamb?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“This is salvation.” Emily yanked Ellie’s arm up, and Ellie screamed as the arrow twisted in her flesh.

“Fuck. Yeah, salvation. The Fireflies wanted to kill me to make a cure.” Ellie tried not to look at Jesse or Dina, hoping they could find a way to free themselves and Weston as Ellie kept this woman occupied. Her thoughts streamed by too fast to gather into any sort of plan. “I didn’t want to die for a petri dish.”

Emily’s mouth tightened. “They know nothing of how to spread this blessing across the world. One must protect immunity, not kill it.”

“If you think I’m some kind of blessed person, then let my friends go. Take me, not them.” She was pleading, shaking and terrified of what would come.

Emily looked like she was considering it. She stroked Ellie’s scar again. “I don’t carry your mark, but I am a Lamb, sent to reap the sin and weakness from this world. We will triumph over sin by the blood of the Lamb. No one can love their lives so much as to shrink from death in this task.”

She drew her knife, and turned to Weston with intent. Ellie jerked on the ground, her screams rising high, “No! No, no! No!”

Emily sank her knife into Weston’s gut, and he screamed over the sound of wet flesh cracking. The sound of rain and scent of viscera flooded Ellie’s nostrils. Dina was screaming through a gag, twisting away from the blood that splattered onto the concrete beside her.

Weston died quickly, but not quickly enough. Ellie’s gaze darted from Emily to Dina, and she struggled. Jesse took a blow to the head when he lunged off the ground. Then they put a noose around Dina’s neck and jerked her off the ground to balance on the bloody bucket. Ellie thrashed, and her hearing went out for a long moment when she was hit in the head.
Then panic made her cry, “Don’t! She’s immune too!”

Emily’s withering glare was back as if she hadn’t just eviscerated a human being. She turned away from Dina, her hands and blade covered in blood. “Does she bear the mark?”

“I infected her with the cure! Everything we could share we did. Everything. Please, don’t kill her! I’ll do whatever you want. Just don’t kill her.”

Emily turned back to study Ellie. Dina rocked back and forth on the noose, her dark eyes wide in terror. Ellie didn’t give a fuck what happened to herself as long as Dina lived, and she tried to convey that with her look. I’ve got you. I’ll do anything for you. Just fight and live.

Emily sheathed her wet knife again, bent down, and seized Ellie’s neck with a hand that stank of blood and bowel. Her fingertips were sticky and warm, and the scent and hard grip made Ellie gag. Then Emily’s mouth was over hers in an invasive kiss. Ellie tried to bite her, but Emily’s grip tightened, wrenching Ellie into a gag so hard she vomited when Emily let her go. The arrows inside her were agony, and things started to soften around the corners. Ellie was thirsty and cold and desperate, her heartbeat a high flutter in her throat, and her sight was graying at the corners.

“You’ll make a worthy mother,” Emily murmured, stroking Ellie’s cheek tenderly.

The retort of a rifle split the silence, and one of the men collapsed. “Mahlon!” one of the group shouted.

They ducked under cover as another bullet zipped through the street. Emily cut Dina down from her noose and yanked her to her feet. The man with her struck Jesse across the face hard enough to drop him and lunged behind cover at Emily’s call: “Leave that one! Bring the women!”

The remaining scarred man—who was big enough to carry a horse—grabbed Ellie and began to drag her as he followed Emily and Dina. Another shot rang out. He dropped Ellie and fell on her in death, and Ellie lost most of her awareness of the world as his weight crushed her. The last thing she saw framed through Weston’s guts was Dina’s desperate reach towards her.
The Lost Lamb

Don’t let them startle. Don’t please don’t…

After being gagged so tightly she choked and beaten enough to lose all resistance, Dina’s biggest immediate terror was of the horses she was tied between. Her arms were bound tightly behind her back, and she was forced to march herself senseless, each arm tied to a separate horse. Each step added to her fear that she would be strung up and gutted at the end of their journey, compounding the immediate terror that the two horses would startle in opposite directions. She balanced on the knife edge of terror and panic during the endless hours of that first day.

She collapsed when they released her from the horses, senseless until darkness crept over them. Somewhere behind the filter of exhaustion, she heard them setting up a quiet camp. Distantly, Dina recognized that her pocket knife had been stripped from her before they left. Why had she thought of it…? To cut her bonds. She couldn’t without a knife. She only had her feet.

In the night, Dina stirred enough to make a bid for escape, but she was thrown down within forty feet. The couple that captured her joked to each other they hadn’t even had to whistle an alarm. Dina struggled, screamed around her gag, and thrashed as they dragged her into the light of a small lantern. The woman sitting by that light made Dina freeze in terror.

The woman who had gutted Weston shot Dina a withering stare over her glasses. Dina couldn’t forget the name attached to her horror: Emily. She was writing in a book with an old graphite pencil. She used the same knife she’d killed Weston with to sharpen her pencil. It was such an unbelievably mundane activity for someone that had pulled out another person’s guts.

Emily nodded to the people who had dragged Dina to her. Dina was tied to a tent pole—a heavy, unmoving thing wedged deep in the hard soil—and the others melted into the darkness. Emily crouched down in front of Dina, her dark eyes catching a glint of the lantern. She reached out to remove Dina’s gag. “Do you know why I didn’t reap you?”

“Reap?” Dina was too scared to do more than parrot her words. Just that one word trembled like a sheep’s bray. Emily studied her without answering, but they both knew what she meant. Dina wanted to be brave. She wanted to snap a smartass reply and stare death in the face without flinching. Instead, she lowered her gaze and shook her head meekly.

“Because even the slimmest chance at immunity must be protected and cultured…though I suppose she could have been lying, your paramour.”

Dina’s fear kept its vice hold on her neck. Emily studied her with her dark, impenetrable gaze. “Immunity should be cultured, but try my patience, and you will prove your sin is greater than your redemption.”

When she leaned close, Dina jerked away. She remembered that ugly kiss Emily devoured Ellie with. God, Ellie… Emily pressed her canteen to Dina’s lips, and Dina’s body betrayed her. She drank deeply, guzzling water that tasted sweet after twelve hours without.

“Sleep,” Emily commanded. “We continue our crusade tomorrow.”

The ground was cold, and she shivered herself awake through the short night. She thought abstractly of working at her bonds, but her hands were too numb and too weak. It was a relief in a way when one of the Seraphites kicked her and yanked her to her feet the next morning. They
released her bonds to tie her wrists in front of her. Her arms shrieked from her shoulders to her fingertips as blood redistributed. Joints creaked and muscles unfroze.

She was exhausted and terrified at the start of the day, and each step away from Jackson built her fear, leadened her feet, and weakened her mind. She lost sight of her reality, of what would be best for her survival. By the time dusk fell, she couldn’t think of anything but the animal fear that made her feet churn in escape.

Her exhaustion made her slow and clumsy, and she fell on her own within fifteen feet of the camp. She sobbed on her side, her cheeks scraped raw by pine needles. Her guards moved efficiently but didn’t rush as they collected her by her upper arms and dragged her back. This time, Dina was thrown into a hastily unfolded cage and locked inside. It was a wire crate, the kind that Tommy put his dogs in at night. It smelled like blood, excrement, and terror.

She dozed with her face pressed up against the cold crate bars. She couldn’t fight sleep despite her terror, her sweat-soaked clothing, and the painful angle her arms had frozen in with her bindings. She dreamed of a soft bed, sweet berries, and a salty cut of venison jerky in between waking to her reality. All through it, an old song crooned in her ear:  *Hold on... You’ve gotta ho—ld on...*

Emily didn’t come see Dina that night. A different scarred woman sat down across the cage wires from Dina, waking her enough to draw her focus. Her dark skin shone brown in the yellow lamp light, and her scars were even deeper than Emily’s. She offered food and water; Dina’s body betrayed her when she gorged herself.

“I’ve been where you are,” the big woman said quietly.

Fuck you! was Dina’s first thought. She stopped chewing and tears rose up to choke her. The food caught as she swallowed.

The woman’s smile creased her scars. Maybe she’d guessed Dina’s thoughts. “Do you know what she’ll do to you?”

Dina thought of Weston and the vulgar sound of his guts slapping the pavement. She stilled. The woman’s accent was a smooth drawl, pleasant despite the words. “Hanging and gutting are easier than what apostates get. Have you heard of crucifixion? Emily considers breaking the arms first a mercy. Never seen anyone thank her for it.”

As Dina digested that horror, the woman continued to smile. “Thought so. Easier to think of dying when it’s just a bullet to the head, but it won’t happen that way. So keep going to find life with us or die the agony of the reaping. No other choice. Believe me, I’ve seen others try and fail again and again. You may find happiness here, but you’ll only find death without us.”

“And how...would I do that?”

“Take our prayers, worship our god, and accept our scars. Stop trying to escape in body.”

Dina met the woman’s gaze, and she saw honesty staring back at her. She took a moment to ponder the emphasis on the last two words. “Who are you?”

“Hannah. Do you accept?”

There never really was a choice. She couldn’t escape, not like this, but she’d be damned if she died before rescue. “I accept.”

Hannah reached out to unlock Dina’s cage, cut her bonds, and offered her hand. Dina took it, and
Hannah helped her stand. That night, Dina was allowed to sleep in a warm bedroll. She thought of the death Hannah described and knew that any attempt to escape that night would be met with a timely but slow death.

She would have to bide her time, hope for rescue, and give these people what they wanted as long as she needed to survive. The last thought she had that night was to ponder how much of a coward that made her.

In Jackson, Dina was never afforded the opportunity to define bravery and fear for herself. She’d always considered Samson, David, and Ruth to be as much examples of bravery as Ellen Ripley, Cheyenne, and John McClane. Her grandmother would probably tut and then laugh her head off if she’d known Dina classified the Bible with the movies Jackson put on in the old church.

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” Bobeshi closed her Bible, and Dina leaned close to breathe in the musty scent of the old book. Many years later, she learned the horrors that mortals could inflict, but at the time, humans always seemed an innocuous threat. After a moment Bobeshi said, “I heard you tell your brother he wasn’t being brave this afternoon, Dina.”

“He was scared of a little pony,” Dina scoffed.

“So were you at his age. Did Samson get on it?”

Dina conceded that he had. Bobeshi squeezed her hand gently. “Then I’d say he was brave.”

“But he was scared!”

“Bravery isn’t the absence of fear, Dina; it’s facing what scares us.” Bobeshi’s tone suggested she was conveying great wisdom. Dina fingered the leather cord on her wrist as she considered the truth. Nearly a decade later, Dina still remembered the wash of understanding that swept her that day.

There wasn’t much in Jackson to truly afford testing her own bravery. Small things were scary, quiet bumps in the night, and the illusion of fear only came with movies and books or for greater things, like when Bobeshi died. Even patrol felt safe, especially now that Dina knew what truth terror was.

She’d always wondered what rattled Ellie. Nothing seemed to shake her, not when Dina’s brother split his forehead open, when she was sneaking past a pack of infected, or when she’d put a nail straight through her own palm fixing a roof with Joel. The night after Dina’s grandmother had died a rattling, rasping death, Dina snuck away with Ellie for respite from the well-wishing kindness of Jackson. They’d sat together in an abandoned building on the south side of town and shared whiskey, and Dina had broached the uncertain topic of Ellie’s past.

“What scares you?”

Ellie’s shoulder shifted beneath Dina’s head, and her hair brushed Dina’s neck as she shook the whiskey bottle in an unvoiced question. Dina took a sip. “Scorpions are creepy.” Ellie’s smile was gentle as she shook off her own attempt at a joke. “Being alone. Losing...people.”

“Like me?”

“Yeah,” Ellie murmured softly. Dina wrapped an arm around her shoulder to drag her into a tight embrace, and Ellie uncharacteristically squeezed her closer.
“Joel?”

Ellie released a world-weary sigh and rested her temple against Dina’s head. “Yeah... Like I said. What about you?”

“I mean, I like Joel.”

Ellie snorted. “No, dickhead. What are you scared of?”

“That I won’t be brave when I have the chance.”

“Bravery is overrated. You just realize what you have to do, and you do it. It’s not brave. It’s just...surviving.” They were quiet for a few minutes, then Ellie murmured, “I had this conversation before, with someone Joel and I met coming over here.”

It was the first time Ellie willingly volunteered information about her past. Dina hesitated before asking, “Who was it?”

“Sam. Sam and Henry. They were brothers, good people. He…” Her breath jerked her chest as she sighed. She took a swig of whiskey. “He got infected. His brother killed him, and then he shot himself.”

“God, Ellie…”

Ellie shook her head, and Dina felt her grief for her grandmother open up to encompass the girl sitting beside her. She wished she could undo all the things that put that dark weight on Ellie, but the undoing would unravel Ellie too. Maybe this was all Ellie needed: to air it out a little at a time, to know she could trust Dina with her past. Dina wanted to know, even if the truth was ugly.

It occurred to her that day that maybe Ellie’s act of bravery was that trust.

When their party caught up with a much larger group, Dina was confused by its contrast to the dozen armed men and women that had escorted her from Jackson. The majority of the central population of the cult was women and children. There was comradery, social structure, supplies, food, cooperation, and more laughter than Dina could ever imagine for their violence.

She had entertained thoughts of escape before, but in the midst of their numbers, she knew it would be impossible. Instead of braving uncertain escape, she submitted. She bathed with them, dressed like them, wore her hair like them, ate with them, and slept with them. At the end of the week, Dina attended her first worship service with them, hopeful when she realized they had some kind of faith.

She should’ve known better.

The prayers of the cult were foreign words in her mouth. Dina thought of her God, the benevolent God that gave man his commandments and asked only for holiness through them. She had lived her life by those principles: being good, remaining honest, and obeying the commandments that her grandmother had instilled in her.

Some echoes of the religion she knew came through: Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Worship only the one true God. Give unto your brothers and sisters as you would have them give unto you.

But then came the others: reap sin from this world. Plant your seed to bring holy progeny to repopulate the Earth. Hold immunity as the greatest blessing of all. All others are to be reaped from
the earth.

Dina took their prayers, and in return, Emily gave her a name: Leah. Leah, Biblical Dinah’s mother. After she accepted their prayers on the Seventh Day after her kidnapping, Dina also accepted their mark in front of the congregation that held its breath as they watched the knife prepared.

Emily’s hands were as sure with the knife as Dina’s grandmother had been with leather. She passed the hot blade across Dina’s left cheek then her right, intoning, “Turn the other cheek” in a morbid parody of the original Christian verse.

The sharp knife passed from her ears to her lips, blooming pain a millisecond after the touch. Dina’s strangled cry of pain was the only sound in the tent as the knife marked her. As she lay gasping and nauseated from the knowledge of her mutilation, the congregation sang a hymn. It took the second verse before Dina realized they were singing some warped version of Lamb of God. She cried silently as she took her seat at the front of the congregation. Her blood ran hotter than her tears.

The young woman next to her took her hand and squeezed, her grimace of a smile sympathetic. “You did well.” She cradled her baby close, and after the next prayer, she stood to offer it to Emily. Emily cradled the baby in her bloody hands and baptized him with water taken out of a tarnished silver bowl. “The Blood of the Lamb anoints you, little Job.”

The congregation intoned, “The Blood of the Lamb dyes white our garments, and he crowns us in gold.”

“Blessed be this child. Take him into your gentle embrace, and protect him from the sin of this world. As Our Holy Mother said before us…”

“Blessed be,” the congregation intoned.

The baby began to cry. Based on the sound he was only a few months old. Emily raised him up so the congregation could see his sweet face contorted in tears, and then she returned him to his mother. The mother and Emily exchanged words too quietly for the congregation to hear, but Dina could make out Emily saying, “He’s beautiful, Rachel.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Emily reached out to pat the girl on the shoulder, and the girl’s smile was shy as she returned to her seat next to Dina. Dina gazed at the baby, wondering why Emily even used water to baptize him when she left bloody handprints on his smock.

After the service ended, Emily approached Dina to study her work. Her dark gaze communicated satisfaction as her hands cradled Dina’s jaw. Her thumbnail scratched Dina as she rubbed away a tear-track from Dina’s face. “Pain of the flesh is nothing, child. You have received the blessing of protection from the evils of this world. You are a Seraphite. Take pride. There is pleasure in pain.”

It was like some kind of fucking sexual fetish. Take pleasure in your mutilation, Dina.

Dina lowered her eyes. Coward, her soul hissed at her. Ellie would have spat in the woman’s face and mocked them as they nailed her to a cross.

Dina couldn’t eat and could barely drink for the pain in her face. Crying opened her wounds so she controlled her sobs. Their one mercy was to excuse her from any duties that day though the head cook let her know she was expected to fulfill her duties starting the next day.
Dina blinked out silent tears through the agony of the first night, her cheeks radiating hot pain across her skull. The salt of her tears added sharp stinging over the dull pulses of agony; it was almost a relief. It hurt to smile, to talk, and even to cry, but she was expected to endure it without complaint and thank them for the chance.

Endure or die, but what was the point of dying now that she’d given this up?

Seven days after they cut her from lip to ear, Dina watched a child scarred in the same way. He cried silently and thanked Emily for drawing the knife through his cheeks. She sang that strange version of *Lamb of God* for him, and his smile was a grimace as he took his place at the front of the congregation.

Was this their life?

For the first time since it all had started, it dawned on Dina that she’d decided even this life was worth more than death.

On the second Saturday of her capture, Dina sat down with Rebecca, one of Emily’s High Matriarchs, who told her of her other duties to the cult. She had been paired with a young man named Mark and was expected to open her legs for him every sixth night that she wasn’t bleeding and he wasn’t on patrol.

In disbelief, Dina followed Rebecca to a small tent, and she stared at the young man waiting there as he stared back at her. He seemed as nervous as she was numb. Dina wondered if he’d been given a lesson on how to orgasm inside her or suffer the consequences.

Odd that it was easier to accept him than the scars on her cheeks. Dina closed her eyes and thought of Jackson for the first time since her capture. She’d been too exhausted to draw into her memories before, but as Mark moved within her awkwardly, his weight heavy and his unfamiliar smell in her nostrils, she thought of Ellie. She imagined Ellie rocking against her thigh, stroking Dina’s breasts with that look of open shock on her face, like she couldn’t believe the gift Dina was giving her. She’d made Dina feel like a goddess every time they’d been together.

Mark grunted and quietly asked, “Am I hurting you?”

The memory broke. Dina shook her head. “Hurry. I’m tired.”

He went wide-eyed in alarm, and Dina closed her eyes. She scrambled to pull her memory back and instead recalled the first time she’d seen Ellie. Dina had been hanging out with Jesse that afternoon, distracting him from his post on a watchtower, but in classic Jesse form, he’d been annoyingly able to ignore her. He’d noticed immediately when the odd pair had approached their walls.

Fifteen minutes later, Tommy and Maria had welcomed into Jackson an old man and a young girl. To this day, Dina still wasn’t sure if Joel and Ellie were related by blood, but she hadn’t questioned they were that first day. Ellie had been wan, quiet, and cute. Dina wondered abstractly if she had been drawn to Ellie because of her novelty or because they were destined to be friends from the start.

Was she alive? Dina’s mind took her to that last vision of Ellie, face pale and arm outstretched on the ground beneath the massive man that had collapsed over her. She had to be alive. There was no alternative. Dina had to keep her faith in that small rightness of the world.

She heard the soft echo of Ellie’s shy words: *I love you too. I love you too. I love you too, Dina...*
After Mark finished, he got up and dressed, then stood awkwardly over the bed. He cleared his throat, wrung his hands—the gesture made Dina still in memory of Ellie—and said, “Thank you, Leah.”

She wrapped her arms around her knees and reached out to rub her forehead with a knuckle. The braided crown pulled at her scalp, causing a constant headache. “It’s not a gift if they demand it.”

He shrank back from her, and his face was outlined with naked disappointment. Dina looked at him and at her clothes, and he turned around to let her dress in relative privacy. Mark led her back to the women’s tent and awkwardly said “Goodnight,” to Dina’s back as she walked away from him.

Dina invited Ellie to join her family at church several times before Ellie accepted. In classic form, Ellie showed up late enough to skip Sunday School, just before the service started. Ellie chose a Sunday that Dina’s grandmother would lead the service. There was enough common ground with everyone’s faith that the church was just as full when Bobeshi led a service every other week as when the Christian preacher did. She was a wonderful speaker and illustrated the lessons of her faith concisely, something Jackson’s residents lauded.

It had surprised Dina to learn after Bobeshi’s death that she’d once refused to enter the old church. Apparently she’d bitterly protested the day of worship the town population had voted for. Dina never quite understood how her steady, pragmatic grandmother could be so angry over what seemed like such a simple thing to her.

“What changed?” Dina asked her mother.

Ester’s face shifted in a sad smile. She cupped Dina’s cheek. “You came long, sweetheart. She wanted you to have a congregation and her faith.”

It had worked. Even when Dina was on Jesse’s patrol, she kept Sabbath every week. She knew Jesse was accused of favoritism for her steady Sundays off, but religion was a subject not many people broached. Dina would go to church in the morning, spend the rest of the day at home in private worship with her grandmother and younger brother, and occasionally goof off with her friends after nightfall. The latter was always a mild guilt, something her grandmother clearly disliked but never said anything about.

She never missed Sabbath and never missed a Sunday service that her grandmother led. Dina was proud of her grandmother’s message the Sunday Dina had coaxed Ellie to come with her, pleased as anything that Ellie got to listen to her. When they walked out of the service in late morning, Dina nearly came out of her skin as she asked, “So what did you think?”

Instead of the praise Dina expected, Ellie’s expression twisted. “You don’t really believe that shit, do you?”

Disappointment crashed through her. Dina had been raised in her grandmother’s faith, and for Ellie of all people to scoff at it... “That shit? Ellie…”

“Of course you do.” Ellie shook her head and sighed, firming and offering a smile. “It was nice. I like your grandmother a lot, and she has a way with words.”

“But you think it’s stupid,” Dina intoned.

Ellie shrugged almost helplessly. “I just don’t see how there can be a god that gives a fuck about us if he let all of this…” She gestured around. “…happen. And the only thing being good does is open
you up to die.”

“There’s more to it than that, Ellie.”

“By those lessons, I’ll burn in hell for eternity, Dina. All I did was fight to survive.” Ellie raised her hand before Dina could interject. “We really shouldn’t talk about this. We’re going to get in a fight.”

Dina could concede that, despite her deep disappointment. It took a lot for Ellie to back down, and she knew that. Dina managed to swallow her pride and joked, “Bitch, please, I’d win, and you know it.”

“Ha, ha,” Ellie muttered dryly.

“You know I’d win!”

“I don’t think I could hit a girl, so yeah. Except you’d break a knuckle punching me.”

“Given how hard your head is, maybe so.”

“Dickweed.”

“Asshole.”

“You’re a fucking—oh, hi, Miriam!”

Bobeshi turned her gaze from Ellie to Dina and back again, offering the faintest touch of a smile. By her long, dry look, she’d overheard at least part of the exchange. “Join us for dinner, Ellie.”

Despite her general attitude of disdain towards authority, Ellie had never gone against Bobeshi’s requests. She nodded and fell into step beside them, offering no criticisms whatsoever when Bobeshi asked her about the sermon. Ellie did care, and ultimately, she followed many of the teachings that Dina herself followed. Ellie just refused to put a name to them, and Dina had accepted that as readily as Ellie accepted her faith.

Occasionally pieces of the religion Dina knew and loved shone out amidst the frothing fanatical diatribes the cult preached. She tried to think of her grandmother’s gentler teachings when Emily sang about reaping the earth of the sinners, demons, and the being anointed in the blood of the Lamb. In all her sermons, Emily only spoke once about the possibility of being anointed in the Holy Spirit, or being immune. Their prayers became rote even to Dina. She tried to say her own prayers but was often too exhausted to do so.

The cultists bedded down Saturday night and rose Sunday morning to begin their worship. The service took most of the morning. Interspersed in every song, prayer, and sermon, there were lessons about the world: discussion about infected “demons”, patrols, their route, and expected weather. Supplies, illnesses, and proper foraging were also part of their day of rest. Ignoring the scarred cheeks and rhetoric about blood and justice, it was fairly mundane. Dina could see how someone would be startled to sit for Sabbath sermon and see Emily disembowel a man not a day later.

The biggest surprise that still remained to Dina was the number of children tucked under their mother’s arms, listening intently. Every week, Dina stared at those children with her cheeks aching and her heart curled up tight in her chest in fear of her own fate.
Children in this place, listening to Emily’s violent faith, some of them with their smooth baby cheeks scarred deep already... Dina looked now, counting nearly fifteen children. Jackson would love the chance to raise them right, cradled in love and comfort. It was hard not to think of her little brother. Dina wiped away her tears as they stung the healing wounds on her cheeks and turned her gaze to her Bible.

The cult’s text was largely unfamiliar to Dina, though some fire and brimstone flavors stood out: Lot and his wife, Samson—an aching reminder of her little brother—and even her namesake, Dinah’s rape and kidnapping. What was that joke Ellie had told her once? “Who was the greatest comedian in the Bible? Samson. He brought the house down.”

Dina had read the Christian Bible in church from front to back, and Revelation had been a departure from the positive nature of the rest of the New Testament. She supposed it was expected that the cult would trot out the Book of Revelation given the Outbreak and subsequent Collapse. Rapture, the Second Comin’!

Dina only learned what these people collectively called themselves after giving herself over to them wholly: Seraphites. Fire, wings, fanatical worship... They took pride in themselves. Dina wondered if they were an odd faction of the Fireflies: both winged, both taking their root in fire or light. Ellie had always talked about the Fireflies like they were the good guys, but Tommy, who had been one of them, always just shook his head. He’d told Ellie once, “Nobody in this world is good, Ellie. There ain’t never been a right and wrong group of people, just right and wrong reasons and right and wrong actions.”

As the congregation stirred, Dina intoned with them: “Hallelujah! Praise to the salvation and glory and power that our God bestowed upon the Holy Mother. Her judgments are true and righteous. She has condemned the bastard who corrupted the truth with his adulteries. God has avenged on him through his daughter the blood of his servants. Hallelujah! The wolf has been reaped from this earth, and his blood runs for miles and miles. Amen!”

They sang “The Blood of Jesus”, bowed over battered hymnals that had been edited several times with different pens. Dina knew the song by heart, but the lyrics were adulterated. They sang of the blood of the Lamb or the blood of reaping washing away sin. She hummed her way through the bastardized lyrics.

Then Jacob, a quiet man that spoke every few services, lumbered up to the front of the tent to read from the battered copy of the Bible. His voice was rough and high, a juxtaposition to his massive size. His accent was deeper and longer than Joel’s had been, and he used it to good effect, intoning the scripture he’d chosen.

“I saw heaven open wide, and out rode a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. He stands invulnerable to evil. His eyes are like fire, and his head is anointed in the blood of his enemies. He has a name written on his face that only he can read. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is Lamb of God. The armies of heaven follow him, riding on white horses and dressed in white linen with crowns upon their heads and faces marked with his name. He raises his sword high and reaps with the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

“The wolves and demons of earth gather their armies to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the demons and wolves are scourged from the earth and thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. All the rest are killed by the rider on the horse, and the birds gorge themselves on the flesh that remains.

“And so is the word of the Lamb.”
They intoned, “Thanks be to God.”

At the end of the service, they were allowed to sit again. Hannah, Emily’s quiet second, took her place at the front of the tent. She was a fierce woman who wore her scars naturally. Her braided crown consisted of brown hair streaked with gray. She was feared by everyone, but Dina still pondered that first exchange with her. According to tent gossip, Hannah sniffed out apostates for Emily to kill, yet she’d warned Dina of the true consequences of resistance. To this day, Dina found her far less terrifying than Emily.

“Tomorrow we’ll arrive at another old settlement. Be vigilant for infected, and any scouting teams sent into buildings must be cautious. We’ll set up an extra guard every evening. Come see me for assignments later today.” And on she went with her smooth cadence.

They finished their service with the Vowing Prayer: “One day there will be no curse. Our Blessed Mother will return to Earth where Her servants will serve Her and Her Blessed God. We will see God’s face, and His name will be on our faces. There will be no more night, no more sickness. Under Him, we will reign for ever and ever. Until that day, we will carry out Our Mother’s task, reap sin from this earth, and endure. Amen!”

After the service, Dina walked outside with the other lower-ranking young women and men to bring food into the tent. They waited while the Matriarchs, scouts, pregnant mothers, and then children ate. Then they ate what was left.

Dina had little stomach for her food. Her cheeks still ached, a phantom pain of the smile they’d cut away from her. She chewed methodically and listened to the murmur of conversation around her. Occasionally, there was quiet laughter, and the children—even scarred ones—ran freely between the tables after they finished eating.

She still wasn’t engaged in conversation, too new and foreign to be trusted. Dina supposed it was only logical for the young low-ranked girls to avoid interacting with her. No one wanted to cast themselves in a poor light for Emily and her High Matriarchs.

“What are you ill?”

She started and raised her eyes. Hannah—dark and grim—loomed over her. Dina set her plate aside. “I’ve eaten enough.”

“You’re losing weight.” Then Hannah’s expression shifted in something foreign: understanding. “Come with me.”

All at once, Dina felt a chill of fear. She’d endured so much to survive… To be killed now while bending to their will would be unthinkable. To die because she finally resisted was more acceptable, justification for the horror of the death she would endure.

Dina followed Hannah. She gave her leavings to the cleaning station, where her food would be thrown to the dogs. On the way, a girl ran up to Hannah, her smile wide and happy. Hannah accepted her hug and watched her leave just as quickly.

Her daughter?

Hannah led Dina away from the crowded congregation tent. The wind was cool across the flatlands, and Dina enjoyed its caress on her skin. She paused when Hannah did, studying the line of mountains in the distance. Cattle roamed at the horizon. Dina had been hoping to accompany Ellie with the wranglers this year when they chose animals to replenish the herd in Jackson out
here. There was something so engaging about Ellie in her cattle get-up, mounted and dusty from a hard day’s work.

Hannah’s heavy hand fell to her shoulder, and Dina flinched. Hannah squeezed. “Give it time. It isn’t a betrayal to find happiness with us. You’re safe here.”

“You murdered my friends.” The words were out before she could censor them. Hannah let go of her shoulder. “Yes. We kill for the future.”

“Then why am I here?”

If anything, Hannah’s expression conveyed sympathy. Yes, Dina supposed, her womb was coveted. Poor Mark had admitted he’d never “been with a woman” the second time they’d had sex—if you could even call it that. She’d felt a stab of guilt that immediately burned away in rage. This was rape of both of them. To lose his virginity in such a way…

What a sobering lesson for her too, to realize how awkward and uncomfortable sex could be. Another thing stolen by the Seraphites. She’d loved it before. She’d enjoyed her brief liaison with Adi, when they’d both bumbled along and laughed with each other until they’d kind of gotten it right. Jesse had been fun, and they’d had time to learn each other well enough to get pretty good at it.

And Ellie… Just kissing Ellie had made her hotter than being naked with Jesse. There had been so much to explore with her, still so much to explore only a few months into their sexual relationship. The comfort they’d had together as best friends—comfort with their own bodies and trust to bare all to each other physically and emotionally—had been invaluable synergy to their attraction.

Before Mark, Dina had chosen all of her partners, and her sexuality had been an expression of her autonomy over her body. Now she had to lie back and open her legs for Mark to awkwardly work himself up to come inside her. The last time had been mortifying for both of them.

Yet she’d still rather endure that than the alternative.

Hannah resumed their walk, and to Dina’s dread, she approached Emily’s tent. Emily sat at the table inside with a pair of old reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose. She looked up and nodded to Hannah before motioning for Dina to sit down. Hannah stepped out of the tent after they murmured greetings to each other.

“Leah,” Emily said matter-of-factly. “How do you find our worship?”

She cast about for something to say and could only think, “Unfamiliar.”

“Did you worship before?”

Dina hesitated, and Emily motioned impatiently. “The truth.”

“Judaism.”

Emily’s eyebrows rose, and her expression softened. “The foundation is laid then. Tell me: do you have questions?”

Dina gathered her courage to ask, “Where are we going?”

“A worthy question.” Emily touched the map on her table, her fingertip on the northwest edge of the United States. “There’s a Quarantine Zone in Seattle.”
“Why?”

“To destroy it.”

Dina cast about for something to say, but then she saw the red marks over three other quarantine zones across the nation. How could they possibly have done that? In the face of Dina’s uncertain silence, Emily said, “How do we defeat this plague, Leah?”

“Kill the infected.”

Emily shook her head impatiently. “We’ve been doing that for a quarter century. We can’t out-kill them. When we do, they lay down foundations on the earth and release their spores to spread more and more of their infection.”

A niggling of the truth came loose. Emily’s lips pinched when she judged Dina’s horror. “Our founder, Blessed Mother Anna, spent most of her life trying to find a solution. She pursued immunity for decades in Memphis. She tested the population and bred Immune Apostles together. It didn’t work. So we found a new way. It takes strong moral character to do the wrong thing for the right reason. We must reap the weakness from the earth to inherit it. That was the Holy Mother’s final lesson.”

Dina felt physically ill as the truth of their faith snapped into place. What kind of monster would ever think that depopulating the planet was the way to the survival of the human race? It wasn’t a sustainable method, even if the Seraphites forced their youth to breed. It wouldn’t work.

“I see doubt, Dina, and we cannot afford doubt. This is the only way to survive, but this path requires strong faith and morality.”

Did this woman hear herself? Dina nodded slowly, tightening her fists to prevent them from trembling. “It’s shocking.”

“Then there is some goodness in you if you feel that way.” Emily studied her a little longer, and Dina read the truth in her eyes: she would lose that goodness. “You’ll find the stomach for reaping in time. Now go. Rest. We have a hard road to walk tomorrow.”

Dina was tempted to ask why Emily hadn’t razed Jackson, but she was still too afraid. They were farther from Jackson every day, but the cult moved efficiently. In her mind, it would never be too late to turn around and destroy Jackson. Dina still had that mooring, but she couldn’t survive losing it.

Hannah waited for her outside of Emily’s tent. Dina didn’t expect otherwise. She turned her feet in the direction of the tent that housed the young women and went without protest. As she walked, she finally took in the reality of her situation: she was here for better or worse. For the first time since her kidnapping, Dina allowed herself to realize that her rescuers might not come, and if they did, they might not survive.

Just as Dina faded into sleep that night, she woke herself up with a hysterical laugh. Her neighbor hushed her in irritation, and Dina buried her face in her rucksack. Develop the stomach to disembowel them, Emily? She filed the pun away for Ellie and slept well the rest of the night.

Authority in Jackson came down to trust. Maria and Tommy were the de facto leaders, though neither claimed to be true authorities. When it came to a town-wide decision, they discussed the options, listened to all sides, and took a vote. It was as close to democratic as things could get.
There were occasional grumbles about fairness, but it was all peaceful. Everyone pitched in, completing their tasks and helping others complete theirs. They shared with each other, but there was plenty of trading: favors, goods, and expertise. Otherwise, rules were followed. It came as a surprise one day to Dina when she realized she was old enough to vote on matters within Jackson. She’d always followed the rules, at least the important ones, so it seemed strange to be able to shape those rules.

“What keeps someone from doing whatever they want?” Ellie had asked early in their friendship.

Dina had been stumped because she couldn’t understand why someone would break the rules. “They’re for our safety.”

“So you’ve never thought about sneaking out, stealing extra food, or breaking curfew?”

Dina shook her head.

“Weird,” Ellie only replied. She swung her legs on the fence, studying the line of slowly moving cattle across the field. “What if the rule’s stupid?”

“But they aren’t.”

At that moment, Ellie and Dina stared at each other in complete confusion. She’d never imagined that Maria or Tommy would create or enforce a rule for any reason but to protect the citizens of Jackson. It was perhaps the only thing that she and Ellie never could find agreement on, and the topic came up occasionally, like the night Dina lost her favorite cowboy boots to Keisha during a poker game. Ellie won them back during the next game, of course, and they walked home together along the well-lit street, laughing about it.

“I’m late! Curfew was half an hour ago,” Dina bemoaned, thinking of the scowl her father was sure to turn on her when she came through the door.

“I can’t believe you follow that shit. If Joel told me I had to be home at a certain time, I wouldn’t come back at all.”

“It’s just to protect me. If I’m late, they know to worry. Just like all the other rules we follow.”

She should have known better than to poke that hornet’s nest. Ellie scoffed and kicked a rock hard across the road. “Authority never gave a shit about people like us. We’re nothing to them. Rules are made to be followed by gullible morons who don’t realize it’s about control. The reason FEDRA’s rules were to make me the perfect little zombie soldier. I break rules because rules don’t mean shit in the real world. You think curfew matters to the infected? Do you think they give a crap about our perimeter?”

“The curfew is for me, not for them. Did you have a fight with Joel again?” There was only one reason for Ellie’s diatribe, and given Ellie’s frustrated snort in reply, Dina had hit the nail on the head. Then she offered a half-smile that grew when Dina wrapped an arm over her shoulders. “By the way I owe you.”

“You do owe me. You love those boots.”

“So do you. What do you want? My servitude? My beautiful self chained up to your chair in a metal bikini?”

“You watch too many movies, idiot.” A blush had swept over Ellie’s cheeks though.
“What then?”

Dina swore Ellie looked to her lips, but she turned away and hummed as she considered. “I’ll think about it.” Even as she said it, Dina knew Ellie wouldn’t ask anything of her.

The social order of the Seraphites was more complex than Dina at first assumed. Emily was the High Mother, the leader of the Seraphites, and all decisions large or small had to go through her. She had men and women coming and going from her on walks, on horseback, in her tent at night, at dinnertime, and one notable time during a sermon. Sometimes she went on patrol with her elite scouts, but most of the time, Emily was with her flock, preaching every Sunday and watching them always.

Emily’s seconds were Hannah and Rebecca, who served as High Matriarchs; they were scarcer than Emily, more often out on patrol than in camp. Several younger women were being groomed to take on their tasks, including Yara, who sat second to Emily for many of her meetings. These women were all marked not only with the scars of the Seraphites but scars down from the outside corner of their eyes.

Through the days of observation during their long walks between camps, Dina came to the conclusion that only women could earn these marks near their eyes. There were no men who carried anything but the cheek scars.

Evil could be matriarchal.

That wasn’t to say that men didn’t have high social status within the cult. A few even were considered reapers, allowed to carry out reaping when the need arose and no High Matriarch was available. Dina wondered if the cult considered their sharp butcher knives, frayed rope, and rusty buckets holy items.

She had to bear witness to a ritualistic murder when they passed through the last big city in Idaho. Dina had been too terrified at the time of her kidnapping to take note of Emily’s chant before she’d reaped Weston, but Emily’s words the second time raised the hair on her arms. “They are nested with sin. Free them that they may know my love!”

The only solace she could take in the killing was that the other cult members flinched and looked away, and mothers hid the faces of their children and clamped hands over their ears. Goodness was still in many of these Seraphites even if it had been burned out of Emily long ago.

As a group they were incredibly organized, likely because of Emily’s ironclad control. Patrols were dispatched to scout the way ahead and gather supplies, and guards were posted each night to monitor passage in and out of the camp. It took Dina weeks before she realized the sheer number of guards and scouts. They returned for Sunday worship on alternating schedule—sometimes with a High Matriarch, sometimes without—presumably to leave enough scouts to clear the way in front and behind while still keeping them close enough to be brainwashed.

Dina knew that she would never escape alive. She was usually too exhausted to consider it anyway. They walked nearly a dozen miles every day, with twenty-five or more pounds on their backs, and that was after breaking down camp and before setting it back up again, then cooking the hot evening meal. The easy days were when the old highway was still intact, but when they had to hike around rubble, the way was hard. Some days they had to double-back to carry the children past obstacles.

At the Idaho-Oregon border, they had several days of rest because the huge bridge over the river
had collapsed. There were only a couple of boats the scouts found in the houses by the river, so they were ferried across the wide river a few at a time. The horses and dogs had to swim, but they managed or were left behind—in the water or on the east bank.

Even after those quieter days, by the time Dina collapsed in a cot in the women’s tent, she was dead to the world. They were worked hard for that reason, and all the rules within the cult were to protect the cult itself. The safety of its members was just a byproduct.

At least after Emily took Dina aside to speak with her, Dina’s peers warmed up. There was talk before bed, gossip so mundane it was hard to believe. Dina learned that several young women were born within the cult, but the majority were picked up along the road. Most of the girls seemed grateful for their place here.

“I was traveling with three men. They used me as they liked, and they hardly fed me. They used to joke they’d eat me if I did something wrong,” said one young girl. Abigail was in her mid-teens, and she’d been picked up by the cult two years before. Dina had trouble sleeping the night after Abigail’s confession. Abigail’s eyes had glittered in pleasure when she described her captors spilling their guts onto the hot concrete.

None of the girls seemed to think their situation was a plight. They worked without complaint—or at least with only a few grumbles—enjoyed each other’s company, and professed that they weren’t mistreated by their assigned men. A few even seemed to like the men they lay with, blushing like schoolchildren with crushes. They had clothing, shelter, food, and potable water, and they were allowed to keep their children close.

Given where some of them had come from, Dina supposed this was a humane situation. They stayed by choice even without having one. How could someone be from something so much worse than this?

What a mess people made of themselves. Dina stretched out on her back that night and pictured her grandmother, her father, her mother, and her little brother. She thought of Lori, who had died so quickly on their supposedly routine patrol, and of Weston’s horrifying death. She gave them both a quiet prayer that where they was now burned away the horror of their last moments on Earth.

She prayed that Ellie and Jesse were alive and happy. She prayed especially that Ellie wasn’t following her, thinking of launching a suicidal mission.

Dina’s hopes betrayed her prayers that night. She fell asleep picturing Ellie thundering into their camp on a white horse, her red hair set alight by the sun, her sword raised high to reap away the insanity of the world around her.

Dina had known from the start that the Seraphites communicated by whistling. The alarm whistle was obvious, but others were subtler. The cult started lessons on those whistles early, and Dina was pulled aside from her usual Sunday tasks nearly two months after joining them to sit with the children on the lesson.

They illustrated their whistles with dots and dashes on a chalkboard, and many of them had rhymes to go along with them.

The man who gave the lesson was old based on his gray stubble and deep wrinkles. He was as gentle with the kids as with Dina. “Who wants to go over a signal?”

A little girl at the front confidently exclaimed, “Cry wolf!” Then she whistled a tremoring high,
“Not so loud, child,” he said with a warped grin. His cheeks seemed to separate with his smile. “And yes, that is the most important call to know and do. High and long, repeat. Then what do we do?”

“Run and hide!” the little girls chorused. Dina looked around, watching the boys join in finally. The kids all seemed to enjoy the lesson, especially when the big man, John, had them practice whistling. A few children couldn’t whistle well, so John told them, “If you can’t whistle or you’re too scared, shout ‘Wolf!’ as loud as you can. Then run. Because what do loud noises bring?”

“More wolves,” one little girl said. Then the boy next to her: “Demons.”

Somehow, Dina didn’t anticipate being asked to demonstrate. She could whistle, but she had to use her fingers. She cupped her thumb and forefinger of her left hand into a circle and whistled around it high and loud. A few Seraphites turned to look in alarm, and John whistled a low, dropping tone. “That’s all clear.” He directed his words to Dina. “Good whistle, but you’ll need your hands free in combat. Work on that strong whistle without using your hand.”

“Yes, sir.”

He seemed uncomfortable at her words; he blushed and turned back to the children.

They practiced four more whistles: all clear, query (“Where are you?”), “I’m here”, and directions: left, right, and behind.

Then one of the children asked about the wolves that had been following them. John’s eyebrows raised high, and he looked around at the kids clustered around him. “Have no fear of wolves invading our camp. You’re in the safest place in the world. We will protect you with our lives.”

“Wolves?” Dina asked.

John hesitated. “Stragglers causing minor irritation.”

“I heard that they killed all our scouts,” one of the older girls said, turning to meet Dina’s gaze. She asked Dina, “Is that true?”

John’s jaw bunched. “That isn’t something you need to know. And that is an exaggeration. Only know that if you see a stranger, someone without the mark of our people—” John touched his cheeks. “—then you whistle or shout and run.”

Their lesson was done after another attempt at the alarm whistle. When John led the children to the children’s tent, he had to return to collect the three that followed Dina automatically as she made her way back to the cook tent.

Dina stared at the children behind her in confusion as John apologetically said, “Children follow the mothers.”

Wolves and mothers. Dina wondered if anyone else within this place that wore the scars of their order felt hope at the mention of a wolf.

For all the structure that surrounded them, Dina didn’t hear any more about their tails until they were two weeks into Oregon’s dry beauty. Mark had just finished and sat by the side of the bed, looking as awkwardly uncomfortable as Dina felt. It was a relief to be out of the crowded confines
of the women’s tent, but this was one of the last places barring Emily’s tent that Dina cared to be.

He’d tried to kiss her tonight, and she turned her face away. He was chastised by her flinch, and they nearly didn’t finish. Now, Mark got up to dress in his leather pants and white shirt. He sat down on the edge of the bed and asked her, “What am I doing wrong?”

“How do you think you are?”

“The other men say that…” He hesitated. Dina felt her rage at their situation bubble up. She got out of bed and pulled on her clothing. He read no social cues in her withdrawal and continued like a wide-eyed lamb being led to slaughter. “They said their women liked what they did.”

“Do you really think that’s why we do this? To enjoy each other?”

Mark’s pale skin blushed red under Dina’s sharp stare. He withered and turned away. His tone was rough when he said, “Do you want to go back?”

Yes, she wanted to go back to Jackson, to her life of freedom, her family and friends and lover. Instead, she thought of the cramped pallets, the smell of sweat, and the heat of so many bodies cramped together in that heavily guarded tent. She could stay the night here if she wanted, which was the more relevant interpretation to his question. Dina sat back down on his bed.

He wasn’t unattractive. In another life, Dina might not be totally opposed to pursue something with him, but he would need a personality transplant to find him interesting at all. He’d made her laugh once—she couldn’t even remember why she’d laughed—but he didn’t have much in the way of conversation or thoughts of his own. He was just...empty. But empty was the way Emily liked her young men and women.

“Are you afraid?” he finally asked her.

She’d learned it was best to tell some part of the truth in her lie. “Yes.”

“You’ve heard of the wolves?” She nodded. Her silence provoked more information. “The wolves circle, but they can’t harm you. We’ll pick them off one by one.”

“What does that mean: wolves?” Dina asked, feigning complete ignorance. They were mentioned in scripture, but so were demons, the Mother, and Lambs. She guessed demons were infected and Lambs were obviously the Seraphites. Wolves though…

“They attack us because they don’t understand our purpose. They’re faithless. Not all of them take to the truth the way you did.” He reached out to touch her hand, and she pulled away. His smile faded.

“How many are there?” she asked, her heart quickening despite herself.

“You don’t need to worry.”

“I will unless I know.”

“We think five, but we haven’t been able to identify them. They’re persistent, but they will never reach you.”

“When did they start following us?”

“Soon after you joined us.” Mark seemed to realize the connection after her question. He hastened
to earnestly reassure her, “They cannot reach you, Leah. You’re safe.”

“What are they?”

By Mark’s expression, Dina had overstepped. His stare was sharp, and for the first time Dina saw past her emasculating presumptions. This man was scarred and dangerous and more than capable of hurting her. As dumb as he seemed to be, he finally seemed clued to the purpose of her questions. He said, “They’re animals, not people. Remember that. You should return to the women’s tent.”

That night, Dina had her first restless night since she was cut. She tossed and turned in feverish excitement that chased away sleep. She imagined Ellie, Tommy, her father charging in to rescue her, of going home, back to Jackson to her family and friends and her lover. Then she imagined them dying to the Seraphites, and the fantasy died too.

Eventually, Dina knew she would have to calm herself. She would be found out; there was no way to hide the hope that burned inside her. She needed to rest and reassess and continue surviving. Dina took several long, steady breaths and realized she could find some solace in her memories. She thought of one of the first times she’d been with Ellie and the memory of the pleasure and excitement of learning her overshadowed the fear of her present.

At the time she’d been fantasizing about the scenario for a long time, and there had been no chance to be with Ellie for nearly a week. Added onto the ache of missing her best friend, Dina was horny, and she wanted Ellie more than anything. She’d managed to beg a record from Jackson’s carefully guarded music library and waited for Ellie leaned up against the porch of the house Ellie shared with Joel, twitching with anticipation.

Ellie walked up the street about a quarter hour after Dina’s arrival. Her expression was her usual dark neutrality. It was beautiful to witness Ellie’s face shift into a happy grin when she saw Dina. Dina grinned back; she doubted she could do anything but. Then she feigned irritation as Ellie paused to pet her neighbor’s dog before climbing up on the porch. Of course Ellie could greet an animal before a human.

“Hey. What are you doing here?”

“I need an excuse to see my sexy girlfriend?”

“Okay, what do you want?”

Dina knew by now that Ellie’s dry tone communicated self-deprecation more than anything. Her new lover needed so much reassurance that Dina wanted her and her alone. Dina pulled Ellie into her arms and drew her down for a reassuring kiss that sparked Ellie’s interest. Ellie grinned even as she blushed. “You must really want something.”

“Just you, baby.” Dina squeezed her ass, and Ellie’s chortle became a true laugh. Dina couldn’t help stealing another kiss. Her voice emerged husky. “Come on. I have something for you.”

“Ooh, a present.” Ellie’s fingertips tightened on hers as Dina tugged her into the house.

“Joel’s not here, right?”

“Yeah, three more nights at the dam.”

“Perfect.”
“What have you got there?” Ellie reached for her bag, but Dina slapped her hand away. They sassed each other with mutual looks of irritation before Ellie backed off with a grin.

“No peeking!” Dina called as she pulled the record from her bag and set it on the record player. She shifted the arm and settled the stylus at the right song before pulling Ellie back into the kitchen. She snuggled close as the music began, rocked Ellie against her body, and sang along with the record. “Come on in my kitchen…”

“Oh, ho…” Ellie murmured, her smile soft and her gaze on Dina’s lips.

All hers, in every way. It was delicious how beautiful Ellie made her feel, how much Dina loved her back. They swayed together, and Dina kissed Ellie’s neck until Ellie met her lips in a long kiss. Their kisses deepened; their bodies moved together in a sensual dance to the beat until Dina trapped Ellie’s hips against the counter and slipped her hand into her pants.

It didn’t take long to have Ellie coming to pieces with her touch. She could make Dina feel sexy. She was sexy too, sweet and innocent but still so wickedly crude. “Come on in my kitchen…” Dina crooned as she licked her fingers. Ellie was flushed and dazed, and she took Dina’s fingers into her mouth when Dina pressed them to her lips.

“Wow.”

“Mnmhm,” Dina replied, rocking her hips against Ellie’s as the song slowed. “Time for supper. We both need our energy for tonight.”

Ellie’s smile was soft, and her flush softened. She looked fragile and young, things that Dina wasn’t used to seeing when she looked at Ellie. She seemed to consider Dina’s words and pulled a face. “Or…” She drew the word out. “We could have more of the same.”

Good ideas didn’t always come around, and Dina had learned to grab hold when they presented themselves. “Aren’t you a forward thinker tonight?” She and Ellie never made it for supper that night, but they came in the kitchen a few more times.

Dina’s sleepy mind was unwilling to let go of the memories of that night. She remembered how they’d curled up together on top of the sheets of Ellie’s bed later that night, skin to skin as the cool night breeze blew through Ellie’s open window.

“You’re so weird.”

Ellie’s quiet statement woke Dina from the doze she’d been in. “Rude. You’re lucky I like you.”

“Who would hear that song and think, ‘Yep, this is the one! Totally should seduce my girl with it’?”

Dina wanted to joke, but she felt something heavier. She nuzzled Ellie’s neck and considered her words. “Maybe I like knowing you’ll think of me when the song plays.”

She waited for the self-deprecation, the cheesy line, the pun or joke. Instead, Ellie quietly admitted, “I always think about you.”

Ellie’s lips were soft against hers. Dina drew their kiss out. “Good. Only me, you got it?”

“There only ever has been.”

“Even before?” Dina ventured. She expected Ellie to brush off the question. Ellie hesitated, then
she peeled Dina off of her and got out of bed. Dina sat up with her heart in her throat, sure she’d just screwed up majorly. This was what Ellie did when she was pissed or upset: she withdrew.

This time Ellie came back. She settled back in bed with a small box in her hands. She opened the lid and set a necklace on the comforter. Dina shifted to examine it in the low light of the oil lamp. She vaguely recognized the symbol; this was a Firefly dog tag. The name on the other side read Riley Abel.

Oh. So this was why Ellie thought the Fireflies were the good guys. Dina gently touched the pendant. “Who was she?”

“My best friend. She died.”

“When?”

“Five years ago.”

“Ellie…”

Ellie shrugged and tucked the pendant in her hand, the tag resting on her palm in a familiar gesture. She sighed, her smile soft with sadness. “She got infected.”

Dina sat up and pulled Ellie against her, relieved when Ellie came willingly. She rubbed the back of Ellie’s neck under her hair and they rested quietly together. Bit by bit, Dina realized. She’d be unraveling Ellie for years to come, and she looked forward to learning every bit of her one day at a time.

A touch of sadness swept over her as she regretted the loss. They’d had so little time together. So little time...

Dina was pulled out of the Seraphite kitchen and put to washing and mending clothing within the safe confines of the cult encampments. Part of her burned with paranoia that Mark had passed on his concerns to Emily, but she had more freedom to move about the camp or rest during their journeys. She still itched for the freedom of solitude, but she was never left alone. The best way to pass the time was singing, but Seraphite songs were all warped versions that Dina had grown up listening to in Jackson.

She’s always liked singing though, and most of the Seraphites seem to like to listen to her sing.

As the weeks passed, her tasks also ended up being less restrictive. Dina took care of children, tanned leather, skinned and butchered prey, and helped dress the occasional scrape or cut. It was almost like assisting her father in his leather shop in Jackson; she took comfort in the familiarity of her tasks. She even braided little bracelets for the children from leftover scraps of leather. She knew certain symbols and patterns would never be accepted, but a burning man seemed appropriate to knot into the leather. Soon, Dina was inundated with requests for her little bracelets by more than the children.

Emily called her into her tent a week after Dina braided her first bracelet. She held one in her hand. “This is good.”

Dina hated how heavy her swallow was. Even after all this time, her terror choked her. “I didn’t think it would be any harm.”

“Our charms are our scars, Dina. We need no other amulets or adornments.” Emily studied the
bracelet. “Do you enjoy it?”

“Yes,” she said truthfully.

“I see no harm in it if your other tasks are completed first.”

And that was that. That night, Dina used the low light of the lamp by her cot to braid another bracelet. Her fingertips worked the leather as she remembered her grandmother’s wrinkled, warm hands doing the same with precision despite the knotted joints of her fingers.

“This is for you, my little Dina,” Bobeshi had murmured in her melodious voice. Her hair had been still mostly gray at the time. She’d motioned to the collection of trinkets on the table in front of them. “Choose, honey. Choose well.”

Dina could still remember the charms her grandmother laid out for her: a star of David, a chai, a hamsa. She hadn’t really known what they represented, but she liked the silver hand with its blue and white bead in the palm. She’d chosen it before her grandmother had even asked her. Onto the bracelet it went, framed by matching blue beads.

That had been her next birthday gift, and she’d cared for the bracelet more than any other possession she had, even more so than the boots her father had painstakingly made for her sixteenth birthday. Dina wondered if Ellie was keeping the bracelet safe for her.

Oh, Ellie… She’d loved Ellie from the start. Ellie, who had been dark, angry, and so passive aggressive until Dina had figured out she wanted a friend, not a savior. It was hard not to want to save her from her past, a past she never talked about but featured cannibals, death, violence, and probably rape in one form or another. It took almost too long for Dina to make herself see Ellie as a friend, not someone who needed her to get over past traumas.

It remained hard to be shut out. Dina constantly repeated to herself that she wouldn’t push about Ellie’s past—the things that made her wake gasping and crying in the darkness—and she didn’t. She didn’t ask, and Ellie rarely volunteered information. Dina just never realized it was from lack of trust, not until Ellie haltingly asked her what they were to each other after making love a week after they’d danced in the kitchen.

“Female?” Dina teased in response to Ellie’s question.

Ellie’s expression firmed, and she sat up, withdrawing abruptly. Withdrawal was always a bad sign with Ellie, and Dina snapped out of the relaxation Ellie had put her in. “I’m serious, Dina. What are we to each other? Is this just some fun game or is this for real?”

To this day, Dina didn’t think Ellie knew how much that question had hurt her. “You think this is a joke to me?”

Then, insult to injury, Ellie quietly said, “I don’t know.”

“Oh.” How glaring that that was the truth. Ellie didn’t know her, not past her jokes and happiness—or maybe she did and just didn’t trust her. In that moment, she’d known she had two options. Dina could get pissed or she could be the better person. That was really the worst part of Ellie: Dina had to be the grown-up one in the relationship. As always, Dina read the vulnerability in Ellie’s words that she didn’t often show the world. Maybe that was trust enough. “Do you really think I’d play with you, Ellie? I didn’t think you cared that I’d been with other people.”

“No, it’s not that,” Ellie protested. She finally turned to look at Dina. “It’s just… They’re guys, and I’m…”
“Just a girl?” Dina finished for her, the knot in her chest unraveling a little.

“Yeah,” Ellie admitted quietly.

“Ellie, you’ve always been a threat to them.” Dina sensed Ellie had softened and sat up to take Ellie’s hand. She pressed a kiss to her palm and considered what to do. It had always been in the back of her mind to give Ellie her grandmother’s wedding ring, but that was a far off vision. But… Dina untied the bracelet on her wrist and closed Ellie’s fingers over it. It was no great loss, not for this reason.

“Your grandmother gave you this,” Ellie protested. She’d probably never seen Dina without it, and she knew how much Dina loved her grandmother. She’d been Dina’s rock after Bobeshi died the year before. Dina squared herself, ignoring her thundering heartbeat and her sudden rise of nerves.

“I love you. So it’s yours now. Just like you’re mine and I’m yours. Right?”

Ellie looked from the bracelet to Dina. Even in the pale light of the moon, Dina could see the tears in her eyes and her slow, cautious smile. “I love you too. That’s enough. You don’t have to give me this—”

“Don’t you dare try to give it back,” Dina said, injecting some teasing into her tone. “You can’t do takebacks. Ever. That’s the way this works between us. Besides…” Dina drew closer to kiss Ellie. She wiggled between her legs and settled on her side to tie the bracelet to Ellie’s wrist. Then she firmly pressed Ellie down onto the pillows, enjoying Ellie’s wide-eyed stare as she settled on her knees over her. “It’ll keep you safe from all the evil in the world. And maybe every time you see it on your wrist you’ll think of this…”

Ellie’s palms cupped her thighs, and in that moment, Dina had never felt better: power, trust, and love tied them together.

She came awake with a gasp, reaching out and catching air with her fingertips. Reality filtered in, and Dina was alone once more. Dina curled up, hugged her blankets, and prayed to her God, the true God, that Ellie was safe and free and happy.

She couldn’t bear anything else.

It snuck up on her, liking these people. One afternoon, holed up an old ski lodge for the second week in the mountains, Dina looked across the temporary community they’d set up, and she felt safe for the first time since Jackson. As Hannah had told her, it wasn’t a betrayal to where she’d come from or even to Weston or Lori to learn about the people around her. She liked many of them, and most of them were good.

Now that they weren’t walking every day, there was more energy to read, joke, and talk before bed. Dina felt herself smile more often, and she even heard her own laughter more than once. The girls were good, and many of them had a respectable sense of humor.

The small town they occupied had been mostly abandoned aside from several infected. Only two fresh corpses hung from lampposts when they’d entered town, and by now they were burned to ash. Emily’s scouts had been busy while the rest of the group approached. They’d reaped the two humans, killed all the infected, and burned out the sporulated houses by the time the women and children arrived. Everyone was set up in fair comfort as they waited a week for the snow to burn off.

She’d loved these times in winter with her parents. In Jackson, their winter’s day celebration was a
hybridization of every pre-Collapse winter holiday. When she was a child, her grandmother had
snuck into her room and snuggled under the covers with her. Her grandmother had giggled like a
child and tickled Dina until they were awake enough to emerge into the cold of the house. They’d
light a fire in the hearth downstairs, and her grandmother would heat up warm milk for them both.

Gifts were so exciting as a child. A doll, a new brush, a shirt, bracelet, boots… Dina thought
longingly of her fancy belt. Her parents had worked on it for months for their last winter holiday,
and she wore it as often as she could.

Gifts were quieter things here: a favor, a friendly hand, giving a portion of one’s meal to another.
She mended saddles, gathered supplies, cooked and cleaned, patched wounds, and braided more
bracelets. Instead of faceless scarred sheep, she now saw friends.

She even looked after some of the young children, including the babies. She remembered her
younger brother’s first few years vividly and took to swaddling and nursing easily from that. The
babies were the speck of innocence in the stain of these people, even little Job, who’d been
baptized with the blood of her scarring. Rachel, his mother, was sweet and seemed to like Dina as
much as Dina liked her.

Dina’s brother, Samson, would be turning eight this year. Dina realized with a start that he was
already eight. She’d missed his birthday. She swallowed tears for the first time in weeks as she lay
in her cot. She’d partly raised her baby brother, and he’d faded so much in her thoughts. Samson
was dorky, sweet, and beautifully mischievous. She pictured his gap-toothed grin and abruptly
missed him like an ache inside.

Dina stilled her quiet tears when someone sat on the edge of her cot. “Shh…” It was Abigail, who
squeezed behind her and wrapped an arm over her waist. She stroked Dina’s hair and murmured
softly against the nape of her neck.

For the moment, Dina was selfish. She closed her eyes and imagined Ellie behind her, whispering
comfort, and her tears continued until sleep drew her close.

The women who slept around her treated her gently the next morning. Abigail hovered, and Kivi
and Rachel pressed their hands to Dina’s shoulder. She saw reflected in their eyes her own sadness.
They had all lost so much. These women didn’t deserve this life any more than Dina did.

Somehow, knowing she wasn’t alone helped.

By the end of the day, whispers went through the ranks of the women, and Rachel brought old
Yuta to the women’s house to pull Dina aside. Yuta asked Dina several pointed questions about her
cycle. Part of her was flabbergasted that they dare associate her sadness and torment with her
cycle. The other part of her was horrified to realize she hadn’t seen her monthly bleeding in nearly
two months.

It was a greater rape than lying still for Mark. Her body had been used for the Seraphite’s purpose,
and she had no choice in what would happen now. A child, born to these people, for their purpose.
A child to be scarred like them. A child to know their hatred and act as their soldier.

For another week, they remained snowed in, and Dina’s panic rose. She couldn’t allow a child to
suffer this place, these people. A child deserved freedom, the chance to grow up without fear or
mutilation. A child deserved love. She’d grown complacent, and there was no room for that. The
Seraphites couldn’t go on like this. The children deserved more than this. They all did, and Dina
would have to work quickly to spare the child in her womb.
As if to punctuate Dina’s resolution, Adah, a young woman who had broken some unnamed, unexplained commandment was dragged before Emily for judgment. Emily stood in the center of their camp and looked at Adah like she was an animal. Her tone was calm as she commanded, “See this angel fallen from heaven! Do not hide your eyes or cover your ears to her punishment! Clip her wings.”

Adah shrieked, begging for mercy. Then her words morphed to wails of pain as the hammer fell on each arm. She lay moaning after the hammer crippled her, and then her screams started again when the men moved her into position and hammered her wrists onto a plank. They hoisted her up in the air. No one in their community could think of anything but that girl’s pain, hanging from nails through her wrists, putting pressure on pulverized arms.

Dina raised her hood to hide her tears.

*Wake up,* she told herself. *Wake up from this madness. You thought these people were good? You thought you could be happy here? Wake the fuck up!*

Then the rifle crack did just that. She snapped away from her horror and stared up at Adah, whose body was crowned by the pulp of her skull. No more pain, just death. Even as the scouts broke away, whistling sharp alarms, the women and children just stared up at the body on the cross.

“The wolf,” Abigail whispered next to Dina. Maybe it was fear in her voice, maybe it was awe. It was hard to tell how she felt, but Dina suppressed a shiver. Their Wolf had mercy even when their Mother did not.

The afternoon was chaotic. Many of Emily’s scouts were consumed by finding the wolf, and whispers suggested that two had been found and killed. That was the biggest disappointment of the day, though there were no details about the wolf himself.

Emily announcement that the wolves had been put down was belied by the deployment of more scouts that evening. Dina did her part, packing up camp and walking nearly ten miles in half the time that day to set up camp. They took another exhausting week of travel before Emily allowed a full camp set up.

That night Emily sent for her.

“Welcome, daughter.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Dina replied. She sat when Emily motioned to the chair in front of her desk. Dina glanced at Hannah, who was writing in a book in the corner. Hannah caught her eye, regarded her with a whisper of a smile, and continued her notes. Rebecca was present as well; her expression was foul enough to raise the hair on Dina’s neck.

“Congratulations on your pregnancy.”

“Thank you,” Dina could only say, too ambivalent about her own emotions to decide how to feel. Whatever the emotion that bubbled through her was strong, and it choked her briefly and raised tears to her eyes. Other than extra tiredness and vague depression, she felt no different than usual. At least she was excused from lying with Mark for now.

“I don’t know if you heard, but Isaiah was bitten two days ago.”

Dina was confused about the significance of that information. Emily raised one dark brow. “Have you forgotten? Isaiah was bitten by your paramour. She claimed to have infected him with
immunity.”

Ellie… A flush of shock ran up Dina’s spine. Somehow she’d forgotten Ellie’s lie and Emily’s reason for keeping her alive. She waited in still terror as Emily shifted the papers on her desk. “He turned twenty hours after being bitten.”

So this was it. Giving all that she had, betraying every part of herself, and she would die anyway. Emily’s gaze was reptilian, her dark eyes beady with warped pleasure as if she could taste Dina’s fear. “I suppose I always knew it was a lie. It was a convincing one, though. Her scar…

“We’re coming up on Seattle quickly. Within a week we’ll be knocking at their doors. It will be a trying, dangerous time, and it will be more important than ever to remain strong in the face of strife. Leah, you have assimilated well. People don’t surprise me anymore, but you have. You’ve done more than survive. You’ve become a foundation for many of our young women and mothers. Your breadth of knowledge and skills have been a boon for us. And the child you carry…

“If it had been any other way, I would reap you from this Earth, but you’ve taken the choice from my hands. I have spoken with my High Matriarchs on the advice of more than one of our flock, and we have decided to ask you to take up the mantle of High Matriarch.”

The first thing Dina’s mind went to was the knife. Her fear rose high and fast in her throat. Emily judged her fear, and her smile was hard to interpret. “Tell me when you will accept, and we’ll proceed.”

Emily turned to Hannah and Rebecca, dismissing Dina just like that. “What is the general feeling at the moment?”

“Fear,” Hannah replied.

“The wolves are dead—”

“Of you,” she continued.

Emily sighed as if her patience was wearing thin, but she only set her glasses down and leaned back in her chair. She turned to Rebecca. “And the scouts?”

“High Mother, they don’t think the wolves are dead. There’s talk of one being the Dragon himself.”

“I suppose a sermon would help. Triumph in the face of death and pain. Loyalty and faith.” Emily replaced her glasses to write herself a note. “We’ll stop to preach tomorrow night before entering Seattle. Leah, you’ll be on patrol with Hannah. What weapon do you carry?”

She realized she would replace Adah, who had been killed on the cross the week before. Dina nodded, glancing at Hannah. “A pistol.”

“Hannah will find you something suitable.”

“What of Yara?” Rebecca asked almost impatiently.

“It will have to happen after we reap Seattle. We can’t afford to lose her yet.”

“And her brother.”

“Yes, Lev must be dealt with too.”
“She’s well-liked,” Hannah warned.

“Justice is not popular.” Even Emily’s sigh was stiff. She motioned. “Go. Rebecca take a forward party. Scout a quiet location within reach of Seattle for our service tomorrow. Leah, you’ll take your marks during the ceremony tomorrow. Rest tonight.”

Rebecca stepped out of the tent without a word but Dina paused on her way out. Emily looked back up at her in silent, now impatient question. Dina lowered the tent flap and stepped back towards her.

“Can I speak with you alone?”

Emily’s gaze flickered to Hannah, but she didn’t send her out. “Speak freely, Leah.”

“You knew about the place I was from?”

“Yes, we knew.”

“Why didn’t you attack it?”

Emily’s expression opened in surprise. Hannah’s gaze went sharply from Emily to Dina. Emily leaned forward, steepled her fingers, and her voice was like a toxic caress as she murmured, “Why do you think we didn’t?”

Oh.

Cold swept her from her toes to her scalp. Her family, her friends, her home…gone. There was nothing to go back to, was there? More than being scarred, more than seeing Weston gutted, more than imagining her rescuers dying, Dina finally felt the true agony of sorrow bubble up. She clapped her hand over her mouth and wailed between her fingers, dissolving into gagging sobs.

An arm went around her shoulders, and Hannah’s quiet words broke through her fog. “Stop. She wants to see your sorrow. Stop and get up. You can’t do anything for them now. Revenge will only come if you’re alive.”

As Dina gathered herself, she looked up into Emily’s eyes, and she saw Emily smile for the first time. ‘There is pleasure in the pain,’ Emily had said once. Yes, Dina could see now what she meant.

Hannah led her back to the women’s tent, and Dina ignored the quiet whispers of concern from the other women. She settled in her cot and turned Hannah’s words over in her mind. She didn’t sleep that night, but not for imagining hope and rescue. Neither existed for her.

Dina planned her future now, her goal to destroy and dismantle. There was power in giving herself over wholly to the task. She could see how Emily’s vision was so appealing to her flock. She would take the power that Emily offered, rise up, and one day she would be powerful enough to burn the whole fucking house of cards to ash. If getting Emily in the noose meant Dina had to hold the knife, so be it.
The heat radiated from the concrete in visible waves. Sweat was a constant drip into her eyes, and no matter how much water she drank, she wouldn’t have enough left over to take a piss. The scanning station was only partly covered, and this time of day put her position in full sunlight. Everyone was hot: soldiers, scanners, and civilians waiting to be scanned. The queue seemed to just stretch on longer as the day got hotter, but to get ration cards, civilians had to submit to be scanned. Food was getting low so keeping the population clean was never a problem.

“It’s too fucking hot.”

Given his accent, the complainer was a Yankee. She supposed he would find Dallas’s summer hot, even if he wore a scanner’s white biohazard suit versus the dark blue fatigues that smothered her. She wanted to offer him her thirty pound tactical vest and see what he thought of the heat.

She shifted within her clothing’s bulky confines. She was tall enough for the uniform, but she was still too skinny. Her squadmates back at Dallas Military Prep used to joke she was a beanpole, at least until she punched another cadet’s head in a few months ago. The only thing she wore that really fit her was her boots. Even the helmet was too big, cinched tight to her chin to keep it from toppling off. To add to that, the nearly ten pounds of her rifle was heavy in her arms after five hours on duty. Knowing the rifle was loaded didn’t make her feel any less like she was just playing dress-up.

This was an exhausting idle, waiting for something to go off. This was a nervous energy on top of the nervous energy they all had to live with now. Even after a couple years since Outbreak, she still hadn’t gotten used to it. Most of the day, people had passed through the scanning station for their weekly scan peacefully. As a cadet, she’d been drilled on watching for runners, attackers, the new terrorist group that was cropping up across the country… Basically anything but the quiet people they’d had all day. *If it runs, shoot it*, was their motto.

“Not a bad first patrol for you, rookie,” her partner told her. He was just old enough to grow a patchy beard, but he’d been on duty long enough to supervise her as a senior partner.

Superstition from growing up watching and participating in sports was so deeply ingrained in her that his comment raised the hair on her neck. She shrugged uncomfortably, not wanting to add to the risk of jinxing their peaceful patrol. He shifted in his armor and nodded back to the scanning station.

They watched a mother and child duo cautiously step into the scanning station. The kid was maybe three, and she shrank away from the scanning team, clad in their white full-body suits and masks. Clearly she was fearful, and she began to scream as one of the scanners grabbed for her.

“Goddammit!” one of the scanners said.

The little girl screamed again, her expression melting into terrified wailing. It didn’t help when the scanners started screaming at the mother to ‘shut the little bitch up’. The kid was going to run. That was the certain truth to the situation, and the rookie felt the risk in her bones. If the little girl ran, the child would be killed as protocol dictated. She couldn’t let that happen.

“Fuck,” her partner swore, raising his rifle as the child dodged around the scanners. Her mother tried to push past the scanners too, but the girl was too fast. She was two paces outside the concrete barrier within three seconds.
The rifle was suddenly light in her arms. She knew what to do and how to do it, and it was the easiest thing in the world to pull the trigger. Her partner jumped, his rifle slipped from his arms, and he hit the ground a moment later, blood pouring from the bullet wound in his neck.

The little girl’s mother caught her daughter in her arms, and they both faced the rookie, alive and whole.

The QZ-wide alarm went off.

Her own gasp dragged her out of sleep into complete confusion. She was in bed. Not in Dallas. Seattle. She was in Seattle, and she’d been dreaming. This was the middle of the night. Relief from the dream was powerful until alarm at the present overcame that emotion. Her boots were by her bed, and she laced them quickly, glad she’d fallen asleep in her pants despite the unseasonable humidity. In less than half a minute, she burst out of her room. Her neighbors were peering sleepily out of their apartment door. They looked to her in confusion that mirrored her own. “Doc?”

Seattle’s QZ-wide alarm had never gone off before, not aside from occasional planned drills. She wondered at first if this was a drill she’d forgotten about, but a scream outside raised the hair on her arms. Things inside settled into the firmness of combat. She had no weapons but her own body, but her body had served her well so far.

“Go back inside. Lock your door and don’t open it for anyone. I’ll go.”

As her neighbors shut and locked their door, she charged down the stairs and burst out of the building, sure that infected had swarmed the quarter.

As she ducked around the corner, the streetlight illuminated a QZ soldier sinking down the lamppost. She recognized his face but couldn’t place his name. He had two arrows in his chest. She had half a second to realize this was not an infected attack before a heavy weight hit her shoulder.

She used her weight to slam her attacker into the brick of the building next to her, seized his wrist, and slapped his hammer away. She struck her heel into the man’s ankle, and he collapsed enough that she got him behind the head and broke his jaw open on the edge of the building. As she slammed him down once more, a blow snapped her head around. She collapsed into darkness.

She was cold and wet. Water tickled her nostrils, and the smell of burning invaded her senses. Her head pulsed, and her arms were bound behind her back. She came back into her body with a cold slap to the face after what felt like years in the darkness of unconsciousness. Her cheek stung as she raised her head and looked around to place herself. She nearly didn’t process the gutted body of a QZ soldier hanging above her.

The threat of those mutilated bodies put her knees under her, but before she could get on her feet, someone with the grip of iron slammed her into the pavement again. A rope tightened around her throat, and then she was hanging by her neck, gagging and trying to heave around the pressure on her trachea.

They braced her to put something under her feet, and she balanced on it, trying to tiptoe her way to balance to relieve the gagging pressure on her trachea. She focused on her attackers and stared in disbelief. They were all scarred, like a demonic cult in the chainsaw massacre franchise she’d watched as a kid when her daddy was late working. Even with all the shit she’d seen and done, this situation was so out of the realm of possibility it felt unreal. Then the hooded figure revealed their face. A woman. A goddamn old woman.

The scarred old woman drew her knife. The men hanging with their bellies open drew her attention
again. She was going to die like them, and it was going to be horrifying. Karma coming back to bite her in the ass. At least her death would be relatively fast, more than she could say for most of the people she’d wronged.

The scarred woman pressed the tip of her knife against her abdomen, and those logical thoughts fled. She pulled back as far as she could, her breath stilled to keep herself as far from the tip of the blade as possible. She’d already cheated death once, but that didn’t stop her from trying again. Her fear swirled deep and sharp.

Sometime in the overload of her senses by fear, the woman murmured, “They are nested with sin. Free them that they may know my…”

A whistle rang out, and the old woman paused, gazing up at her with dark reptile eyes before she withdrew. With the knife gone, a full breath filled her lungs again. A new thought ripped through her: what the fuck was happening? Seattle was secure. Her QZ was one of the safest, happiest places left in the country, and she’d been right in the middle of that safe place before waking up to find herself in hell.

Two scarred men dragged up a young girl. The bucket beneath her wobbled as she watched in horror that expanded from her own situation to that of the girl as they pulverized her left arm with a hammer. A small quiet part of her whispered that at least the girl had the balls to spit in that bitch’s face. As the second man raised the hammer, an arrow whispered from the darkness to pierce his throat, and the girl had the fortitude and balls to put that hammer in the first man’s face.

Just the scarred woman was left. The old woman fired into the darkness and then turned towards the girl that had just clawed her way out of certain death.

In the moment, she realized she had a choice to make. It was a gamble, but right and wrong were sharply defined. Right wouldn’t be easy, but for the first time in her life, it was clearly labeled.

So there really was no choice.

She calculated the angle and kicked off her bucket to swing herself in an arc. Her aim was good; she wrapped her thighs around the scarred woman’s neck, yanking her into a triangle choke. Maybe even her Dallas Enforcer CO would have been impressed by the move. She gritted her teeth, using her weight and strength to hold the woman still, beyond comprehension when the scarred woman raised her gun and pulled the trigger repeatedly.

The girl staggered up with her hammer and put it in the old woman’s skull. Then the dead woman beneath her sank to the ground in a dead weight, and air was a commodity again. She released the body and kicked towards her bucket, clipping it with her toe and sending it rolling away with a clang.

As much as she welcomed death in theory, her body still struggled mightily against it. Don't breathe. Fight. Don't breathe. Calm. Don't fucking breathe.

She’d been choked before in training and combat, but the rope was less forgiving than any human. Then… Then the rope gave way, and she gagged, coughed, and drew a gulp air into her screaming lungs like her first breath. Blood rushed from her face, and her hands were free too. She yanked the rope from her neck, only took slight notice of the boy that had rescued them both, and cast about for a weapon.

The hammer was still nested inside that bitch’s skull, and it freed with a wet pop. The weight of the hammer was reassuring in her palm, and she tightened her grip, taking comfort in the strong flex of
her muscles. She slowly rose to her full height and listened to the crack and snap in the darkness.

With a fire like this, with where they were—outside the fucking zone by that old sign—infected were on their way. By the sounds coming at them, infected were already here.

“Watch your backs,” she told the kids, her voice rough from the rope. She tightened her grip on the bloody hammer and faced the darkness. She’d just survived certain death. What did a few clickers have on her?

The clickers were easier to dispatch than the other scarred enemies they stumbled upon that night. The few scarred attackers who saw them were armed with percussion weapons, bows, and crude machetes, but they posed a threat as soon as they recognized the girl’s broken arm. She supposed the arm-breaking was as ritualistic as gutting and hanging their victims.

The boy was good enough with his bow to let her get in close range, and they managed to kill four more enemies before sneaking away from the whistling queries that raised around them. After that, the kids whistled their own replies, confusing the cultists and clearing a path for their return into the QZ.

It was a miracle they survived through the gray of morning. Dead surrounded them every step of the way, and the QZ was clearly no longer secure. The wall had been breached in several places. Crude dynamite maybe? There was no energy to spare to ponder how the QZ had fallen so readily or how so many had died overnight.

She couldn’t linger on that thought of the people she was supposed to protect and heal dead in the streets. Right now, these two kids were alive, and they were her priority. She owed them that at least.

By the time they hit a safehouse, the girl had to be carried up the flights of stairs. The safehouse was empty and undisturbed. There hadn’t been a thought to spare about explaining why these two enemies were with her, but apparently the thought had been unneeded. With the three of them, there were ample supplies at least. She grinded her teeth as she sorted through their inventory and returned to lock the door up tight. How had the city fallen so quickly?

There were few medical supplies in the safehouse. She calculated the dose for the girl’s analgesic and drew up the injection. The boy raised his drawn bow when he saw the syringe and needle, but the girl was breathing in long moans of pain.

“For her pain. Let me give it. Please.”

He lowered his bow, gently releasing the tension on the string. The sting of the injection didn’t even register. Cutting away the girl’s shirt displayed ruined skin, torn muscle, and shattered bone. Her own people had pulverized her. There was hardly any point to scrubbing the wound. It was just pulped flesh now, like sausage out of its casing.

She studied the injury and had trouble knowing where to start. Open, suspected intraarticular comminuted fracture of the left proximal radius and potentially the proximal ulna… Even if she could stabilize the fracture, surgically correct the damage—which she couldn’t with all the medical supplies in the world—there was sure to be deep infection of the wound. She suspected there was extensive nerve damage on top of the muscle and bone injuries.

For now, a thick padded bandage and sling would have to do to stabilize the fracture. The girl moaned softly at each movement. That she’d made it all the way here showed more than
toughness. The pain was probably just beginning. There was little chance for anything but
amputation in this girl’s future.

After she finished stabilizing as well as she could, she wrapped a jacket around the girl’s shoulders
and replaced her pants and socks. The sling would be as potent an analgesic as the opiate.

“Help yourself to dry clothes,” she told the boy. She pulled off her shirt to wring it out and pulled
on a clean shirt from the supplies.

“Who are you?” the boy asked her.

She told herself that her daddy didn’t raise her to be rude. She held out her hand and tried out a
smile. The kid flinched, and she realized it probably looked more like a grimace. “I’m Sarah. Nice
to meet you.”

“Lev,” the boy said with a long stare that indicated he thought she was crazy like a fox. Eventually,
he put his hand in hers, and she gave him a brief shake. Trust had to be earned after all.

“Who’s that?” Sarah nodded to the girl now breathing easier, her head drooping from the effects of
the pain injection.

“Yara,” he said quietly, taking a protective seat next to the girl.

Studying their striking similarities, she asked, “Your sister?”

He nodded.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“We came to reap the sin from your city.”

“What are you?”

“Seraphites.” Lev hesitated and looked at Yara again. “We were. Yara betrayed Emily, and Emily
wanted her dead.”

Seraphites? Jesus Christ, Sarah thought with a touch of irony. That name even she knew from all
the way across the country. The Seraphites were notorious for overturning Memphis’s QZ a few
years after Outbreak. They’d run it for over a decade until reports stopped coming in. Why the hell
were they here? “And you protected your sister.”

“What else could I do?”

Sarah shook her head in agreement. “Good call, kid.”

After a few minutes of consideration, Sarah opened a two cans of beans, handing one to Lev. She
ate the other cold. She would coax Yara to eat when she rose out of the stupor of the pain injection.
As they ate, Sarah contemplated what she’d gone through the night before and sighed. What a
confusing mix of dream, unconsciousness, and reality. “So it’s a torch and burn operation? Kill
everyone?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To stop the spread of sin.”
“Sin… Meaning the infected?” What had he called them last night? “Demons?”

He nodded jerkily.

In some ways, the tactic made sense. At least it came from logic. Depopulate, sterilize the environment to destroy the infection, and repopulate. The problem with their method was steps two and three. Sterilizing the environment was impossible. Even burning the entire country to the ground wouldn’t be enough; fruiting bodies were underground, protected from sunlight. All it took was one curious explorer to have another Outbreak on their hands. Just in Seattle, they’d sealed off thirty percent of the buildings to lock out curious scroungers. The spores were light phobic at least; the sun itself was their ally in preventing easy spore transmission. If only humans were smart enough to avoid underground areas.

Repopulating too would be impossible. There was already the potential for a genetic bottleneck. Further reducing the population would only weaken them genetically and socially. Hell, with the loss of many of the bells and whistles prior to Outbreak, infant and mother mortality rate increased dramatically. They were at ten percent in Seattle, but outside the QZ, Sarah wouldn’t be surprised if only half of kids born made it to ten years old.

While the Seraphites had a logical if violent plan, it was the wrong one.

If only the last vaccine trial in Chicago QZ had worked. If only the Fireflies had managed to successfully complete their research. If only they’d been willing to collaborate the way San Francisco managed. Hoarding of information and research did no one any good, but the Fireflies and FEDRA did it anyway. It didn’t help that Marlene’s head researcher in Salt Lake City had been self-taught fool with more ego than brain. He’d probably had never read *On the Origin of Species*, let alone a textbook on epidemiology.

No amount of adjuvant added to the killed ophiocordyceps antigen would make a successful vaccine. Every iteration of what the Fireflies had proposed had already been tried twenty years prior, then ten years prior in Sarah’s own lab. It would not work. Doing the same thing with the fungus growing on an immune person’s meninges wouldn’t work either. The Fireflies were so obsessed with harvesting that strain of CBI that they overlooked the fact they were destroying the source without understanding it first.

Rumor was that they were all worried Marlene would call off the whole trial. Apparently she knew the immune kid. Maybe she did and shut the whole thing down. The hospital went dark after that last message out.

FEDRA wasn’t any better in all their years of studying CBI; they killed all their potentially immune by enforcing positive culls. It was a bitter realization that a two-day quarantine wasn’t that hard in both theory and practice. Sarah had to freedom to do it in Seattle. Granted, only one of fifty people in the last eight years had survived to become immune. He’d succumbed to an odd case of meningitis within the month, and Sarah had discovered a giant intracranial tumor. She wondered if it was from the infection or if his tumor had prevented the worst neurologic signs of CBI.

And now Sarah had to wonder what the state of her lab was. All of her notes were stored there, in precious paper form. That was her life’s work.

All at once, how close she’d come to death roared back at her. Life was so fickle, so fragile. She’d been scraped away from death more than once, but it had never seemed as horrifying as the night before.

Even waking up in a hospital in agony with an endotracheal tube down her throat hadn’t been as
bad as tiptoeing a bucket with a knife at her belly. Sarah cupped herself just below her left breast and forced herself to take a deep breath. She’d lost her spleen and a few inches of intestine that first time, but she’d emerged whole.

Whole and alone.

Sarah felt the weight of Lev’s gaze. He put his hand on his sister’s right arm, and she stirred briefly and muttered, “Lev. M’fine. Feels better now.” Then her eyes rolled back, and she sank against his shoulder. Her breaths were long, deep, and steady.

“Get some rest,” Sarah told Lev. “We’re safe for now.”

“Why help us?”

“Why help me?”

The stalemate answered both of their questions. Sarah put her feet up and sighed, wrapping her arms around her middle. She grazed the stinging wound on her belly and turned back to study the two kids sitting curled up together in the dim light of the lantern. In comparison to Outbreak Day, she’d take tonight as a victory.

She woke with a start, trying to place herself. Sarah cupped her hand over the watch that had been stashed in the apartment as she illuminated the face. Only a few hours had passed, but she was now too jittery to go back to sleep. Must have been a nightmare, but she didn’t remember it.

The boy was still asleep, his feet propped up and his hand resting on his knife. Lev, Sarah repeated to herself. Lev, and his sister Yara, who lay on the couch with her broken arm resting on her belly in a sling. Lev and Yara of the Seraphites. Yara’s eyes were open, and they glittered in the dim light of the apartment.

“Okay?” Sarah asked her, her voice rough with sleep. The injection would be wearing off soon.

“Who are you?”

“Sarah. It’s nice to meet you, Yara. Think you can keep some water down?”

She nodded, and Sarah helped her sit up enough to sip water. Sarah set her up with a can of beans. She nearly offered to feed Yara, but the quelling glare she received turned her away with a small grin. Yeah, this kid had some balls.

The stale scent of sweat still encased her. Though her shirt was clean, her body wasn’t. Sarah dampened a cloth and used a sliver to soap to lather it up. She stripped to her shivvies to scrub some of the fear from her skin.

“Who scarred you?”

Sarah turned from washing herself to meet Yara’s curious gaze. It was the first lucent thought the kid had probably had since she’d cut down a clicker with her knife. Given their cooperation the night before to survive the unsurvivable, Sarah figured she could reveal a secret or two. Sarah tapped the scar at the edge of her ribcage. “Shot. They had to open me up to figure out how much damage.”

Yara reached out to stroke the graceful curving scar that followed the edge of Sarah’s caudal left rib. Sarah’s muscles flexed as Yara’s touch tickled her. Yara looked up to meet her gaze. “It’s
beautiful.”

Maybe all scars were to a girl raised to turn her other cheek to the knife. Sarah nodded and offered a faintly amused laugh. “I never found out who the surgeon was that saved my life. We used to joke it had to be a surgical oncologist. This approach, this way to enter the abdomen...” She tapped her side. “It’s used for left adrenalectomies and planned splenectomies. Um, removing certain organs. Trauma surgeons would have opened me here.” She traced her finger down the groove of her abdominal muscles from her xiphoid to her navel. Then she touched her scar. “But a cancer doctor might’ve opened me this way.”

“But they saved you that way.”

“Very true.” Sarah pulled her shirt on and couldn’t focus her gaze past her thoughts. “I always wondered why I made it.”

“Sometimes I wonder that too,” Yara responded quietly. “Why did Emily put Adah on the cross and save me? She knew I was behind it.”

“Behind what?”

Yara cupped her arm. “I was preaching a new faith. I wanted to change us, to turn us against Emily’s violence.”

“Emily was that one with the knife? Did she run the Seraphites?”

Yara nodded.

“Who’s running them now?”

“Hannah was her second in command, but I don’t know if she can.”

They needed a longer talk to sort out hierarchy and implications thereof, but it would be nice to get some information about Yara’s goals. “What was your plan?”

“To stop reaping. To start taking people in instead of killing them.”

“How did you plan to do that?”

Yara’s smile was faint. Sarah wondered if she knew how much better she was to rise out of the shit she was surrounded by and try for a positive change. As with most other efforts like hers, Yara had been punished unmercifully. She said, “It started and ended with words. Lev helped me escape. Simon told Lev that Emily would crucify me when we were in Seattle. We tried to escape during the attack, but I was caught.” Yara studied her arm before taking a bite of beans. Her eyes shone with tears. Stoic.

“You want to talk about it? Your arm?”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know if you’ll keep it, kiddo, but I’ll do what I can to help you.”

“Will I die?”

That made Sarah swallow past the lump in her throat. “Would you die to keep the arm?”

“Infected flesh must be cut away,” Yara replied quietly. Her words were rote, like reciting a Bible
verse. Hell, maybe it was part of their text. Still, Sarah couldn’t sneeze at that. “Then you’ll live.”

After Outbreak Day, September 26, 2013, she was confined to a hospital for nearly a month. The hospital was a pit of endless agony and pain. She had no information about the outside world, and fear swept her every day that passed to her ignorance.

Her first information had come from a uniformed man a few days after she’d surfaced from the pain that dulled her understanding of her surroundings. The soldier that strode up to her hospital bed had been harried and weighed by his own dark emotion, his uniform in disarray and a large bandage on his neck.

“What’s your name?” he’d asked hoarsely without looking up from his papers.

Funny. No one had asked her that yet. The two nurses that worked on her floor dropped off trays of food, did cursory exams, and rushed off to the next patient. They hadn’t been able or willing to answer any of her questions, and Sarah felt guilty delaying them when they had so many patients to take care of. She hadn’t seen a doctor but once, and that was when the first kid she’d shared a room with died in the middle of the night. Sarah supposed she was healing well enough not to need a doctor to check on her.

Even as panic and fear enveloped her, she’d remember her daddy telling her to trust the doctors and nurses around her, that they would see to her needs appropriately. Surely they were already looking for her daddy and Uncle Tommy to let them know she was here. Or maybe they were sick or hurt too, healing up to come see her.

From this new man, Sarah realized she might get some answers even as a stirring of unease rose up because surely they knew who she was. It would just be confirmation of her identity, like when her daddy went to donate blood. “Sarah Miller.”

He scribbled her name down on a sheet of paper without bothering to ask her how to spell her name. For her entire five year career in Dallas QZ, her name on official file would be ‘Sara’. “I’m Chief Petty Officer Liam Inman. I’ve been appointed as your guardian.”

If they didn’t know who she was… Afraid the man would slip off like the nurses, Sarah blurted, “Where’s my daddy? His name is Joel Noah Miller. He was born September 26, 1984. I think his social security number ended with 6985.”

“I’ve been appointed to you because your family is dead.”

She gaped at the man sitting across from her, and he hurried his explanation, visibly irritated by her shock. “You’ll be discharged in a few days. There’s a place for you in the Military Preparatory Academy of Dallas—”

“I’m from Austin—”

He snapped, “Austin is gone.”

“Gone?” The tears that rose were unbidden, and they softened the man’s expression. He sighed heavily and more gently said, “It’s been overrun by the infected.”

Things had started swirling inside her, her mind overwhelmed by a cluster of emotions. None of this made sense. She didn’t remember much from that first night except Mr. Jimmy coming through the door, snarling and wrong. That car ride in darkness, coming upon people mauling each other, passing by that poor family, the truck bearing down on her... “But what about Uncle
“I already told you. Your family is dead. I’ve been appointed as your guardian.”

Sarah had already forgotten the man’s name, and she couldn’t focus past the tears in her eyes to put his face to memory. He ripped off a sheet of paper and slapped it to her food tray. He loomed over her, dark and large, and he said, “Be thankful the doctors thought you were worth the effort of saving. Most others would have left you for dead with all the resources you’ve taken. Your government expects you to repay that debt in full.”

Her family was dead; her home was gone; her world was uprooted; and she was a burden. Sarah stared after the man that was her new guardian as he stepped past the curtain three feet away from her. He audibly said, “I’m Chief Petty Officer Liam Inman. I’ve been appointed as your guardian because your family is dead. What is your name?”

The kid she’d shared a room with for two weeks began to cry. Sarah rolled over, too choked by her own grief to register his.

Much later, Sarah would be privy to the information that little effort was taken to reunite families. The government needed bodies, and nothing beat malleable children with guns. Sarah never doubted her family was dead, but when she’d had the authority, she asked a favor from a contact in Atlanta QZ to ask after her mother. There was never a lead.

In a way, it was better to be given the certainty of her father’s death than to spend any resources imagining a reunion. She had needed every spare drop of energy to live, and learning to live for herself was her first step towards survival.

The Seraphites decimated Seattle’s QZ. Somehow they slipped into the walls and snuffed out what military presence existed in their quiet little establishment. Though they hadn’t had Boston or Atlanta’s presence, Seattle had posted guards on the walls and scanned those coming in from scouting the outside. It had been a hybrid sort of QZ, modeled slightly after SFQZ’s Firefly and FEDRA compromise.

The Seraphites had swept over them like a flood and scattered them to the wind.

The scent of death had engulfed the QZ by the time Sarah ventured out for supplies, but it was the cloying smell of burning bodies that put a cold sweat on her brow. She went back to that night—the terror of death—and told herself to snap the fuck out of it or she’d be tiptoeing a bucket again.

The nearest pharmacy was a rundown little clinic run by a medic that combined his skills to treat uncomplicated cases in humans and animals. Sarah hoped to find someone within the clinic as she broke in, but it was unoccupied.

Some of the supplies had been raided, hopefully by hastily retreating civilians and not the Seraphites, but there were several unopened bottles of injectable antibiotics. She reached for a fluoroquinolone and potentiated penicillin, snatching several bags of fluids and vials of sodium chloride for reconstitution. She sorted through supplies and grabbed a few IV catheters Kip had kept on hand for the animals.

Yara had become febrile; her arm was infected. Without injectable antibiotics, she’d die before Sarah could figure out how to amputate her arm. Lev had remained behind to keep watch over their safehouse and his sister, and Sarah risked this trip for this very purpose. It was a shot of relief to find the supplies she needed even knowing she still had to make it back alive.
Sarah could see the use in all the stocked supplies, but she had to be quick about what she grabbed. Yara needed just about everything in here: analgesic, antibiotics, fluids for flush, iodine scrub...

Sarah held her breath as she gently replaced the door and slipped into the alley. She jerked at the sound of gunfire into a full body flinch that dropped her to her belly. Then she got up again. She was under cover, and it was still dark. She carried no light. If someone was shooting at her, they had night-vision goggles and she was dead already.

Gunfire sounded again. It was the quick double-tap of semi-automatic rifle fire. Unless the Seraphites had found their military stores, the QZ forces were finally fighting back. The Seraphites carried weapons from another era: percussion revolvers and rifles, bows, and machetes. The revolver Emily carried had been double action cartridge model and one of the nicest weapons Sarah had seen from the Seraphites as a whole.

From a distance, she could hear screaming and Seraphite whistles. The whistling pattern was off, quieter and less controlled than Sarah had heard from the patrols the night they’d swarmed the QZ.

Sarah told herself Yara needed these supplies. She had to go. Instead, Sarah slipped through the streets, holding cover, and held her breath when several people sprinted by her. Jesus, Seraphites. Seeing the white shirts, hand-sewn leather trousers, and bald and braided heads was enough to make her flinch, but these figures were small. One girl looked over her shoulder in fear, and Sarah realized she was just a kid. Both retreating children were shot in the back just before they reached the corner of the building.

“Fuckers.”

Sarah eased out of line of sight as two familiar men walked up to survey the damage. They wore fatigues and carried assault rifles. They both rolled the kids over with the toes of their boots and seemed satisfied by their work. “Nice shot. Think you hit the heart?” one said to the other.

“Wish she’d suffered longer.”

Then Seraphite whistles broke the quiet, and both men sprinted down the street in retreat. Sarah moved up the street to look into the window of the building these men had fired into. Her gut dropped. Kids. They’d killed four little kids inside. There were two big cultists shot up too.

Deadness settled in Sarah’s gut, but this was a fight for another day. She slipped away before she was swept into the tide of the Seraphite’s righteous rage. As Sarah moved through the streets, she put those two soldiers’ names in mind: Patrick and Darren.

Deja vu struck Sarah when she set up Yara’s slow IV infusion of antibiotics. The day before the Seraphite attack, she’d done something similar in her clinic lab—placing an IV catheter and setting up a fluid pump—but she’d pushed blood, not antibiotics at the time. Only one hundred or so hours ago had been another life.

She’d started her morning as usual with an early morning workout before several house calls and in-clinic appointments before lunch. The resident poultry farmers, Marvin and Jaz, had come to her only a few minutes after they’d set up the appointment for their ten year old daughter to be seen. Rose had been pale and weak, her usually bright smile dim and her expression drawn. Sarah had written down pertinent history, distracted from Rose’s parents’ pleasantries as her worry mounted.

Over the last eight years of clinical practice, Sarah gained a gut instinct about her patients. While Sarah could explain away Rose’s symptoms and signs as sequela of the diarrhea making the rounds
among the animal farmers, something about the case made her instinct rise up high, wrapping its tentacles around her neck in anxiety. Her gut told her this was serious.

She drew a vial of blood for a complete blood count. Rose’s bloodwork showed severe anemia, moderate thrombocytopenia, and marked leukocytosis. When Sarah looked at Rose’s blood smear under the microscope, she’d turned her head away. Hundreds of giant lymphocytes crowded the slide.

There wasn’t much else it could be but lymphoblastic leukemia. Blood cancer. There wasn’t a damn thing Sarah could do about it either except start palliative care with steroids and arrange for a blood transfusion. She hated ‘keeping people comfortable’ while they waited to die. Maybe in Chicago QZ or SFQZ they had chemotherapy and radiation options. Seattle had it thirty years ago. But not here and not now.

Sarah sat down behind the door of the small lab room with her microscope and CBC machine and gathered herself. She stepped out of the room, smiled gently at Rose, asked her to be brave as she placed an IV catheter, and Sarah had her assistant place one in her too.

Patrick, Sarah’s assistant, had helped with the transfusion without complaint...at least until he’d looked at Rose’s manual smear. “Fuck you. Why are you wasting this?!” he’d snapped, walking out of the clinic right then and there.

Fuck Patrick. Fuck him for alerting Rose’s parents that she was dying like that.

The son of a bitch had tattled to their CO, and she’d been called to his office like a naughty school child that afternoon. Her CO—a man over ten years her junior—had looked at her with a combination of sympathy and worry. This meeting wasn’t the end to her day that she’d needed, not after the frustrating sorrow the day had brought.

Captain Matias A—as either the first Matias orphan of his birth year in military prep or the child of someone of the first of their name—rarely broke rank or lost his formal training from SFQZ, even in this place. Sarah sometimes unfairly compared him to a child playing dress-up. An officer was not made by salutes, but Matias missed that memo. Matias had seen no true combat time since Sarah had come to Seattle eight years ago and for that, she couldn’t help but judge him by his ill-fitting uniform and awkward formality. Unfortunately, he ran the whole damn QZ, and he was her boss.

She saluted him and settled into the appropriate stance when he said, “At ease.” Matias sat but didn’t offer Sarah the same courtesy.

“Do you know why I called you here, Doctor?”

All that stiff formality, but she was ‘doctor’, not Commander. She wondered what he thought she did through her military career but only said, “No, sir, I do not.”

“I received a report today that you made a questionable medical decision.”

“Respectfully, sir, confidentiality shouldn’t have been broken.”

Matias waved her concern away. “I know everything that goes on in this QZ. I have to.”

“Sir, I used my medical training to give my patient the best quality of life I could.”

Matias’s face flushed, a sure sign of lost patience. “You used a precious resource without approval on a patient that will not get better.”
“She needed the transfusion,” Sarah said quietly. All fight slipped out of her. Or maybe she was beyond caring what her non-medically trained commanding officer thought. “And she’s more at risk for a transfusion reaction than the average case.”

“That filter should have been saved,” Matias snapped. Fucking prick. “And how dare you give her an unauthorized transfusion of your own blood?!”

“I’m a universal donor. I checked my vitals and hemoglobin before—”

“Look at you! You aren’t fine! When’s the last time you’ve had a day off?”

“People don’t have the luxury of getting sick on a schedule.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw at her halted tone. “I’m enforcing leave for a week. That means no lab access, no doctor calls, no surgeries, no procedures, nothing. Go for a walk along the perimeter; hell, take guard duty; just find something else to do. You’ve compromised your objectivity. Herd health, Sarah. I know you were taught that in your training. You need to clear your head.”

That condescending passive aggressive statement nearly made her snap. Sarah met Matias’s gaze and glared under her brow before turning on her heel and leaving his office without being dismissed. Better to be insubordinate than to really lose her temper.

So she found herself with a suddenly free afternoon. The afternoon before the Seraphite attack, it was unseasonably warm and muggy. April weather was pleasant because they were emerging from the rain that swallowed Seattle from November to March, but with the weather so hot that day they were likely to get a rare thunderstorm. Sarah paused as she walked down the street, studying the menagerie of produce stands by the road.

They were fairly self-sustaining. They had to be. SFQZ hadn’t sent supplies in over a year, and even then, the resources they’d sent had been medicines and harvested seeds. Seattle was expected to maintain its herds, flocks, and crops. The citizens served both military duties and their day-to-day duties of upkeep of the QZ.

Sarah was one of the few people within the QZ who wasn’t required to serve a military position, though she could and did when needed. The head doctor of the QZ had died when she was in transit to Seattle, and SFQZ refused to send anyone else. She wondered if her own request to be transferred out of their CBI research lab had damned Seattle QZ with her. SFQZ snubbed them, and as a result, she was the only doctor for the entire settlement. Not only did she serve human patients, she also worked with the farmers to keep the herds and flocks appropriately healthy.

So they weren’t SFQZ, but they did well enough. There were eggs, milk, meat—poultry and beef—corn, and several in-season vegetables available to purchase. No one went hungry here, and they’d controlled the infected population within a modest perimeter around the QZ. This day and age, it was nothing to shake a stick at.

Sarah could stand out for MREs, but fresh eggs would pair well with the grits she had stashed in her apartment. Some apples would be nice too. She considered the ration cards in her pocket and decided there wasn’t another use for it. Milk would be nice too…and cheese. Though the cost of those had been driven up because of scours devastating the calves.

David smiled when he saw her and pulled out a bottle of milk from his cooler. “Doc. Here.”

He was a son of one of the cattlemen, and he looked like he’d been up all night. “Scours still hitting you hard?”
He nodded. “I heard New got sick too.”

A bolt of concern worked through her. “He need to be seen?”

“Doubt it. His wife would have him seen quick if she was worried.”

Cryptosporidium was bad enough in the calves, but an outbreak within the QZ could decimate them. There was a variety of reasons why the calves were getting hit this year, in no small part because their field access was limited for a time. David offered her a tight smile, and Sarah said, “They following protocol? Nyugen too?”

David gave her a half nod. Sarah decided she’d visit them tomorrow, Matias be damned. Those cattlemen covered for their own, even to the detriment of the herd health. She replayed her thought and shook her head in disgust. Fuckin’ herd health.

She passed over the ration money for the milk and continued on. Seeing Rose’s father at the egg station made her falter. Marvin’s smile was small but true. “Doctor. Have a dozen. And a broiler.”

“Just six eggs, please.” She held out the money, but he waved it away. “I have to pay you.”

“You didn’t ask for payment for Rose. You gave her your blood. You…” He had to clear his throat. “You don’t pay now.”

She felt it like a stab of guilt. She’d never set out to be a medical doctor even when her aptitude tests put her on the track. Her education had been focused on gross and clinical pathology, research, and epidemiology. She’d spent as much time in a lab as in the field collecting samples from infected. Here in Seattle, she patched people up by reading outdated textbooks and hoping she interpreted their clinical signs appropriately. In her spare time, she killed the occasional marauder and plenty of infected.

Sarah studied Marvin and asked, “How is she?”

“Better. A little better.”

“Remember what I said.” No cure. Not much time.

He blinked back tears and nodded. “But the time we have with her is happier now. She feels better. That’s important. So you don’t pay. If… If it becomes too bad, can we still come to you?”

Sarah took the eggs and chicken and wondered now if she could eat them. She nodded as she contemplated all the expired anesthetic and analgesic injectables in her lab. Sometimes it felt like all she did was kill people, but at least this would be by choice.

Marvin didn’t look at her. “Will it hurt?”

“No, it won’t hurt. Just like going to sleep.” She paused. “For what it’s worth, I think this fucking sucks.”

He gave her a ghost of a smile. “I know you do, Doc. Thanks for caring.”

With that, she bought a half dozen apples and made her way to her apartment. It was quiet, empty, and the last place in the world she wanted to be.

Funny how the world made that misery seem so petty now. Sarah wondered if Rose was still alive. The bigger mercy would be ‘no’. She glanced at Yara, who moaned softly in her sleep, and
wondered why it was always the kids who suffered for the sins of their elders.

She dreamed that night of being held tight in her father’s arms as he ran through Deerwood’s burning downtown. She remembered the smell of his sweat, his strength, and her fear that burned brighter than her pain.

Never had Sarah believed in those terrifying few minutes in his arms that she would be hurt. Her daddy would keep her safe. Even seeing the eerie bouncing shadows of those snarling people coming up on them from the ambulance, she’d known they’d be safe.

She dreamed those shadows drew closer, that her daddy’s steps slowed, and the fear of darkness choked her. The sounds of infected were burned out by the thrumming of her heartbeat until it drowned out all other noise.

Sarah’s gasp woke her up. She sat up and cupped her hands over her face, wiping sweat from her forehead. She hadn’t thought of that night in a long time. Her life had started over in her daddy’s arms, just like the world had that night. She wondered if the kids born after the Collapse had it better than her generation. Looking over at Yara and Lev—who was awake on watch—she wasn’t so sure anymore.

When Sarah motioned for Lev to rest, his brow furrowed. His scars deepened with his frown, and he shook his head. “I’ll wake you. Sleep.”

She tried to find a comfortable position. The couch was soft, but her feet hung off the end. When she was a kid, she’d never have guessed she’d grow to be her daddy’s size, no matter that her mother had been tall too.

Her mother had never really wanted her. By the time Sarah was old enough to understand more than her mommy didn’t live with her anymore, her parents had been divorced for years. Her mother would come to visit once every few months at first. Then the visits dwindled to occasional phone calls. Sarah still remembered overhearing her father swearing into his phone that last year of normal life.

“You’re her mother for god’s sake.” He strode across his bedroom. “What am I supposed to tell her? She’s turning twelve, Helen. You missed her last birthday! No, a fancy gift can’t replace you. All that girl wants is her mother! Goddammit.”

The last swear had been soft. Sarah realized her mother must have hung up on her daddy. She’d moved away from her daddy’s door and was in her bed when he knocked on her open door frame a few minutes later. She smiled.

“Reading?”

She showed him her book. He sat beside her, shifting the bed with his weight, and studied the cover. “Sword of the Mountain? Haven’t you already read that?”

“No. It’s a series. Sword of the Fire was the first one. Sword of the Ocean is coming out next week.”

“Yeah? Good enough to reread, huh? What’s it about?”

“Fantasy. Dragons and knights and stuff.”

“Stuff”? Fascinating.”
Sarah managed to put on a smile. Her daddy studied her, his eyes gray in the afternoon light. “I just talked to your momma, and Sarah, she wanted me to tell you she was sorry she couldn’t make it to your birthday. She’s thinking about planning a trip for you though.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, studying the cover of her book. He could lie sometimes, but this wasn’t a lie that she could miss.

“I was thinkin’ you could have your friends over through. We can rent one of those wolf movies for you. I can get Uncle Tommy to help me fire up the grill. Maybe we could do burgers and hotdogs.”

“Brisket?”

His smile was gentle, and he patted her ankle. “I reckon I can accommodate that.”

“And fried okra?”

“A little early for it, but I can go by the farmer’s market and see if there’s any.”

“Can I come?”

There was that gentle smile again. “I reckon so. Tomatoes should be in season.”

“Peaches?”

“Should be.” He chuckled and leaned close to kiss her cheek before rising. He’d kept his work clothes on, and she could guess he’d tinker with a car or cut the grass.

“Daddy?”

He paused at the door frame.

“Why did Momma have me if she doesn’t want me?”

His expression shifted in wide-eyed shock. She’d never seen him look like that before, and he came back to drag her into a hard hug with enough force to scare her. “Your momma loves you, you hear? She’s just scared.”

“Of what?”

“Sarah…” He sat down slowly on her bed again as he considered his words. “It’s a lot of responsibility, being a parent. It’s scary.”

“You aren’t scared.”

“I am. All the time. I want to do right by you, to protect you and still let you grow, see you turn into the best person you can be. You’re my responsibility. In every way.” He raised his hand as she started to protest. “I know that’s not what you wanna hear, but it’s true. And that scares the living blazes out of me.”

Now Sarah gazed at the ceiling and wondered what her daddy would think of the woman she’d become. The best person she could be? She turned her head, studying Lev and Yara. The most she could hope for was a tomorrow.

When the Seraphites entered the safe house’s quarter a week later, Sarah knew they needed to vacate. The patrols were looking for stragglers, burning out buildings and surely wanted to kill any
remaining citizens. When the patrols returned from whence they came that night, Lev and Sarah tried to erase all trace of their existence in the safe house. They moved quietly through the streets to an adjacent building, but Sarah ventured out a second time to kill the two runners that had wandered by them.

The apartment they chose had a good vantage point. Sarah had the opportunity to study the Seraphite scouts the next day, controlling her first instinct to flee. She slipped out of the apartment with the kids and looked down upon the street with a pair of binoculars from the hallway. Her breath caught when she saw the rope slung over a lamp post, and then the screams of fear of the man below reached her. He wore brown fatigues and struggled in their grip.

Sarah wondered who it was, but she didn’t recognize his dirt and blood-stained features. She turned her attention to the Seraphites, telling herself again that they would have to wait for nightfall to retreat again.

At first Sarah thought a child was with the patrol. Then she realized the girl was an adult, but she was young and delicate. When Sarah looked through her binoculars, she noticed the scars at the corner of the girl’s eyes were fresh, still angry and puckered. Her hair was dark, done in the odd braided crown of all the women of the cult Sarah had seen so far.

The man they’d strung up stared at the girl in horror as she drew her knife. Sarah imagined her murmuring that odd sacrificial string of words, and then the girl sank her blade deep into the man’s belly. His wail was muted against the rope around his neck. The woman reached inside him and yanked out his viscera while he died.

Then she had an oddly human moment when she stared at her left hand, wiped it against her coat, and grimaced before she put her fingers in her mouth to whistle. Sarah passed her binoculars to Yara for her to look.

“Leah?” Yara said, her brow furrowed. Lev looked too and nodded. “I saw her first marks. That was less than a year ago.”

“Hannah must be desperate to make her a matriarch.”

“Or dead,” Lev intoned in a hushed voice. “Unless they’ve done to her what they did to you. Make you matriarch to keep you busy.”

“Maybe.”

Sarah watched the Seraphites move on after raising the corpse higher on his rope. The tension in her neck eased slightly as the cult passed their building by. “What do the words mean when they kill?”

“They are nested with sin. Free them that they may know my love.’ We reap the sin from the earth, returning their souls to the seat of heaven.”

“If you believe in it,” Sarah muttered. “Why that way?”

“It’s been this way since before I was born,” Yara replied. “The First Mother declared it law.”

“Seems like a shitty way to go.”

Yara’s expression twisted in some uncomfortable emotion: shame or fear or disgust.

“You’ve done that to people?”
“I’ve reaped. That was why I knew we need to stop.”

“I guess we’ve all done our share of reaping,” Sarah muttered, shying away from the thought. Yara’s exhaustion and pain were too easy to overlook, but with her unhappiness, there was no ignoring it. Sarah motioned for the kids to retreat into the apartment. She and Lev blocked the door and opened a few cans of food.

“Who named you two?”

“Our mother,” Yara said quietly.

“You were born in the cult?”

Lev nodded. Yara scooped a bite of food up and winced as she settled deeper into her seat. “Our mother wasn’t born into the cult. She knew God before everything ended. She said my name means ‘displeased’. She knew what I would be. But Lev…” She smiled at her brother, who looked back at her quietly. “That means heart.”

“Do you know what your religion was adapted from? Christianity, Judaism?”

Yara nodded to Lev, who reached in his coat to offer Sarah a leather-bound book. “Snakes were part of it, whatever it was.”

Sarah amused herself by picturing some albino inbred kid strumming a banjo. Maybe that kid from Deliverance had created the cult that was now set of destroying the country. She flipped through the book, not surprised to see it was a Bible. A Jewish Bible, actually, with the Revelations of John glued into the back. Not much she could do with it right now. More practically, she asked, “Can you explain the whistles to me?”

The kids brightened. They wrote on a scrap piece of paper in dots and dashes to describe the whistle code. It was a strange approximation of Morse Code, but it didn’t align. Commands included ‘flank left’, ‘flank right’, ‘lie low’, ‘come quickly’. It was an odd moment of hilarity when Lev quietly demonstrated the ‘look behind us’, which sounded like a catcall whistle.

The patterns were fairly simple, and the subtleties were clever. “Who thought of this?”

“Emily,” Yara replied. “She developed it years ago before we began our journey.”

“Was she the leader from the start?”

“No. Anna is the First Mother. She led the Seraphites to Memphis. She tried to breed immunity, but when she realized it wasn’t the way, she led us on our crusade.”

“Reaping crusade?”

“Yes,” Yara responded, her expression darkening. Questioning her faith or her conscience? Sarah sighed as she studied the scarred kids beside her.

“When do you take the marks?”

“As children.”

“How many years old?”

“Eight winters.”
“Jesus Christ,” Sarah whispered. She ghosted her fingers over Yara’s cheeks, then gently touched her cheekbone below the vertical scar at her lateral canthus. “And these?”

“The mark of a chosen High Matriarch.”

“What makes a High Matriarch?”

“They lead,” Lev replied succinctly.

“I was afraid they were forced to breed,” Sarah muttered.

“We do. We are,” Yara replied, her gaze turned away from her brother. Lev’s mouth tightened, and Sarah looked back and forth between them. She shook her head, wishing for whiskey for the first time in a long time. “That all started with your First Mother? The snake handler.”

“Yes. No. She started us, but she didn’t handle the snakes.”

“My daddy used to say he never understood a woman enslaving another’s reproduction. That she knew life before the Outbreak is unforgivable.”

“She led our people through darkness,” Yara defended.

“She was a woman with a pack of scared people, and she twisted her narrative to fit her own needs. She could have preached what you do: peace. Instead, she had people tearing each other’s guts out and forced to have babies like dogs. And for what?”

“For the future of the earth. The Holy Mother was immune to evil.” But Yara’s voice wavered.

Of course she was fucking immune. And that immunity was bequeathed to her by god. Sarah hoped she was burning in hell. “Do you really believe in heaven, hell, the Dragon, Revelation?”

That firmed Yara. “How else can you explain what happened on earth?”

Sarah shook her head, trying to keep her voice steady. “Random chance. Ophiocordyceps jumped species, probably some huge mutation. Infecting people with a one-hundred percent morbidity rate, incubation period of two days, and easy direct and indirect transmission, and add to that infecting a highly dense population of the most populous species on the planet. Humanity’s mass on the planet was a ticking time bomb for pandemic, and we happened to win the lotto on the worst pandemic possible. Before CBI, a prion was the only disease without any treatment or therapy and one-hundred percent fatality rate, and you know how it was passed on? By eating an infected person or animal’s brain. Nothing else would pass it on. And it took decades to see clinical signs after transmission.”

Sarah rubbed her forehead, knowing she’d had a tantrum and feeling bad for it. The kids hadn’t understood anything she said. Her anger had served no purpose. “Sorry. Putting CBI to fate just… It doesn’t sit right. It was random, bad luck, and no one deserved what they got. We didn’t bring this on ourselves. No one deserves CBI, and just because someone hasn’t gotten infected doesn’t mean they’re better than those that do.”

“Who are you?” Lev asked her, his brow furrowed.

“I’m a doctor. I studied Ophiocordyceps—CBI—for a decade in Chicago for FEDRA. I tried and failed to find a cure, just like everyone else. I can tell you right now, God had nothing to do with any of this.”
“Then why is there no cure?”

“You think your god would create this disease without giving us a way to fight it?”

“We just aren’t worthy of it yet,” Yara replied quietly.

Sarah realized she didn’t have a good rebuttal to that assertion. She was the worst person in the world to claim otherwise, but she’d searched for the cure to be worthy, not the other way around.

Her first week of her new life out of the hospital, Sarah had been tossed in an old school that was all fenced off and full of military types. It was a boot camp, plain and simple, the kind of place the government would send its orphans right after the collapse of society. She wasn’t cleared for active training for another month, but in that time, Sarah took plenty of punishment from her classmates. She learned that their guardians were only that in name, and that was the hardest lesson for her after learning her father was dead.

It took Sarah all of a week to realize no one was coming to her rescue. She had to rescue herself. At the time, she was small, skinny—extra so after her stay in the hospital—and cried too much. It didn’t take long before she stopped crying, stopped taking their shit, and gave their shit back twice as good as she got. She’d always been athletic, small and quick, so maybe it made sense she could kick and punch and grapple with the best of them.

It wasn’t like she’d been a weakling before, but when the world collapsed and kids started seeing their family die around them, punches fell harder. Quarter wasn’t given; it was earned. Sarah had been spared seeing her daddy and uncle die, though the knowledge sat plenty heavy.

By some miracle, when the other kids stopped growing, she kept going. She put on fifty pounds of muscle and eight inches before she got her period at the age of seventeen. By then, no one thought she was an easy target; she’d earned her reputation not just by her size but by her actions.

There was something soothing in violence. She’d gotten a taste for it the first time she’d won a fistfight with her classmates. There was a lesson in getting hit in the face, but hitting someone else was another lesson altogether. By the time the first anniversary of Outbreak rolled around, she’d broken one of her classmate’s arms when he’d tried to rape her in the dorms, and no one who knew her messed with her again. That spot of violence earned her more violence, but that violence had kept her alive so far.

Killing was a natural extension of that violence. She’d killed her first person when she was fourteen years old, on her first day guarding a scanning station. In some ways Sarah figured her first kill was so damn hard that it made all that followed easy by comparison. She’d never lost her taste for it, even when her job was to heal.

One of her classmates destined for Dallas’s medical training camp had pointed that out as a joke on that long bumpy ride across the QZ to the teaching hospital. “Miller here already knows how to take someone apart. You ran with Hill, right? Probably’ll make her that much better at putting somebody back together.”

“Every heard of Humpty Dumpty?” she retorted, sinking back in her seat with her rifle against her shoulder. That had raised a quiet, nervous laugh from the other kids in the van and shut them all up. It had been a shit line, but they were scared of her and what she could do. She carried that around like a dark weight until Chicago; then she found something else to weigh her down.

When Sarah left Chicago QZ ten years later, she’d been the only surviving member of all the kids
in that van, the last class of soldiers that made it through Dallas’s medical school. She was the last survivor of the CBI lab in Chicago too: one fled, another killed himself. Every one of those men and women were better than she was, but she’d stopped wondering why she was still alive a long time ago. It was pretty clear whatever god there was thought she had more suffering to do.

Sarah and the kids nearly got caught in a crossfire the next time they had to retreat. This time, their flight was from QZ soldiers moving through their building. Given the violence Sarah had seen on the few times she ventured out, she didn’t trust anyone not to take their rage out on these kids. That left in her the uncomfortable position of hiding from both sides of this conflict. So far neither side gave any kind of quarter.

As the Seraphites and soldiers exchanged gunfire, Sarah kept the kids down low and listened to the violence. Eventually, the Seraphite scouting team was overwhelmed, and one of the soldiers tossed a molotov for sport. The soldiers laughed as they watched the burning Seraphite run down the street on fire.

“Run, angel of fire!” one of them whooped. Then another put a bullet in the poor man’s head.

One of the others was busy raping a dying Seraphite woman on the street.

As they listened, too close to risk moving away, Sarah recognized the voices. Patrick and Darren again. The third man was Orval. The men laughed as they inflicted their violence. Sarah tightened her hold on the kids as the men giggled about what they’d done. Maybe there was some bravado in it, but Sarah only heard glee. Even at her worst, she’d never been able to laugh at what she did.

When the Seraphite whistles interrupted their fun, they ran. Sarah and the kids were forced to retreat too. “That was Cush and Tabitha,” Lev said softly. Yara only hushed him, her face drawn in fear. That they knew the victims hurt more than Sarah knowing the attackers.

“How is that who you are?” Lev asked Sarah that night in their new hide.

Sarah cocked her head, glancing between the kids. It was a fair question after all of her about their cult. “We’re all capable of violence.”

“How would you do that?” Yara asked.

“You don’t kill kids. You don’t hurt for the sake of hurting,” Sarah responded quietly instead of the truth. She amended, “Not unless it’s invited, and those people today didn’t invite that.” She shook her head. “Never kids.”

The kids shrank away from her, and Sarah wondered if the quietly burning rage inside her was that easy to see. She ignored their palpable fear as she set up Yara’s injection and began to administer it.

They were spinning their wheels, unable to escape because of Yara’s injury and unable to stay because of the violence that surrounded them. The only option was to outlast. But hell, if Sarah had half the chance… She’d bloody her hands gladly.

The tit-for-tat was so predictable that Sarah wondered why people were so blindly stupid. Humanity’s violence must be predictable evolutionary behavior, though the purpose it served for human continuation was hard to parse.

She’d seen this cycle go down in Dallas after a child was shot at a CBI scanning station. A group of outraged citizens armed themselves and started lynching soldiers, and soldiers retaliated with
hanging the ringleaders. The hardest part was that Sarah understood the rage at the loss of innocent human life; she felt it too even if she didn’t deserve to.

Instead of moving on and finding a peaceful way to prevent it happening again, citizens resorted to violence that escalated with each exchange of fire. They even fired into a military prep school, killing five kids and wounding twenty others.

On and on it went for three years. Sarah had been apart from some of it, training at UT Southwest Medical School in the safest area of the QZ, but she’d been deployed during a few emergencies. She’d killed civilians, and civilians had tried to kill her. She’d survived; they hadn’t. She’d lost her faith in God right then and there.

All that violence had culminated with the Fireflies entering the QZ, blowing out an entire checkpoint, and bringing chaos throughout the entire city. For an organization that claimed to want to reestablish order, the Fireflies sure did fuck over most citizens of Dallas QZ. The city was nearly lost to riots before the infected breached the walls. Dallas QZ was scraped back from the brink of complete outbreak with the majority of its non-military civilians dead, most of the infrastructure destroyed, and the world no damn closer to a cure or government after the Fireflies stepped in.

Sarah had been shipped out just as the Fireflies started the destruction. She was on her way to Chicago QZ to fill in an opening at Chicago’s CBI testing lab when the distress calls started. Her CO ignored the pleas and continued on, unwilling to risk Dallas’s best and brightest to return to a dead-end situation.

Dallas made it after all that, gradually rebuilding population and infrastructure. Sarah had missed the worst years after that first Firefly terrorist attack, but she’d known her own escalating hell in Chicago.

She knew how Seattle’s story would end.

The violence only seemed to escalate, and the small group of soldiers terrorizing the Seraphites began gutting the Seraphites in mockery of their ritual sacrifice. They stripped their victims naked, beat them, and then ripped them open. Sarah could imagine the echo of their laughter as they did it, and the rage coiling in her belly simmered.

On the fourth week, Sarah and the kids snuck past a line of three young Seraphites—all apparently in their teens by their youthful bodies—rotting naked and eviscerated in the streets.

It was an uneasy place to bed down with those kids hanging below their hide. Yara hadn’t been able to go any farther that day, and Sarah was getting desperate to get to her clinic for the medical supplies there. Not only did there seem to be more QZ forces here, but infected had started slipping through the QZ’s walls. It was a bomb waiting to go off.

Her prediction proved true.

Sarah awoke sharply the next morning when a table went spinning across the floor. A man had his hand around Lev’s mouth, and he grinned ferally as he looked from Yara to Sarah. His hair and beard had grown thick and wild, but she recognized his easy good looks and white-toothed grin. QZ soldier, her old assistant, Patrick. She’d worked with him for eight years, and she’d never known the depths of hatred he could descent to.

The beauty of it was that he didn’t know what she was capable of either.

Patrick’s expression cleared in recognition, and he laughed. “Commander Miller, what a surprise. I
always took you for a dyke, but I guess you just like ‘em young.”

“Let him go,” Sarah said softly.

To her surprise, Patrick did. He released Lev, raised his hands, and grinned before he shoved Lev hard into the wall. Darren was busy tearing through the supplies they kept in their backpacks, and Orval had a gun pointed at Yara’s head.

Sarah felt it coming on: the rightness of violence. She watched all three men, remembering their joy at murdering children, raping, torture, mutilation... She got to her feet. The nice thing about living through what she had was she knew there was no good or bad side. There were just pricks that deserved to die and those that had the chance to kill them. They’d whetted her appetite for violence, and now she would feast.

Patrick curled his lip, showed her his bloody knife, and said, “Get back down.”

“No.” Her voice emerged as a growl.

The act of advance was often enough to freeze a man, and the situation proved no different than Sarah’s memory. Patrick stared at her wide-eyed as Sarah crossed the room in three strides. She slapped Patrick’s knife away and dropped him like a rock. Her thumbs went into his eyes as he clawed at her face, and his corneas popped around her nails until her thumbs hit the bone of his eye sockets. Before she could crush his skull, one of them hit her across the back. She spun away from him, landing her elbow to his nose. He dropped to the floor, stunned.

Beyond her, Orval turned his pistol from Sarah to Yara in clear panic, but Lev grabbed his wrist and Yara bit him in the hand. The gun fired, bullet punching through the wall. Sarah strode to Orval, reached for his face, and grabbed his lower lip. She pulled so hard he let Yara go to grab Sarah’s wrist. She kept pulling and slammed his face into the corner of the counter. The blow stunned him enough that she got both hands on the back of his head and pushed with her entire body.

His wail didn’t break through her fog. She kept pushing, pressing with all her strength, the muscles of her arms and shoulders burning with effort. His jaw broke—dislocated or fractured, his teeth loose in his gums, and his blood pouring down the wall. Sarah dropped him and stomped his neck, his shoulder, his head.

Someone slammed into her from behind again, and she put her elbow in his gut. He was bigger—Darren, with blood running down his face—and he tried to round her neck with his bicep. She lowered her head to protect her neck and put her teeth into his muscle, tearing a hole in him. He howled and released her.

Sarah punched him, solidly connecting with his cheek. As he staggered, she pushed off the ground, grabbed his head with her hands, and connected her knee to his face in a flying knee strike. He collapsed on his back like a falling tree, his hands out in obvious unconsciousness. Sarah followed him down and her rage fueled each strike to his face until it caved in.

Someone struck her in the head, and Sarah turned, her rage ratcheting up higher at his fucking nerve. It was Orval, his jaw dislocated, bleeding from the mouth, still with enough fight in him to hit her with a bat again. She grabbed it, stomped on his ankle, and yanked the bat away from him. Orval stared in shock at her strength, and Sarah enjoyed the complete terror in his face.

She’d won batter of the year on her girl’s baseball team back in Austin for a reason. Sarah settled in batter stance, led with her left leg, and twisted her entire body into her swing. Orval’s neck
snapped, and his jaw unhinged the rest of the way. Home-fucking-run. His scream was choked now, but he was still alive when she grabbed his arm, twisted it behind him, and stomped on his shoulder, separating the joint with one blow.

She took several breaths, taking stock. Orval was dying, Darren was dead, and yes, there was Patrick crawling away on his hands and knees, braying like a sheep. Sarah advanced on him, and on the last step, she leveled a kick to his groin—VIP of the All Star Soccer game in the girl’s league as a kid too. Her daddy would be proud of her form. She imagined Patrick’s testicles popping under the laces of her boot, his scrotum swelling to three times its normal size with blood.

He collapsed. Sarah rolled him over, surveying the damage dispassionately. He was blubbering like a baby.

“Don’t kill kids, Patrick. You don’t do that.”

His blubbering became wailing. Sarah grabbed him by the back of his neck and dragged him to the window. She put little thought into the act as she pitched him out of it. His scream rose high before he slapped into the pavement three floors below. Amazingly, he was still alive after impact, shrieking animal screams of death right in front of the startled Seraphite scouting party moving through the streets.

Then she turned and came face to face with Yara. Yara reached out and touched her face, wiping away the tears on Sarah’s cheeks. “Sarah, we have to go.”

Reality came back in a rush. Her shoulder ached, her head pounded, and her hands were sticky with blood and vitreous humor. Her knuckles were swelling. The surviving attacker, Orval, was moaning like an animal in the corner.

There were Seraphites moving into the building as they spoke. Sarah looked at the two kids she was supposed to be protecting and realized how badly she’d fucked them. She grabbed her bag and handed it to Lev.

“Go. Go now. I’ll lead them away. Go north. I’ll find you.”

“No,” Lev said, his shock evident. Yara shook her head, and he gave her one last long look before he followed his sister.

For the next ten minutes, Sarah snuck through the building, tossing bottles to draw the Seraphites away from her kids, listening for any sign that the Seraphites had found them. Then she heard the whistling. The two scouts near her hiding place murmured in confusion to each other before moving away from Sarah.

The kids were giving her cover. Brave and stupid, and she would be so angry if they got themselves captured. The only way to keep them from killing themselves was to find them. She could track their whistles, but she had to get out of the building. Sarah vaulted out of a window to climb down a closed garbage container and dropped quietly into the overgrown grass there.

Then she came face to face with a High Matriarch.

This matriarch was young, not much older than twenty maybe. Her matriarch scars were raised and pink. She had a sweetness about her face that made Sarah hesitate to raise her gun, but then Sarah saw the blood that covered her right hand to her wrist. She realized this sweet-faced girl had just eviscerated one of her peers. A cold flush washed over Sarah as she knew this would be her death.

The matriarch stared at her, her own gun lowered. Another shock, seeing that massive pistol in her
small hand. The girl studied Sarah’s bloodied hands. “Did you kill our children?” she asked.

“No,” Sarah responded, taking no pleasure in the irony of the question and her answer.

“You killed the ones that did.”

“Yes.”

A whistle rose around the building, and the matriarch shifted to put two fingers of her left hand—now Sarah recognized her—in her mouth. Sarah flinched, but the whistle that emerged was an all-clear. Then Sarah noticed the tears that tracked over the woman’s cheeks. She offered a rueful smile and shook her head. Her last words before she turned to leave Sarah in the grass were, “You aren’t my wolf.”
When Ellie was twelve years old, she was put under the guardianship of a principle of one of the ‘best’ Military Prep schools in Boston. The principle of Ellie's previous school had arranged the transfer because of Ellie’s… How had he put it? Her lack of respect for authority, inability to work with her peers, poor attitude, and suicidal disregard for personal safety.

Her new guardian, an old asshole named Brannigan, introduced himself with an old Japanese saying: If the nail sticks up, hammer it down. He was notorious for being the hammer.

Ellie got along as swimmingly as expected with her new guardian, who singled her out for every punishment and assigned her culpability for every prank and broken rule whether she’d been involved or not. He didn’t shy from corporal punishment, and more than a few kids in the school left his office with a bruised face. According to school rumors, whatever authority existed in Boston had come down on him for using his belt a few years back so they were spared bruised asses.

The only positive Ellie could take from the situation was that Brannigan didn’t tolerate rape. There were more than a few stories about rape from teachers and soldiers, and one notorious principle who rented his students out for ration cards. There were always a couple adults in each school that no kid should ever be alone with, but so far Ellie had avoided that particular violation.

Despite that small measure of safety, the food on her table, the comfort of her bed, and her education, Ellie stifled under Brannigan’s authority. She learned quickly to hold her tongue and just accept his judgment, criticisms, and punishments or pay with a black eye. Despite herself, she clung to his constancy. Brannigan was her guardian for better or worse, and at least he was predictable.

One day after a year of submitting to his dictatorship, her anger rose too high and sharp to stifle, and she sparred with him verbally, ending the argument with a sneering, “You’re a fucking hypocrite!”

She knew she got to him—a victory in itself—because Brannigan backhanded her instead of his stinging palm slaps. He still wore a big ring he’d earned back before Outbreak, like it meant something anymore, and the ring crunched across her brow and split it open. She cupped her swelling eyelid, gazing up at the man she hated and needed in turn, and only truly felt betrayed when he said, “I’m transferring you to Warf MP.”

Despite herself, frustrated tears filled her eyes. “I’ve done everything you asked! I always do. Why does everyone always leave me behind?”

She regretted the question as soon as she asked it and regretted it even more after Brannigan’s look of disgust and disdainful reply. “What’s the common denominator in your miserable life, kid? You are. Get the hell out of my office and pack your bags.”
Unvoiced was the reality that if she was kicked out of Warf Military Prep, she was done. Kids who struck out too many times got sent to detention along with all the deserters, traitors, and criminals. People who went into that prison system never came out again.

It was then that she finally realized no adult would ever give a damn about her. She couldn’t earn a guardian, much less a parent. She’d naively assumed she could stake a place within Brannigan’s life just because he’d unwilling earned a spot in hers. Instead, he’d given her up without a care.

But she met Riley because he’d given her up, and Riley led her to Marlene, to Joel, to Dina...

Dina!

Ellie surfaced from the long darkness with a quiet cry. Sound and sight crashed in, and she jerked back from the chest she leaned against. She was on a horse, tucked up against Joel’s bloody shirt with his strong arm around her as they rode, and she was crying.

“Ellie! Ellie?”

She turned her head, and the world spun off axis with the horse’s trot. She puked, supported by Joel’s arms, and tried to get her bearings even as she gagged from the pulsing pain in her skull. They were in a field outside of Jackson. She had no idea how long it had been since she’d last been awake.

Oh fuck... Her memory of that afternoon deafened her to everything else, and dread and terror overwhelmed her.

“Dina?” she asked desperately.

“Ellie, I don’t know. I didn’t see her.”

“We have to go back!”

“Maybe she found a hiding place—”

“They took her!”

“Look!” Joel pulled the horse up to give her a view of Jackson. Smoke rose in thick plumes, and even from the distance, she heard gunfire and screaming. Another horse rode up beside them, and Jesse—pale with blood soaking his collar—swayed on the horse as he gazed at Jackson in horror.

“They circled around. There must have been others.”

“We have to go.” Ellie grabbed Joel’s shirt and yanked hard to get his attention. Dina would be with the attackers. They had to protect Jackson and get her back.

“I reckon so,” he said, his voice rough. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.” It was a lie, and they both knew it. Joel looked like he had half a mind to leave her there, but he spurred the horse forward. Over his shoulder, Ellie saw more horses ride up, but she recognized the riders. Tommy and Maria looked to Jackson with panic on their faces and hesitated just as Jesse did.

“They would have gotten to the safehouse,” Maria said.

“Not all of them,” Tommy replied quietly. He and Maria had a baby back in Jackson’s nursery to worry about. He glanced at Joel. “Maria, you take Ellie—”
“Fuck you,” Ellie told him before Maria could. “Give me a horse. I can create a distraction.”

“What’re you thinking?” Joel asked her, his jaw set.

“Let the herd out again.”

There was only a moment to consider, and in that moment, Joel met her gaze in silent study. Whatever he saw satisfied him. Joel climbed down from his horse and handed Ellie the reins. “Careful, baby girl. Get out of there as soon as you can.”

She spurred the horse into a hard gallop, giving no quarter. She only encountered two scarred men, and she killed one by running him over. Her horse bucked and startled doing it, but Ellie was one of Jackson’s best riders for a reason. She ducked the other man as the crack of gunfire split the air. She felt a burning punch across her back, but she was at the gate and yanked the latch open, nearly dislocating her shoulder as she held on while her horse rode past to open it wide. She rode into the midst of the herd, kicking up dust and creating chaos, and the cattle thundered out onto Broadway for the second time that day.

Dust, chaos, and heavy hooves were their allies. Ellie rode within the herd, trying to direct them one way or another. Then her mount stumbled over a body, slipped, and went down. A cow bore down on Ellie, clipping her back and sending her sprawling onto a raised porch. The world went dark.

She rose from a frozen dream as if waking from death. Dina was her first thought. Dina, Dina… She collapsed as she got out of bed, her right thigh protesting her weight. Her shoulder screamed, her head spun, and she felt a dozen other aches and pains, but she could only think of Dina being dragged away by her collar, her eyes pleading with Ellie to…

Then Joel was overhead. He tugged Ellie to her feet and pushed her down. “Lie down, baby girl.”

Ellie wobbled and stood anyway, looking around to place herself. She recognized Jackson’s infirmary, even as full as it was. She saw Gabby across the room, but Doc wasn’t around. She tried to focus, but her memories of the past were faint and uncertain. “What happened?”

“Not here.”

Joel supported Ellie and led her to Doc’s office. Joel set her in Doc’s chair firmly—not that she was in a state to get up—and leaned against the edge of the desk, watching Ellie. She took a moment to steady herself. The world wasn’t tilting on its axis anymore, even if her head pulsed with each heartbeat.

“Where’s Dina? Did you find her?”

Against her hopes, Joel’s jaw tightened in denial. “No. Was gonna go back out to look for her.”

“Her family?”

“Alive. Looking in town for her just in case. Where’s Lori?”

Ellie exhaled in shaky relief that Dina’s family was okay, but her horror returned. She thought of Lori’s body. “Dead. I confirmed. Joel, I’m going with you to look for her.”

“Can you even see straight?”
“Straight enough.”

“You could’ve died. Took a bullet across the back. Your wounds could get infected—”

“Joel.”

He nodded slowly. As much as she knew she had to go, dread weighed her heart. Before he left, Joel explained that just after Ellie left to find the patrol, Lori had radioed a distress call from the patrollers. Joel, Tommy, and Maria saddled up to hunt them down. While they were away, a larger enemy party had entered Jackson and razed it.

“Were we a distraction?”

“Don’t know, Ellie. Could’ve been. Or it just worked out that way. We knew something like this would happen one day, but all of our safeguards didn’t do much good.”

When Jackson’s doc-in-training entered Doc’s office, she looked worse than Ellie had ever seen her. Stress and grief lined Gabby’s face, and she ordered Ellie back into bed. Joel nodded for her to go. “Eat and drink something. I’ll be back soon. Then we’ll go.”

“Where’s Doc?” Ellie asked as she sank back onto the bed. Gabby’s twisted expression answered her question. Dead. Jesus Christ. She wanted to offer comfort, but she none to give, and Gabby moved away quickly to tend to another patient. Ellie reluctantly drank some broth and ate a few bites of bread, swallowing against the horror that sat high in her throat. She wondered who else had been killed by the invaders. Her gut protested her food when she realized a few of her neighbors didn’t look like they’d make it the night.

Joel kept his promise, returning within the hour with two horses. As they rode through town, Ellie gazed around her in dumb horror. Jackson was devastated, ransacked by humans and cattle, blood and death in the streets. Husks of burned out buildings smoked, choking the air and limiting visibility. Dead corpses were marked by names written on rocks used to secure sheets covering bodies. The scent of blood was strong.

They rode past the graveyard, where four men and women were preparing more graves than Ellie could stomach. She imagined she could scent the soil turned over even through the smoke that choked them. Nausea rose high and fast, but she swallowed it down.

“How many did we kill?”

“Thirteen. If you hadn’t let the herd out, more of us would have died. They had a hanging and gutting station set up for those they didn’t kill outright.”

Weston… Ellie shied from the memory of his death. “How many?”

“Fifty-three right now.”


Joel scoffed—a sound of pain—and he listed a few names. Ellie’s heart went into her throat, and she waited for tears. None came. She closed her eyes and brought to mind that bitch’s sneer as she studied Ellie, the hard bite of her kiss. It should have been her. She should have been the one to be taken, killed and no one else… The woman had been Emily. Ellie would never forget her name or her face.

“Any other enemies left?”
“No, not that we found. We’re not in much state to track the larger party.”

“But you think there’re more.”

Joel gave a half-jerk to his head. It wasn’t an answer, more a ‘we’ll talk about it later’. He motioned for Ellie to be quiet and tied their horses up within the grove that flanked the outpost of the original ambush.

They moved quietly through the small cluster of buildings, armed and ready for an attack. The scent of Weston and his guts frying on the pavement permeated the entire outpost, and even Joel had trouble keeping his gorge down as they cut Weston down. Animals had preyed on his hanging guts and his feet, tearing off one boot and eating him to his ankles.

Lori’s body was gone. So were the other dead attackers.

Ellie stopped to stare at the pool of congealed blood on the pavement beneath the lamp post. “Why leave him up and take the others?”

“A warning, I reckon.”

Smoke was rising in the distance. Joel left Ellie to scout the source of the smoke alone. Ellie’s exhaustion prevented her from demanding to accompany him. Instead, she sat in the shade of a building and let time pass her by. When Joel returned, his expression said everything. He’d never been very good at lying to her.

“I’m going.”

“I know.” His reply was as weary as any words he’d ever said to her.

A quarter mile away, they came upon human remains. At least four bodies had been burned to ash and bones. Ellie groaned as she slowly got to her knees by the hot coals. Her leg ached and protested. She stared at what remained before she fished out a folding knife from the ashes with her machete. She’d carved the cherry handle and had Tommy fit the blade to it. The knife was Ellie’s birthday gift to Dina last year.

There was also a ring with the ashes. Dina had sometimes worn the ring around her neck on a leather cord. Her grandmother had braided the thong, and Dina received the ring from her grandmother after her death. The ring with its tiny cream pearl was to be hers when she married.

Up until recently, Ellie tortured herself by picturing Jesse slip it onto Dina’s finger. Funny how Ellie would welcome that reality over this one.

Ellie touched the bracelet that was wrapped around her wrist. Dina had needed the hamsa more than she did. The bracelet was more a symbol of her own cowardice than Dina’s love. She’d been so afraid that Dina didn’t really love her, but in the end, Dina had died for that love. Ellie rubbed the warm hamsa and studied the remains, trying to match them to her memory of Dina’s smiling face.

Joel seemed to wait for her to collapse, to sob and scream, but she only wrapped Dina’s belongings in a piece of cloth and slipped them into her backpack. Something inside her was firming, crystallizing with an emotion so strong she couldn’t feel it at all. The thought whispered, and she knew it would turn into a roar: I’m going to find and I’m going to kill every last one of them.

She’d never really felt hatred before. This emotion was new; it scalded.
Joel eventually crouched next to her. He hesitantly touched her arm. “I’ll take care of it. It does a person good to lay their loved ones to rest.”

“Did you bury Sarah?”

Joel’s swallow was audible; his voice was rough with emotion. “No. The same people who killed her took her from me. They ripped her from my arms. I used to wonder what they did to her, but… She was dead already. Only mattered to me, not her.”

“At one of those triage camps?”

“Yeah.” Joel took a long breath. “I’m sorry, Ellie.”

That was the first thing to get to her. She choked down her bitter laugh and had to hide her eyes for a moment. “Why are you sorry? We’re the ones that fucked up. We should have prepared for this.”

“There’s a difference between a few scroungers and a goddamn cult army. They were all scarred, Ellie, and the way they strung people up…”

His tone rang of familiarity. “You heard of them?”

“Just rumors. Back then we knew enough not to be obvious about moving through the southeast. Heard of more than my fair share of cults, but theirs grew strong. Some snake-handler founded it so far as I know. His wife kept it going, turned it into a militia, and took over Memphis QZ and held it. Heard tell of them stringing up and gutting their victims.”

“How are they here?”

“I don’t know, Ellie. I don’t reckon we will. Last I knew, they were still in Memphis. They started out near twenty years ago. A lot can change in that time.”

A fucking lot could change in a day.

After Joel finished his grim task, they rode back to Jackson. Ellie again took in the devastation. So many dead. So many wounded that even the wounded helped clean up the streets and prepare the dead for burial. Yesterday had been normal. She and Dina had spent an hour in bed before going to the cafeteria for supper. It seemed like another life.

She’d never see her smile again. Never hug her or kiss her again. Never hear her laugh.

It was surreal to see Dina’s family among the citizens moving through Jackson. They were in a panic like everyone with missing loved ones, taking on the agonizing task of looking through the dead for their daughter.

“How… How did it happen?” Ester asked, swaying forward to grab Ellie by the arms. Her fingers tightened on a wound on Ellie’s upper arm, but she didn’t feel it enough to pull away.

She shook her head and looked at Samson, Dina’s little brother. He didn’t smile; he looked like he’d forgotten how. Ellie glanced at Joel for help. She marveled that she could be so numb when
their expressions melted in grief.

“I brought her ashes back,” Joel said gruffly.

“You mean they burned her alive,” Levi retorted, his voice breaking. He rubbed his thick red beard and his mouth tightened beneath it. Abruptly, his face twisted, and he rubbed his eyelids with his fingertips. He choked on his grief while Ester cried quietly on Ellie’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save her,” Ellie haltingly said.

“No, no,” Ester whispered, cupping Ellie’s cheeks. “Ellie, you didn’t do this. Don’t apologize for them. You lost her too.”

Her words were worse than screaming blame. Ester had always been kind, even when Ellie had been a major dick when she’d been in Ester’s classroom, even when she’d been uncertain about Dina and Ellie’s relationship. And now… She could take blows, shouting, and rage, but that Ester was crying for Ellie too made her gut drop.

You lost her too. Just like she lost everyone she loved. What’s the fucking common denominator in your life, Ellie?

“Mommy,” Samson said softly, reverting from the ‘Mom’ he’d been trying out for the last year. “Where’s Dina?”

“She’s dead, son,” Levi choked out. Joel took his shoulder firmly, and his voice was steady. “I have her remains. You bury her, mourn her, and think about your family now.”

“Fuck you.” Levi swore with uncharacteristic vehemence. “You have no idea—”

“Honey,” Ester pressed her palm to Levi’s arm, and all the fight slipped out of him. He slumped and turned to his wife, drawing her into a desperate embrace. Samson tucked himself into his parents’ sides, and Ellie watched them, hoping for even a drop of their grief.

Then her legs went out from under her. As always, Joel was there to catch her.

Ellie and Dina had gotten off to a rocky start, just the same way she’d started with Riley, Joel, and the whole of Jackson. She was the common denominator in her own life, right?

It hadn’t helped that she’d been forced to enter Jackson’s stupid school system after returning from the bitter disappointment of Utah. For five hours every day, Ellie was expected to sit in a classroom for lessons she already knew. Military prep had surpassed the schooling of these kids. The chores before and after class weren’t so bad though; they kept her mind busy enough to ignore the echo of Joel’s lie. Ellie liked the barn work the best. Animals were easy to understand.

Humans remained enigmas.

Dina had approached her one week after Ellie and Joel arrived in Jackson, and she’d done it like someone offering a lifeline. That alone made Ellie tell her to fuck off, and Dina had done so with as little care as anyone in Ellie’s life.

Later, seeing how Dina was with everyone in her life—generous, kind, funny, and carefree—Ellie had regretted her previous rudeness. Ellie considering approaching Dina to apologize for being a dick. Then Weston, a boy her age and nearly twice as big, had shoved her up against the school building and tried to kiss her, and she’d been back in Colorado with David sitting on her, his hands
around her throat.

She’d come out of it beating Weston’s face in with her fists. He was unrecognizable for several weeks. All thoughts of socialization with Jackson’s other kids went out the window; Ellie knew she’d never be accepted, not when she’d beaten up their golden boy. She knew what they thought about her. The long pitying looks made Ellie grit her teeth and lower her head.

As punishment—fucking punishment for his actions, go figure—Ellie was put on nurse duty for a month. On her first day, Doc and her reluctant doctor-in-training, Gabby, were called out to assess a possibly broken leg, and Ellie stayed behind to radio them if someone else came to the clinic.

She’d been bored out of her mind and considered leaving for a short break when two people thundered in around noon. One of them clutched a screaming, bloody kid. It was a lot at once, especially taking in the terror on Dina and Jesse’s faces. After they explained what had happened, Ellie snapped out of her alarm. She’d dealt with a lot worse than a busted forehead.

Ellie pressed a clean towel to the kid’s forehead over his gash and caught his attention. “Lost a fight with the porch railing, huh?” The kid continued to wail. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Samson,” Dina said, leaning too close. Ellie glared at her and turned back to the boy.

“Your know-it-all sister said your name is Samson. That right?”

Samson continued to sob. Amazing how scared people in Jackson were of pain and injuries. “Hey, kid. You’re okay. You’re fine.”

Samson gave a few exaggerated sniffles that ended with the shudder of suppressed sobs. He was still moaning, but his moans quieted. He opened his eyes and focused on Ellie. He seemed cognizant, and there was no evidence of dizziness. Ellie tapped her scarred eyebrow. “See this?”

His gaze followed her finger without issue. He nodded.

“Yeah, it hurt like a bitch when it happened. But it healed, and now I have a cool scar. I bet yours’ll be pretty badass.” Ellie pulled the towel back. The cut was almost four inches long and it still bled freely, but it wasn’t gushing. Seemed to be full thickness through skin, and it flapped up about an inch under the scalp. The bone lining seemed to be intact. Jesus. No wonder he was screaming his head off. “Damn, badass. I’d whistle, but I can’t.”

“You can’t whistle?” Samson asked in a thin voice.

Good. The kid was calming down. “I’ve been practicing for almost a year.” Ellie tried to whistle and failed on purpose. “See?”

Samson produced a watery smile. Ellie pulled the gash up again, and then she noticed Dina was swaying. Jesse noticed too and caught her arm. “The one about to pass out, sit down. You, Jesse, right? Can you hold onto this for me?”

Ellie spent a few minutes making sure the kid didn’t have a concussion. She only remembered a few of the standard tests, but he did fine. Ellie washed his blood from her hands and went into the side room to radio the doc. “Ester’s boy is here. He busted his forehead open, but I don’t think he has a concussion, and I don’t think it broke the skull lining.”

“I’ll send Gabby over,” Harriet said. “Gather the supplies you think she’ll need and start prepping the wound.”
“Yes, ma’am,” Ellie replied, immediately annoyed that military prep training still had its claws in her. Fucking FEDRA. “Yes, ma’am; fuck you, ma’am; kiss my ass, ma’am,” she muttered at herself.

She gathered standard suturing supplies, pleased to find suture, needles, tweezers—forceps was it?—needle drivers, and concentrated iodine prep. Ellie set up her materials on a metal tray by the kid. “How’re you doing, kiddo?”

“I’m good,” Samson said, his voice wavering a little.

“I’m not going to lie. This is gonna hurt. Maybe you can squeeze your sister’s hand real hard to get back at her for being so annoying. And cuss. Fuck, shit, goddammit, chickenshit, asswipe, cunt… All great words for pain.”

Dina’s glare was halfhearted at best. She took Samson’s hand, and he giggled and squeezed her fingers, swearing up a storm. Soon enough Samson flinched and cried, but Ellie kept going when she reminded herself what an abscess looked like.

“How’d you get your scar?” Samson asked after he’d calmed down.

Ask me another, she wanted to tell the kid. She felt sorry enough for him to tell him the truth about her old guardian. “Real asshole. He loved that damn ring. I hope I broke it with my face.”

“Why did he hit you?”

Ellie had forgotten about Dina and was abruptly self-conscious. She looked up, met Dina’s pretty dark eyes, and shrugged. “I talked back.”

Ellie escaped a moment later. She sorted through the injectable medications and was surprised to see an injectable local on the shelf. She retrieved the bottle and a syringe and needle. Should have done it before she cleaned the wound.

“What are you doing with that?” Dina asked cautiously.

Feeling stressed enough for anger, Ellie snapped, “I’m going to stab you with it if you don’t shut up.”

Dina’s face flushed and her eyes flashed in outrage, but Gabby thundered in and interrupted that tantrum. She assessed Samson, repeating some but not all of Ellie’s tests, and relaxed. She went over Ellie’s setup, then looked to the bottle in her hand. “What dose would you figure he gets?”

“Well shit…” Ellie calculated out loud. “Max dose for guys coming in was twenty cc, but he’s probably a quarter their size, so five cc. I don’t think we’d need more than three.”

“How many local blocks did you give?”

She hadn’t been supposed to, but sometimes stuff got hectic in that trauma ward. The doctors and nurses were too busy with actual surgery, and Ellie hated flinching skin under her needle. “Dunno… Twenty?”

“You worked in a surgery ward?” Gabby asked her.

“Yeah.”

“What QZ?”
Ellie shifted uncomfortably. “Boston.”

“Can we concentrate on my brother?” Dina interjected. Jesse shot her a sidelong look but didn’t interrupt her. Gabby sighed. “Ellie, go ahead and give him the block.”

For the first time, Ellie got nervous. She looked at Samson and back at Gabby. “I never liked anyone I’ve treated before.”

“The hardest part of medicine is treating your friends. You can do it.”

So she did. In the end, Samson flinched less than Dina did. Gabby leaned over Ellie’s shoulder, asked her if she’d stitched up soldiers too, and then said Ellie had more experience than she did. Ellie looked at the kid and sighed. She pulled on clean gloves, tied her suture into her needle, and closed the deep layer before drawing the skin together with an intra-skin pattern, closing with a hand tie. It came together pretty well after she flipped the last knot.

“Who taught you that?” Gabby asked as she surveyed the closed wound.

“I just watched a surgeon in the military hospital.”

In retrospect, Ellie decided she should have let Samson have a cooler scar. Doc Harriet had taken one look at Ellie’s closure and wanted her to apprentice with them permanently. On the other hand, Dina’s entire family was in her camp after that incident. Dina’s family, including her formidable grandmother, even had Ellie and Joel over for Sunday dinner a few days later. Their questions were exhausting, but the food was great.

All she’d had to do was accept them, and she had a family of a sort. Dina was as open as the rest of them, and in the end, Ellie guessed she had no choice in it all. She fell in love with Dina, but she’d also fallen in love with Dina’s family. They were like out of a fairy tale, impossibly perfect even in their conflicts. Ellie coveted them.

She just didn’t anticipate tearing a gaping hole in them.

One of Ellie's worst habits was to torment herself by imagining what really went down in Salt Lake City. Did Joel kill Marlene? What about the rest of the Firefly forces? How many were there? Had there been a choice at all or was Joel right about them giving up on the cure?

She could always tell when he lied. Joel had a great poker face, but Ellie knew him. He had lied about nearly everything involving Salt Lake City, but that didn’t make the reality easy to decipher. She wondered through the years in Jackson if her imagination wasn’t a thousand times darker than the secret he held.

But she was too much of a coward to broach it. She clung to his lie as justification for her happiness, her new life. The darkness still came out: at herself, her own happiness, her friends, and at Joel. His stifling protectiveness was an easy reason to carry such negativity towards him, a great outlet for the shouting matches they sometimes had.

Fuck Joel, though. She loved him, the bastard. He was her world as much as she was his, and they were stuck together for better or worse.

“What really happened?” she asked him over Dina's grave. Studying the freshly turned soil, she supposed there was no reason to fear his lie. Her happiness wasn’t at stake anymore.

“I didn’t come upon you until they were dragging you off. I didn’t know they had Dina. I don’t
She waved the apology off impatiently. “No, in Salt Lake City.” His shock made her laugh in disbelief. “You think I didn’t know you were lying? Tell me what happened.”

Joel leaned back under the shadow of the old oak by the cemetery. The bags under his eyes were outlined in shadow. The corners of his eyes widened in a look she’d only seen in him when he faced Tess and when he’d faced her: naked fear.

“I told you…”


He turned away from her, folded his arms, and spoke quietly. “They knocked me out. Took you straight to surgery. Marlene told me they were gonna cut you open and dissect you for a cure. I couldn’t let them.”

Not a lie. “How many did you kill?”

His answer was a growl, and his sharp stare was all aggression. “As many as it took.”

“And Marlene?” Ellie asked dully.

“She was just gonna come after you.”

So Marlene was dead. “Were there others like me?”

Joel sighed, defeat on his face. “I don’t know. I swear. I listened to a recording from the head doctor, and it sounded like he meant that.”

“What did it say?”

“Ellie, I can’t remember his exact terms. I was more worried about finding you.”

“So what you’re saying is they could have made a cure.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But you’d be dead either way.”

“She was going to tell me about my mother. She said when we got to where we were going that we’d have a long talk.”

“Marlene? Ellie, she chose to put you on that surgery table without waking you up. That’s not on me. Not on you neither.”

He was right. She’d thirsted for the knowledge about her mother that Marlene carried. She’d imagined that conversation many times over, but it was never an option in the end. It was annoying not to be able to blame Joel for that even if she could blame him for killing Marlene. A lump rose in her throat as she asked the true question. “How could I enjoy the life we had here when it was bought with their deaths?”

“Ellie—”

“You don’t get to answer that. Leave me alone, Joel. I’m tired.”

He sighed heavily. Ellie didn’t look at him, but she could easily picture his weary, sad expression and the fear that lurked behind his eyes. He’d known this was a house of cards, and his lie had
balanced it all. Now they were fucked, and neither one of them had a clue on how to unfuck it. Even if he wanted to earn her forgiveness, she wasn’t willing to give it.

It was becoming increasingly clear to her that she should have died in Salt Lake City. For now she still had her life; she needed to do something with it. Maybe this was her purpose all along: not to save but to kill. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of Dina’s fresh grave; instead she pictured Emily’s scarred face. Ellie firmed in her decision as the rightness of it settled in her bones. Her mind was all made up. Nothing else to live for now.

She would enjoy gutting the fucks when she caught up to them. There was no forgiving this evil, and anything she did to them would be justified. No one could change her mind. Not Maria: “Don’t waste the gift of those who survived, Ellie.” Not Tommy: “We need you here. Jerry can’t handle the load of all the animal work alone.” Not Ester: “Please don’t make me lose you too, Ellie.” Not even Gabby: “I can’t be their doctor. Please don’t leave me too.”

After Ellie announced her plan at the next town meeting, Jesse was a frequent visitor to the infirmary. Even while tending to patients, Ellie calculated food, weapons, and ammunition. Jesse was of like mind. He helped her collect materials and gathered a few willing members of his patrol group.

She should have been sleeping well out of exhaustion. She hovered on the knife edge of oblivion during the day, but as soon as her head hit the pillow, the gnawing agony of doubts surfaced. She reimagined that day over and over again, each time bringing Dina home. All her mistakes wore at her, a slogging treadmill of doubt and self-hatred.

“You should’ve checked out the rifle. You should’ve stayed conscious to go after them. You should’ve tracked them from the start instead of riding for Jackson.’

The worst was when she’d finally sleep and dream an extension of her imaginings. Jackson would be whole and Dina would be asleep next to her. When Ellie awoke still nursing the relief of her dream, it was like losing Dina all over again.

She had to get out of Jackson, do something, do anything but stay and regret that day for the rest of her life.

When everything was in place, Ellie spent her last night in Jackson in the little pink house she’d shared with Joel. She woke just before dawn after a restless night, tucked her supplies into her backpack, checked her pistol, rifle, and bow, and crept quietly downstairs.

Joel was waiting for her on the couch, his own heavy pack ready. His expression was grim with disappointment. “You still don’t think I know you.”

“Don’t try to stop me.”

“Like I said. I reckon we’re in this for the long haul.” He picked up his pack and tightened the straps over his shoulders. “Your little militia group waiting for you?”

“Just Jesse and a few others.”

“You consider that Jackson needs all of us right now?”

Ellie ignored him and went for the door. Joel sighed as he followed her. “Didn’t think so.”

As much as Joel had coddled her in Jackson, he backed off on the road. Maybe he sensed he would
get on her last nerve. Jesse’s crew hadn’t been an issue since Ellie killed five marauders by herself on her first day on patrol, and they trod lightly around her now.

Jesse had stopped talking to her directly. He was good-natured, easy-going, and had been somewhat civil after Dina dumped him for Ellie. She’d always liked Jesse. She looked up to him as a role model of sorts. He kept their group of nervous, annoying not-quite-adults in check, and his emphasis on safety meant they went months between injuries. He was also funny, handsome, and well-read. Aside from Dina, he was the one person in Jackson who liked her jokes.

It took Ellie a week after Dina kissed her at the dance to be brave enough to approach Jesse. She found him at the local watering hole and accepted one of the two drinks she was allotted per week as she sat down. The whiskey burned going down, but she liked the sharp taste and smell. It gave Jesse time to walk away if he didn’t want to talk to her. Or hit her.

“Hey,” she said awkwardly.

Jesse’s eyes flickered to her under his bangs. He shifted on his stool and didn’t greet her.

Ellie didn’t read open hostility in him despite the silent treatment, but she was afraid of finding any. He was lukewarm at best. Her apology came out in a rush. “Look, I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” he asked. She turned to face him and was startled to see the corner of his lips twitch in a tight smile. Some of her fear eased. She returned his smile tentatively, and they lapsed into silence for a long moment. Then he asked in a low tone, “One thing I want to know: why’d you say that stuff about us getting back together?”

“I don’t know.” Ellie sighed and rubbed her fingertips as she tried to put it into words. “Have you ever wanted something so bad you had to convince yourself you could never get it?”

Jesse shot her an impatient look. Okay, so she had to be blunt. “I’ve loved her for a long time.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Ellie sank into herself, scrunching her shoulders. She raised her glass to her mouth to gather her thoughts.

“Well, so have I,” he muttered. “She was my best friend up until you came.”

A nasty, jealous part of her was pleased she’d taken that spot from him. Then she admitted, “That’s all I thought I’d be. I’d start hoping sometimes… It was easier to just remind myself why I didn’t have a chance. I was actually kind of relieved when you two started dating.”

Relieved was simplification. Horrified, crushed, resigned, sunken into her own hell that she couldn’t tell anyone but Gabby about, but being so low afforded the relief that she couldn’t get any lower. Dina didn’t want her, couldn’t want her, and Ellie operated under the false assumption that she could get over her. It hadn’t worked; the agony was steady for the entirety of last year.

“So why?”

“Because I love her, and she seems to want to try it out with me. Before though, you two are my best friends. So what if I fell in love with Dina? As long as you’re both happy, I can deal. I never thought she could want me.”

“Because you’re a girl?”
“Yeah.” Part of her reticence was that fear she could transmit the infection, and by the time she learned otherwise, it was easier to keep up the charade. And if she was honest with herself, she’d never really felt deserving of that kind of happiness.

“Well, between you and me...” He took a slow sip and sighed. His jaw worked. “I wasn’t surprised to hear about you two making out that night.”

“We weren’t making out!” She wished away her hot blush, especially when memories of what she and Dina did for the first time the night before came to mind.

“Not what I heard. Look, Ellie, we’re good, okay? Just don’t ever bring this up again.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, watching him get out of his stool and leave without another word. That didn’t feel ‘good’, but it was better than nothing. He had been professional since then, a far cry from the quiet friendship they’d shared before. If Dina’s relationship drove the wedge between them, her death split them apart like a froe. Ellie wondered if Jesse blamed her as much as she blamed herself. Or as much as she blamed him. For all of his talk of safety, patrols, and caution, he’d been useless.

It took him nearly two months after they left Jackson to say anything to her again. His words were, “Jesus Christ.”

Ellie glanced up from the man that she’d just killed. She pulled her blade from his throat and leaned back on her heels. Joel emerged from around the adjacent building, his expression grim as he studied the scene:  the multiple knife wounds, blood on her hands, and the thrashing marks in the dirt.

In the end, the scarred man hadn’t given her anything worthwhile. He’d only repeated, “Noble is the sacrificed lamb for he will live in the embrace of the One Mother Eternal.”

There was no time to comment on Jesse’s squeamishness because whistles picked up on all sides. The cult descended upon them quickly, and they scattered to take cover. The skirmish ended within a few minutes. They killed all five enemies, but Kim was wounded in the process. No one gave Ellie the chance to get more information.

They retreated to what they hoped was a safe distance, taking cover in an abandoned building. Kim didn’t complain as they bound his wounded arm. Jesse set up watches to cover all sides from attack. When everything was organized, he turned to Ellie, who had been waiting for his critique.

“This isn’t who we are. We aren’t them,” Jesse accused her. His tone was rough and deep.

She had a reply ready. “Wake up, Jesse. You want to know where they’re going or if they’re coming back? Then we’ll have to fucking ask!”

“You caused this.” Jesse waved at Kim. Kim winced and looked away from the argument. “We’ve lost half our ammunition, our supplies are dwindling, and now they know we’re here. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Why do you think I left Jackson? I didn’t come out here for a little reconnaissance. I came here to right their wrong, to wipe them out.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“You think they should have killed me instead of Dina, don’t you?”
Jesse’s jaw bunched beneath his beard, and he was so predictable she almost laughed. “That isn’t —”

“You think I don’t think that too? Because I fucking do. I was just trying to buy us time.”

“What if they believed your bullshit about being immune? What if she’s with them right now?” There was real fear in his voice.

Was that his hope all along, his reason for coming with her? Ellie hadn’t let herself believe it. She’d go crazy with it, and she knew finding out Dina was dead all along would just be losing her all over again. Ellie shook her head. “I found her knife and necklace in a pile of burned bodies. These people don’t take prisoners.”

“What if they do? They could be experimenting on her because you told a lie!”

“I was trying to save her life!”

“For what? To be their caged pet? If they do that to the people they kill, what do you think happens to the ones they keep around?!” He sighed and dropped his face into his hands. Tears thickened his voice. “Even if she did get taken, she’s dead anyway, isn’t she? This was always a fool’s errand.”

He was right, and that pissed her off. She’d panicked, but she hadn’t known what these people were like. “At least I tried.”

“We’ve tracked them across Idaho. They have supplies, numbers, and they’re organized. They aren’t turning back to Jackson either, and now they know we’re here. Ellie, we’re done here.” His tone was that of defeat. Ellie wondered if she imagined his relief too.

“I’m not.”

“I won’t risk us for your revenge mission.”

“That’s your choice,” she responded. It was the beginning of the end, then. He and his men would go back to Jackson, leaving Ellie to forge her own path. She only had one problem to take care of after that.

At nightfall, Jesse and his men left. Ellie watched them go without regret. She sensed Joel was wavering too, and a part of her savored the chance to be just her again. She used to be so scared of being alone, but the thought was balm now. “Like old times, huh?”

“Ellie,” Joel said with quiet disapproval.

“Tell me, Joel: what was I supposed to do?”

“That was a risk. I’m starting to wonder if you actually want to come out of this alive.”

“Did you ever think I did?” she asked him without bothering to hide the edge in her voice.

His eyes were dark today. This was a day she had trouble reading anything beyond his expressions. He said, “Do you remember what I told you about survival? You find a reason, baby girl, and you live for that reason.”

“Oh, fuck you, Joel!” she exploded. “I don’t work like that. These people came into Jackson, they murdered half of us—”

“—and Dina is the one you feel down in your gut. I get it. You think you let her die. You think you
messed up, and this is your fault, so you’re gonna take as many of them out as you can before you get yourself killed.” He paused, taking a long breath to collect himself. She ignored the pain in his eyes. “Do you think I haven’t been where you are? None of the people I killed murdered my little girl, and killing them sure as hell didn’t bring her back.”

“I’m not talking about this, Joel.”

“We damn well are gonna talk about this!”

“Fine. This is it for me. Sorry I don’t live up to the perfection of Sarah!”

He didn’t take the bait. “This ain’t the way to go about it. I’m telling you this because I know. Don’t make my mistakes!”

“I know you think I’m a little kid, Joel. That I should be normal and good and sweet and just let her go the way you can let go of everyone in your life, but guess what? You raised me. Everything I’m doing I learned from you!”

Joel’s jaw tightened. “I gave you Jackson.”

“No, you took away my choices!”

“Death ain’t a choice,” he said evenly. “I didn’t give you one in that, but Marlene didn’t neither. If she really wanted you to choose, she would have waited for you to wake up. That woman didn’t see you as a person. All she wanted was the fungus in your head. You would have died for a chance at a vaccine. That didn’t sit right with me.”

“That wasn’t your call to make.”

“Then go find the Fireflies and make your choice with them! Don’t die here because you feel guilty you got away and Dina didn’t.”

He didn’t get it, but he never had. That had been her chance to do good with her life otherwise filled with fucking things up. She turned on Joel. “So what? You want to go back with them? I release you, Joel. Go back to Jackson, find another fucking reason to survive than me because I don’t plan to make it out of this alive.”

“I’m not leaving you.” His voice had dropped to gravel.

“You told me once that killing yourself isn’t easy. Well, it seems pretty damn easy where I sit. So you better go if you want to keep your reason for survival. Go find another replacement for your daughter and play house with her.”

“That’s not what you are, Ellie.”

She saw the truth in his eyes and couldn’t acknowledge it. She massaged her knuckles, setting her jaw and steeling herself to meet his gaze. “How did you put it? We’re going our separate ways. Because I’m not your daughter, and you sure as hell ain’t my dad.”

His chest rose and fell, and he slowly nodded as if he was looking at someone else. His brow pulled, and he cupped his watch. With a rough voice, Joel gritted out, “You done?”

“Done?” Ellie echoed in disbelief.

“With whatever it is you’re trying to accomplish by hurting me. I ain’t leaving you. We go together
or not at all.”

And just like that, Joel again proved to be the most loyal person in her life. Ellie felt the tug of love and the agony of regret. She didn’t want the guilt of Joel’s death hanging over her head, but it wasn’t greater than her guilt at survival. It was time to end this, even if Joel decided to go down with her.

The next three months were an exercise in danger even with Joel covering her back. She never managed to scout past the cult’s back scouts, but she did pick a few off at a time. She relied on her bow and knife mostly because she could snatch arrows from the scouts she killed. Their guns were from another age, using black powder and slugs instead of cartridges so there was little ammunition to be had.

From them she learned she could pack black powder into the tip of an arrow to blow someone apart at close range. From them she learned their whistling pattern, though working with Jackson’s herding dogs made it easy. ‘Left’, ‘right’, ‘lie low’, ‘double back’ were all familiar enough to recognize.

The cult moved systematically and had strict patrols. She couldn’t scout close enough to reach their center because they were so damn organized and communicated even across moderate distances.

The first time she got close enough to study the bigger party was between Idaho and Oregon. She caught sight of a boat crossing the river and settled in her hide to follow their movement with her scope. She was surprised by the kids and teenagers. Most of them were scarred. What surprised Ellie most were the smiles, the kids running freely in play between buildings, and the happiness some of them exuded.

She watched them load up kids and young women with care, then the scouts and scarred women forded the river. When Ellie was sure they’d all gone, she hiked the few miles to their camp. She found few traces of the camp other than some friendly dogs and two horses unwilling to cross with their masters.

Joel was only a few minutes behind. He propped his rifle upright and studied the shore. “Think there’s a pallet around here?”

Was her uncontrollable smile a betrayal? Ellie sighed and shook her head. She settled in for the night, comforted by the warmth of the two dogs that slept tucked up with her. She was hungry, and she knew Joel was too. They’d have to hunt for game soon or butcher one of the horses.

The cult didn’t leave them a boat, and the water was too cold and the river too wide to swim. Joel rode one of the horses north to find an intact bridge, and then it took a week to find traces of the cult again. They stuck to the big paved roads, which aided Ellie’s scouting. The path through Oregon’s dry mountains was hard. There was little cover, which was more dangerous for Ellie than for the cult. She had to distance herself from them more.

Every seventh day, they stopped like clockwork. It gave Ellie the opportunity to rest too. She and Joel scrounged for food when they passed through old towns. One mercy was that the cult wiped out and burned out whatever population of infected they encountered so she and Joel didn’t need to worry about covering for that threat.

The cult finally bedded down for good in Washington after a big snow. Based on her map, they were just east of Seattle up at high altitude. It was shockingly cold, but they had to be careful with a fire for heat. The scouts still snooped around, and they couldn’t afford to kill one of them and bring
the whole swarm coming.

Nearly two weeks into their long stay in the mountains, the sun started to burn off the last big snow that had stranded them all here. Ellie finally snuck as close to their camp as she’d ever gotten because few scouts than usual were patrolling. She was surprised to see so many of the cult crowded outside. She was shocked by their numbers even after all this time. Despite herself, she studied the faces of the children and women, hoping...

Was it fate to get this close only to witness a girl’s crucifixion? Ellie watched from a tree as Emily—recognizable even months later—led the horrifying torture. As much as she wanted to shoot the cunt, Ellie couldn’t fire into a crowd that had children in it. Instead, she watched the crucified girl scream in pain as her wrists were hammered into a plank. Then her torture continued as she was hoisted high to hang from her ruined arms.

After she’d seen those women and children at the river crossing, Ellie had let herself imagine something good about these people. She’d imagined maybe they enjoyed the safety their group afforded, like she’d enjoyed FEDRA without realizing the worst parts of it. But Jesse had been right; living with the cult wasn’t a mercy over death at their hands.

There was no choice, not with the clean shot she had. The girl was high and set apart enough not to risk hitting a bystander. Ellie settled the rifle on her shoulder, braced herself in her perch, and centered the reticle on the girl’s face.

Her head exploded in a mist of red. No more pain. No more suffering.

The whistles woke her from the trace she’d been in. Ellie cursed as she realized the danger too late. She scrambled out of the tree and fell the last ten feet, twisting her knee and ankle. Ellie ducked behind the tree just as a bullet blew open the trunk next to her. Her face stung, and blood dripped into her eye.

Ellie sprinted through the forest as more gunfire sounded. They’d set upon her quickly, and there was no hiding her footprints in the melting snow. Fuck.

She collapsed into a small bank of an old creek, distancing herself from her tracks. She gasped as she crouched below the lip of soil fifteen yards away, then held her breath as she listened. The cultists had followed her, and their whistles were cautious now. She could pick them out from the forest only by practice, but it would be easy for someone ignorant of them to mistake the soft hooting whistles as wildlife.

Ellie crawled under the bank, her rifle braced again. She listened carefully as she moved. Three? Maybe three. She heard one approaching from her left and carefully lifted her rifle over the lip of the bank. As the cultist woman moved out of cover, Ellie pulled the trigger.

The rifle retort hurt her ear, and the cultist’s shoulder exploded in a mist of red. Ellie ducked back down and scrambled farther down the bank. When another cultist dropped over the bank, she put a bullet through his skull. She gasped as the second man dropped nearly on top of her. She swung the butt of her rifle at him—out of rounds now—but he seized it on her second blow, his scarred face twisted with a snarl.

He threw her like a rag doll, and she rolled hard across the creek. The freezing water was dangerous even only a foot high, and it soaked through her clothing. She drew her knife and swung, slicing his hand open as he reached for her again. He howled as she darted away. She turned to run, but he grabbed her by the hair, jerking her feet out from under her.
Ellie flailed and sliced, kicking him again.

“Wretch!” he screamed as she broke free. Ellie sprinted down the creek bed, her breath loud in her ears. She could hear his steps behind her but couldn’t risk looking. When he took her to the ground, his weight crushed her into the wet pebbles of the creek bed. She rolled before he could force her head underwater, slicing blindly with her knife. He howled, she scrambled out from under him. When he grabbed her ankle, she twisted to kick his face.

Their struggle drew them close to the sound of rushing water. Ellie flinched as she saw the steep drop of the creek into a much larger waterfall. In that momentary lapse, the cultist seized her bag and shoved her hard towards the drop until her toes were balanced on the edge. Her eyes drawn to the rushing falls below them as she flailed, gravity tipping her forward over the edge of a cliff. Below them, the water rushed by in two massive streams that met in a vortex of the roaring torrent.

The only thing that prevented her fall was the cultist’s grip on her backpack.

“The demons and wolves are scourged from the Earth and thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur,” he shouted over the roar of the falls as Ellie wobbled on the precipice of the cliff. Their breaths condensed into heavy puffs of fog around their faces. She waved her arms for balance as he dangled her over the edge of the abyss.

“Righteous is he who reaps the sin of animals!”

Funny how Ellie’s first instinct was to believe completely that Joel would save her. She believed it even as the cultist pushed her, in the frozen moments of pitching face-first towards the roaring mass of river.

There was little time to revel in the drop of her gut before she struck the freezing mass of water. She was swept up and spun in a vortex more powerful than Jackson’s entire herd, unable to control even where her limbs went. She was a wet rag doll in a washing machine, without any knowledge of up or down, left or right, cartwheeling and flipping at the mercy of the torrential river around her.

She slammed into a hard surface underwater, crushed to it by the force of the water, sure she’d drown. Then another hard rush of water blasted her out of the nook, and she found her head above water, the water’s roar just as deafening in the air as below it.

Air came harder than water when she was thrust upward, and she gasped a thin whisper of air around the water in her nose and lungs. Ellie choked and gagged before going under again. Even free from that underwater prison, she was sure she’d drowned. Then her backpack nearly dislocated her shoulders, drawing her head out of water again so she could gag up a warm burst of water. More air came around the water, and the next choking retch wracked her body. All the while, her body still rolled around with the force of the water as her pack anchored her.

Ellie’s body shuddered as she reached for her pack. She couldn’t feel her fingertips, but she was able to get her knees around to kick at the branches holding her. A fucking tree in the middle of the river had snagged her. After desperate minutes, she was free, kicking and struggling against a softer flow of water until she dragged herself out on a pebbled bank what felt like hours and hundreds of miles later.

She coughed again, gagging and gasping as she got on her knees. Her chest jerked in uncontrollable paradoxical coughs to get out water as it also tried to suck in air. She collapsed again, finally drawing a full ragged breath, shuddering uncontrollably as air whispered thin into her aching lungs. She stared up at the surreal symmetric triangular thrust of snow up the bank. Shelter?
It was the hardest thing she’d ever done to drag herself to the old hut. She fumbled in her pocket to pull out her knife, and it took too long to snap it open. When Ellie cracked the door open, she squinted into the darkness, unable to quietly enter because coughs still racked her body.

The hut was heavy with spores, but the source was a desiccated corpse in the corner. The windows were all boarded up, protecting the cordyceps from sunlight. Ellie crawled past the corpse, already feeling warmer. She was so fucking tired, but she couldn’t stop now.

There was a jury-rigged fireplace in the center of the hut. Beside it was a stack of thin dry twigs. Turned before he could light a fire, huh? Ellie’s hands shook uncontrollably as she opened her backpack. The waterproof container inside was nearly impossible to open. Lighting the match was the most physically difficult thing she’d ever done, and she cupped the burning match in her hands, dropping it onto the small pile of tinder she’d scraped together last time she replaced her fire pack. The match lit the tinder, and the tiny twigs caught too. Her shuddering breath nearly made the thin flame go out.

“Fuck...” Ellie sat for a few seconds with her hands cupped over the fire. Then she started stripping off her wet clothes. The clothing itself was painfully cold on her fingertips, but better to be naked than sit in cold cotton.

It took hours to warm up. She ate a piece of her dwindling pemmican and lay curled up facing the fire. She even braved an old itchy blanket in the building. The combination of soft smoke and spores stung her eyes, but the heat was the most important thing right then.

A cursory inventory revealed that she’d lost her rifle and her bow string had snapped. The bow miraculously had tangled up with her bag’s straps. She had a few spare strings in her bag. Her pistol was gone too, but she hadn’t had ammo for it anymore. Dina’s bracelet was still on her arm, the biggest fucking miracle of it all.

Talk about a good luck charm.

By the time morning came around, Ellie couldn’t move her back. Her muscles had seized up in a column of tense pain, and her face ached. Her ankle was swollen, her knee ached, and she had raised bruises all over her. It was going to take some time to heal and get back on the road, but there was no doubt in her mind that surviving this meant she had more work to do.

“I wonder if he thinks I’m dead,” Ellie told the infected corpse. “Yeah,” she said, her noisy exhalation sending spores spinning across the room. The light from the window she’d cracked illuminated the swirling spores. “Yeah, I didn’t think so either, but it would be better that way.”

Joel never found her in the ten days it took to return to function. All that sitting around gave her time to take care of some mundane issues: cutting her hair for one. Inventory didn’t take long given her supplies waned as days went on. Her thoughts only multiplied. She slept a lot and worried almost as much. Was Joel still alive?

The corpse in the corner offered some diversion by way of conversation, especially after she found the stash of canned goods hidden under a loose plank by his desiccated hand. Ellie thanked him and told him he was a better conversationalist than Joel ever had been. From boredom alone, she fashioned him a straw hat. When she set the lopsided hat on the sprouting fungal plates that had destroyed the corpse’s skull, Ellie realized she was going fucking insane. She left that day.

The insanity seemed to follow her from that isolated hell. The weather had warmed dramatically, and travel was hard from all the damn mud. As Ellie made her way north, she struggled with her decision to push on instead of doubling back to search for Joel. He’d asked for it, following her.
The thought didn’t ease the new layer of guilt that tightened around her heart.

Ellie had a job to do: kill the cult. If she turned back now, what was the point of all of this?

Though Ellie was sure she could catch back up to the cult, she struggled too with the fear of losing their tracks. It took some time to figure out where she was, but either by skill or dumb luck, she found a marked highway within a few days. By then, smoke was rising in steady columns to the west, rendering her fear moot.

When Ellie came upon the city, she knew without a doubt that FEDRA had it—or at least they had it before the cult swept in. Just that first night, Ellie found dead everywhere. The cultists had left rotting bodies hanging above the streets, and by the smoke, the cult was trying to clear the dead.

Ellie was humbled by Seattle’s losses. She couldn’t help but think that at least it hadn’t been that bad in Jackson. Ellie presumed whatever population that remained in Seattle went into hiding or was folded into the cult...if they did fold anyone into the cult. Jackson hadn’t been given that option, not that anyone would have taken it.

Then again, she remembered the large number of children and women in the deepest part of their traveling camp. No way they could breed that many kids on the road.

What the hell was she going to do? Ellie crouched in the street to study the men hanging overhead. She remembered her vow and offered a tight smile to the dead men above her. Kill them all, starting with that bitch, Emily. Ellie didn’t plan to make it any easier than Emily made it for her own people.

All Ellie saw as she slipped through Seattle the next day were cult scouts and infected. The cult was picking off FEDRA soldiers and any civilians that they found. Ellie never found any of Seattle’s residents before the cult did. When she saw a living one, he was usually strung up, about to be gutted. More and more dead rotted as they hanged, and Seattle’s scent worsened by the day.

Vultures and crows feasted, and the buzzing of flies was painfully loud.

At least there were good weapons and some ammunition to scrounge from FEDRA. Ellie was pleased with the condition of the pistol she’d found, and she had a few rounds for it. It was nice to another weapon at her disposal.

Ellie picked off a few of the cultists when she could, but she made her mistake when she was spotted sneaking through a large scouting party. When an old scarred woman cried, “Wolf! Wolf!” Ellie knew she was fucked.

An hour later, she was holed up in the upper floor of an abandoned building to patch herself up as well as she could. She had no food, no medical supplies, and her pain made her head swim. Another close call to add to the others. The arrow to her shoulder was the worst, though the dark bruise swelling her upper arm didn’t help. She had a furrow of ruined skin on her arm from a rifle shot, and the machete had nearly taken off her head. She wasn’t sure she could draw her bow if needed.

There hadn’t been a FEDRA seal on the door of this hide, but by the supplies, someone had lived here recently. Ellie tried not to gorge herself, but she drank so much water she nearly reflexively pissed herself. She used alcohol to treat her wound and screamed into a pillow as she did.

Sleep was a fevered dream, restless but deep in its own way. The fear, rage, and despair that choked her blackened everything in her mind’s eye—endless loops of violence and pain—
compounded the driving need to keep moving or die. Or be the cause of everything, to take all the blame, to be the reason for losing everything that she loved.

When Ellie woke in her nook again, it was dark outside. She was sweating and cold, and every part of her ached, inside and out. She made herself eat. She drank as much water as she could stomach and changed her bandage. When Ellie pressed at her shoulder wound, pus bubbled from it, and the sour scent made her gag. She opened a bag of sugar and packed it in, gasping at the pain. Then she wrapped it up tight.

Fuck.

She needed antibiotics; her dressing wouldn’t do alone. Something. She’d have to wait until nightfall the next day and hope her fever didn’t get worse. If she was sweating through it, maybe she would be okay.

She dreamed that night of the last moments she had with Riley in the restless way that fever brought out bad memories. They’d woken at dawn the day following the attack after a restless night. Ellie knew without asking that Riley didn’t feel good. Her skin had gone gray, and tears slipped from the corner of her eyes at a near constant drip. She winced in light and pressed her wrist to her forehead almost constantly. Ellie struggled with her body too. She was feverish, nauseated, and terrified. They’d managed some bravado immediately after being bitten, but bedding down that night on a covered rooftop, darkness had let fear dig its claws in them.

They’d left the pistol between them, knowing without saying that the first to go would be put down. Ellie hoped it was her; she couldn’t face shooting Riley. She imagined letting Riley kill her, succumbing to her friend nobly instead of killing her. What Ellie really hoped was that turning was oblivion. She’d take pain over knowing what was happening to her.

By midday that day, Riley was slurring and crying tears of blood. She’d managed to tell Ellie where to find Marlene. She told Ellie leave her or kill her, but Ellie hadn’t listened. Five minutes later, Riley’s last coherent sentence was: “It's too bright.”

The time before and after shooting Riley was a blur. Ellie just wished the act of shooting her was too. She’d hoped for a touch of madness and prayed that when it was her turn to lose her mind, she’d forget it all.

Even years later, Ellie faded into a waking nightmare of Riley’s twisted expression of rage. She’d remember her own fear of her friend, the instinct of survival that made her the opposite of noble. She’d remember the way the back of Riley’s head blew open from the bullet and how Riley kept screaming for nearly thirty seconds after the first shot. The second bullet only made it worse, and after that Ellie just stood and begged forgiveness as she watched Riley’s last few minutes of deep, rattling breaths.

Ellie hadn’t known where to take herself after that. She kept waiting to feel something different, to go crazy, but when the hunger for food and thirst for water set in and her fever faded, she’d wondered if she would turn at all. Even if her record at Military Prep hadn’t been so bad, she knew she’d be killed after scanning positive. Instead of returning to her safe prison, she sought out Marlene. If she was as good as friend as the letter from Ellie’s mother suggested, she might offer Ellie somewhere to belong. It was Riley’s last command too.

Maybe she could do something good in her miserable life. There didn’t seem much other reason to survive all this horror if not to serve the greater good in some way. Maybe Marlene would offer that to her. A part of her she didn’t want to acknowledge hoped to latch onto an adult who would
stand as a foundation in her life. Maybe Marlene would finally be different than everyone else who’d let her down by not wanting her.

Ellie awoke with a moan, shaking off the weird mix of horror and hope that the dream had put in her. She blinked away tears and took an agonizing breath as she sat up. Time to get up and keep moving. After all this, she refused to die lying down.

Ellie tried to remember where FEDRA had kept its medical supplies for civilians in Boston. There had been a general infirmary, a kind of hospital for civilians. FEDRA itself had a military hospital that was much better stocked. She’d been admitted there once as a kid for pneumonia and had been stuck working there during military prep years later. They even had a surgeon, and their chemist synthesized anesthetic agents to allow general anesthesia.

Even if her memory of Boston were better, Seattle’s layout was a mystery. The cult had plundered much of its stores, but from what Ellie could gather, there hadn’t been such a huge segregation of civilian and military here in Seattle. That also meant Ellie couldn’t guarantee where all the best supplies were. In Boston, stores were behind FEDRA seal, nearly the same seal that had blocked condemned buildings. It was a neat trick, but it was also part of the reason why so many people explored condemned buildings and got infected.

She slipped out of her hide at dusk the next day, feeling shaky and weak. She moved too loudly and too slowly, but after their sweep the day before, the cultists seemed to have abandoned this area. Ellie kept her eyes peeled for any sort of pharmacy or physician’s office. It was unlikely this long after the collapse, but maybe FEDRA had set up shop in the already-established buildings.

Ellie searched for several hours and only found an old tube of triple antibiotic cream. She pocketed it. She was shivering now, freezing in the cool evening air. Ellie considered holing up for the night, but she caught sight of a pharmacy sign down the street.

Something was in the store. Ellie listened with her breath held. Not infected, not an animal either by the systematic movements. Someone sorting for supplies too. She looked over the edge of the broken out window.

The figure was big and wore a dark coat and boots. Ellie couldn’t make out the hair, but that sure as fuck looked like a cultist. She made little noise as she considered her options. She had no ammunition at all. She’d broken her machete off in that fucker’s neck during her last fight. Just her broken body and her switchblade, then, but maybe he had supplies. She’d survived worse odds before.

Ellie opened the door and slipped quietly into the store. The figure turned his head, paused, and listened. Ellie froze. Then he turned fully, saw Ellie with her knife, and they were on each other. Ellie dodged the first blow and the second, but her enemy swept her legs like a fucking ninja.

The blow against the ground made her choke back a scream. She put her foot in his crotch, and the figure grunted and staggered in pain. Ellie tried to get her feet, but her enemy fell on her. Ellie got one cut in, slicing her enemy’s palm, but then her enemy seized her wrist and slammed it into the ground. Ellie’s switchblade spun off out of reach.

Ellie slammed her forehead into her enemy’s face, and her opponent rocked back on his heels. Ellie burst out from under him and scrambled for her blade, but her enemy seized her wounded shoulder and wrapped an iron grip around her neck. Air and blood pinched off, and Ellie struggled against that powerful arm.
Her opponent’s hand closed over Ellie’s mouth, and his grip on her neck loosened. Then a voice whispered in her ear, “Shh. Shh.”

She was dead. She was so fucking dead. Like this. A single opponent and… The arm loosened, and Ellie took a gagging breath through her nose. She coughed against the wet hand on her mouth.

Then she heard the whistle in the street. Footsteps—slow and measured—followed. Ellie tried to soften her breathing, as did the person who had her wrapped up like a vice. Those footsteps continued down the street and didn’t pause, especially when a high whistle went out. The cultists had found another victim, and the person holding her wasn’t one of them.

“You okay?” came the quiet murmur in her ear.

A woman? Jesus. Ellie nodded against the hand over her mouth.

“You going to kill me if I let you go?”

Ellie shook her head. When the woman let her go, Ellie moved slowly and retrieved her knife. She turned, studied the woman in the darkness, and closed the knife. Not a cultist, not with her single braid and smooth cheeks. The woman smiled at her and held out her hand. It was surreal to shake it. She still spoke quietly. “I’m Sarah. Nice to meet you. I assume you’re not with the Seraphites?”

“Are you for fucking real?” Ellie whispered in disbelief. When the woman kept studying her, Ellie supplied, “Ellie.”

“What are you doing here?”

Ellie gazed at Sarah and her mouth went dry. “I don’t know.”

“You and me both,” Sarah replied.

“Are you FEDRA? Do you have medical supplies?”

She nodded in the affirmative to both questions, lifted her giant pack, and motioned for Ellie to follow. They slipped through the street quietly and entered a hide so well disguised that Ellie was sure she couldn’t have found it on her own. The setup was good: plenty of space, shelter from the wind, and an enclosed room that shielded their flashlights from the outside.

Ellie pulled up short in confusion when she saw two cultists in the room. Just two, so her immediate reaction of distrust faded. These two were just kids. Then she saw the girl’s left arm, twisted but in a sling. She glanced back at Sarah, taking in her military clothing, and wondered how the fuck these three found each other. Sarah was watching her intensely, and Ellie saw that her hand was on the grip of her knife. She felt a chill pass over her when she realized Sarah’s dangerous intent.

“I’m after Emily, not kids,” Ellie explained.

The two cultist kids glanced at each other. “Emily’s dead,” the boy said at last.

Ellie laughed at herself, angry at the tears that came up to choke her. Just like that, her balloon popped. “I’ve been hunting her since Wyoming. Was gonna string her up and gut her.” Ellie nodded at the girl’s arm, remembering the girl she’d saved with death. “Pre-crucifixion?”

“You’re our wolf,” the cultist girl said with dawning realization. Her gaze moved across Ellie again. “You killed Adah on the cross.”
“What did she do to deserve that?”

“She disobeyed.”

“Is that what you did?”

“More than that. I killed Emily.”

“Well, fuck you,” Ellie muttered as she sank down on her ass. “And good job.”

“Who is she?” The boy directed his question at Sarah. Sarah didn’t look up from washing and wrapping her hand as she said, “Killed a dozen Seraphites two days ago. Tracked her to her hide, but a patrol swept through, and I had to get out. Why don’t you introduce yourself?”

He looked at Ellie with distrust. “I’m Lev.”

“Yara,” the girl said.

“Ellie. You FEDRA?” When Sarah nodded, Ellie asked, “How the hell did you three end up together?”

“Hell’s the word. They saved my life.” Sarah motioned for Ellie to come into the light. She tugged off Ellie’s shirts.

“At least buy me a drink first,” Ellie joked lamely. Her bandage was stuck to her wound, and it ripped away in the worst way. “Fuck!”

Sarah studied the sugar coating the wound and nodded. “Infected? Good trick. Gotta clean it out and pack it again.” Sarah propped Ellie against an old couch and instructed Lev to lift the lamp to shine down on Ellie’s wound. She picked up a rough-bristled brush, splashed a sliver of soap into a water pail, and handed Ellie a padded stick. “Bite.”

Ellie screamed herself hoarse around the gag as Sarah scrubbed her wound until it bled. Ellie’s world grayed out as she gagged and gasped. Tears leaked from her eyes, and her heart pounded. Sarah smeared more sugar into Ellie’s wound, and Ellie groaned at the agony. Then Sarah pressed a padded bandage against her shoulder and wrapped it tight. “We’ll change it tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” she thought to say. Sarah studied the purpling bruise on Ellie’s left shoulder.

“Is it dislocated?”

“No. Fucker got me with a sledge hammer though.”

Sarah soaked bandages in water and pressed their cool mass against the bruise. Sarah sat back down and cupped her crotch with a wince. Ellie felt herself grin for the first time in months. “I got you good.”

The look Sarah shot her was ugly. “I was trying not to hurt you.”

“Glad you weren’t trying then. Can I take the couch?”

“Knock yourself out,” Sarah muttered in a low drawl. Ellie glanced back at her in confusion. That tone and those words were shockingly familiar, but she couldn’t place why. Ellie settled on the couch and fell asleep while she turned that new thought over in her head. She slept hard for the first time in weeks.
Ellie woke with a gasp and a groan. The big figure leaning over her seemed so familiar, but as soon as Ellie opened her mouth to greet him, she realized this wasn’t Joel. Instead, Sarah—pale-eyed and pale-haired with an oddly familiar expression—loomed over her and patted her with an MRE wordlessly. She was more shocked that she trusted Sarah so implicitly than that Sarah hadn’t betrayed her.

The MRE tasted better than Ellie remembered from Boston, but she’d never been this hungry in the QZ.

“Feel better?” Sarah asked.

Ellie nodded without giving it much thought. She glanced between Sarah and the two kids that sat huddled beside her. “So what now?”

They all looked as at a loss as Ellie felt. Then Sarah firmed in the face of their uncertainty. “I need to get Yara into the QZ to my clinic.”

“What are you going to do there?”

“Fix her.”

Ellie glanced at Yara again; her face was milky pale and drawn into a constant grimace of pain. She wondered what kind of magic treatment would cure that in the middle of a fucking siege, but she couldn’t voice her doubt in front of Yara. It wouldn’t be fair to strip her hope.

Sarah continued, “But we need help.”

There it was. Ellie glanced away from Sarah’s pointed stare and looked away from the kids too. She couldn’t afford to take the time and effort to help them, not when she had another selfish task to perform.

“Please.” It was Lev who spoke this time.

Ellie pressed her face into her hands, hating the way her resolve wavered. She rubbed her face vigorously and wondered at her original purpose in all this. Tears thickened her voice as she looked to the cult kids. All along, it was the same pattern as always: deny the possibility of the one thing she wanted most. She almost couldn’t believe herself when she asked, “My friend was taken from Jackson. Dina. I think she was killed, but… She’s short, shorter than me. Dark curly hair, freckles.”

Lev and Yara exchanged a look. “All initiates are renamed when they take the marks,” Yara replied at last. “But we initiated a new lamb into the flock after our attack in Wyoming. Emily named her Leah. She’s alive. She’s a matriarch.”

A rush of hope and terror swept through Ellie. Then Sarah dryly added, “She lived on to gut some of ours.”

That hope was gone. It was sobering to realize she’d unconsciously clung to the futile notion that Dina was alive even while denying it in the first place. She thought she’d been hopeless before, but the emotion that settled over Ellie was heavy and dark. She accepted its weight and felt some of the burning drive to kill fade. Emily was dead, after all. So was Dina. Definitively.

It was better this way. Better for Dina to be dead than to be one of them. Being forced into the cult’s murderous bidding would have broken Dina. She was too good, and she believed her eternity was tied to being good.
Better too that Ellie didn’t have the chance to lose her again.

“Then it’s not her. Dina would never hurt someone else, not like that.” Ellie turned her mind to
other matters, able to put this to bed finally. It wasn't as shattering as she'd feared it would be, even
if it was agony. “So how do we sneak Yara to your clinic?”

“Carefully.”

“Enlightening,” she retorted sarcastically. “What do we do when we get there?”

“Get her healthy enough to leave, and then get out of here.”

Still so fucking helpful. “Just leave it? Wasn’t this your QZ?”

Sarah’s expression darkened. “Sometimes that’s all we can do to survive: leave death behind and
start fresh. Find something else. I’ve done plenty of that in my life.”

“We can’t leave,” Yara argued. “We have to save my sisters and brothers. Our faith has corrupted
us. This isn’t the right path. I was found out before I could set my plan in motion, but with Emily
dead, we can do this.”

“What path?” Ellie asked her.

“This path of killing. We’re dying off. We lost the majority of our flock during our journey west.
We’ll die out, and we’re no closer to stopping the spread of infection: to man and animal. We have
to find a cure.”

Sarah's tone was strained and sharp as she snapped, “Cordyceps is species-specific. It doesn’t
spread to animals.”

“I’ve seen it, Sarah. It’s spreading west with us. It’s why we’ve coming this far, to out-kill the
infection.” Yara was as earnest now as she’d been begging for help for her people.

With all that Ellie had seen, infected animals didn’t seem that surprising anymore. However, Sarah
looked like she would be sick even as she continued to deny the possibility vehemently. Her
certainty was too desperate to ring of confidence. “Even if you’re right, and you can’t be, we’ve
been trying for a cure since Outbreak. I lost hope a long time ago. Maybe if FEDRA hadn’t decided
to kill the immune with the infected...but they did. That screwed us from the start.”

“Immunity is a myth,” Ellie tested.

Sarah glanced at her askance. “FEDRA propagated that lie. All who scan positive killed
immediately? I can understand early in the infection process, but now… Better to have a two-day
quarantine. So, yes, inside QZ there are no immune people; outside is another story. The Fireflies
were finding them all over the country. Not many, but enough to know it happens.”

Ellie’s stomach turned over. Joel had lied. He’d told her he lied, that he stretched the truth about a
stupid recording he’d heard. Ellie knew it had been a lie, but Sarah was saying he was telling the
truth.

Sarah nodded as if guessing the reason for her astounded silence. “There aren’t many immune
people, maybe three percent of the population, but they exist. FEDRA was waiting for the Fireflies
to manufacture a cure or a vaccine while working on their own experiments. They were going to
sweep in and steal it. The Fireflies were at their last resource and only had a few men. Wouldn’t
have been hard.”
“What happened?” Ellie asked dully.

“Someone beat us—they, I guess—to the punch.”

“Fuck.” Ellie buried her face in her hands and exhaled Shakily into her palms. Joel had brought the Fireflies down entirely, but she’d already suspected that. The other part though...he hadn’t lied, not really. All those years of resentment over that lie... Wasted. She’d wasted so much time with him. She’d thrown him away so carelessly.

Sarah ignored her shock and continued, “There was some research that suggested a slightly higher rate of regression if the patient was bitten prior to puberty. Never seemed to be the case later. I’m halfway surprised the Seraphites don’t inoculate their children to weed them out.”

Yara said, “It was done at the beginning, but Emily outlawed the practice. So few survived.”

“Are you immune?” Sarah asked her. Ellie lifted her gaze to see Yara and Lev shake their heads. “We had eight cousins. None of them survived the infection. Emily halted the testing before we had to undergo the trial.”

“No wonder they stopped. Morale must have been horrible, killing kids like that.” Sarah rubbed her mouth as if the thought made her sick to her stomach.

“How the fuck do you know all this about the Fireflies and FEDRA?” Ellie directed her question at Sarah, who seemed surprised by it. Sarah’s jaw clenched and she studied her hands, a rueful smile softening her face. She wouldn’t meet Ellie’s eyes as she explained, “I’m a doctor. I’ve been researching the infection for nearly twenty years. God knows what state my lab is in now.”

Of all the fucking possibilities... It was inevitable, wasn’t it? It had always been about her immunity and about finding a cure with it. Ellie felt pulled by the tide of something bigger than her, a roaring river of fate. Instead of tearing her away from the cure as it had with Joel, now fate was sweeping her towards it.

“I’m immune,” Ellie admitted with a heavy sigh. Yara’s entire face lit up with hope as Sarah’s gaze sharpened with curiosity. Lev looked from them to Ellie as if realizing the implications himself. Ellie studied them right back and knew that death by revenge wasn’t an option anymore. Maybe she’d survived to get this far for a goddamn reason that she’d been too short-sighted to notice before. She opened her hands in offering and asked, “So what do we do about that, doc?”
“What are you doing, kiddo?”

It was odd to hear words anymore, not with the way Ellie ignored him and the way he let her. Traveling with her through Oregon had been a trial in patience and worry. Joel wondered sometimes if it would be better to try to turn her around by force, but Joel knew his girl well enough to see nothing but disaster in that approach. She hadn’t tried to ditch him yet, and as long as he remained with her, there was a chance of bringing her out of this alive.

She’d pushed him away to protect him, a nobler motivation than when he’d uttered the words she repeated in mockery to him. He’d only been about protecting himself when he’d gutted her in that ranch house.

“You’re not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain’t your dad.”

He should have known better than to think she’d forget that. Given how easily she repeated it back to him, Joel knew he’d torn a hole in her with those words. She sure as hell tore one in him.

“Turn’about’s fair play,” he mumbled to himself as he rested his cheek on his rifle stock. He kept his finger off the trigger as he used the scope to spot Ellie’s perch up in an old cedar tree. He hoped the cultists didn’t think to look up. It was a stupid position and stupidly close to their camp. What was she doing? She hadn’t told him of any plans that day, not that she’d been talking to him much in the last few lonely months.

The cultists—he wished he remembered their name just for something to call them—had bedded down in an old ski resort. Must have been a popular place back in the day given how much natural snow it got this late in the season, though thankfully a lot of that was melting off now. He and Ellie found an old house in the neighboring town, but Ellie set out every day in the cold to snoop.

The trees had grown into what he was sure were old ski trails, and Ellie was perched in one now. Fairly close was a picturesque waterfall fed by multiple creeks and a river roaring from the runoff. It would’ve been a pretty spot under any other circumstances, the kind of place he might’ve thought to bring Sarah for a long road trip back before everything fell apart.

It took a few minutes to find a good vantage point farther up the mountain—on the ground, thank you—to catch sight of what Ellie was watching.

They were crucifying a little girl.

He could barely stomach watching both the girl and all the others that witnessed her execution with evident horror too. Not many of them seemed happy to see one of their sisters tortured in such a way.

A familiar face drew his attention. It was like stepping on a nail, the cold sweep of shock that rose high in his chest. He aimed his rifle back, trying to find that familiar, young freckled face. Jesus Christ, was Dina still alive?

As hard as he searched, he couldn’t catch sight of her again. Just as his scope settled on the girl who screamed as they propped her up high to hang from her bleeding, pulped arms, a rifle retort
broke the silence of the slope. Instinctively, Joel jerked his fingers away from the trigger. The reticle had been centered on the girl’s face, and he cursed in surprise as he watched it explode in a familiar plume of meat.

Past his immediate shock, Joel wasn’t surprised. This was inevitable. Ellie was too damn soft for her own good. She couldn’t witness suffering without trying to end it one way or another. She’d surely just brought the whole damn cult down on the two of them because she’d had to end that poor girl’s suffering.

Joel jerked his weapon around to watch Ellie half fall out of her tree.

“No, go, go,” he whispered under his breath, his voice catching as the trunk by her head splintered in time with another crack of gunfire. Joel hunkered down into his cover, listening as scouts whistled and fanned out in practiced precision. His breathing picked up as he fought his instinct to run after Ellie and rescue her, risks be damned.

She was less liable to get hurt without having to protect him too.

Joel got his knife into two cultists as he moved down the mountain slope a few precious yards at a time. Another battle was going on closer to the falls—gunfire only briefly exchanged—and he hastened to get there alive. There were two dead cultists near a creek bed and two more figures near what looked to be by a steep drop above the falls.

He lost all sense of stealth as he realized that was Ellie hanging over the edge of the creek. Her arms were flailing, and she was on her tiptoes, held from falling only by the cultist man gripping her pack. Joel tore into a sprint and reached out—useless from twenty yards away—as the cultist pushed her.

Just like that, she was gone.

Joel sprinted at the cultist and grabbed him around the neck to slam his blade into the man’s neck. He tossed the body aside to scramble to look over the edge of the drop-off. Bitterly cold water flowed around his hands and legs, stripping sensation and strength. From as close to the edge of the drop-off as he dared, Joel stared down futilely at the twenty-foot drop into a rushing roar of moving water.

“No,” he realized he was whispering. “No, no…”

He saw no traces of Ellie other than her sneaker marks in the mud by his hands. There was no place she could have caught on her way down. It was a straight path down into roaring rapids. Christ, this couldn’t have happened. He couldn’t have let it happen.

An arrow whizzed by his shoulder, and he collapsed on his belly. Even with half of him gone with Ellie, Joel’s instincts were ingrained. He crawled to cover under the opposite bank, and the next few minutes were a desperate fight for survival. As soon as he thought he could get away to get downriver and search for Ellie, another scarred scout would descend on him and the process would all start again.

Finally he was forced into a hand-to-hand with a man with a fireman’s axe. His enemy was bigger and younger than he was, but Joel had experience and desperation on his side. They struggled over the big hammer on a steep incline just downriver from the falls before Joel set his feet and twisted to catch the young man off balance. He raised the axe to bring down on his enemy, but the ground gave way. The clay bank collapsed under their weight, sending them both skidding down a small mudslide towards the river.
Joel scrambled for purchase and—with his heart in his throat—managed to shimmy under a loamy overhang, gasping in the wet freezing air kicked up by the rapids. The man he’d struggled with tumbled farther down the bank and was swept away in a second, dragged under the water not to surface again. Joel waited in his precarious position, filthy, breathless, and shaking from the cold as whistles picked up again.

He would be exposed if they searched the opposite bank, but he couldn’t move as scouts stepped audibly over his hiding place.

“He went in.”

“It’s not confirmed.”

“It won’t be if he’s in the river.”

“We can’t lie to Emily, Hannah. None of us saw the river take the wolf.”

“We saw Matthew sacrifice himself to take the wolf into the river. We’ll tell her that.” The woman spoke with authority enough to shut up the man arguing with her. They walked away, whistling all clear to the other scouts. Joel leaned his head back against the bank and exhaled shakily.

Too damn close. But it always was until it was done. He just wasn’t done yet.

Joel crouched in the freezing clay gap for a few minutes more, gazing at the rushing water that collapsed into a frothing torrent. The falls seemed even bigger by this vantage. His heart dropped low into his gut.

Ellie was a strong swimmer. If anyone could make it out of these rapids alive, it would be her.

He had to believe it.

Joel woke to the sound of rushing water the next morning. He was cold and damp, but physical pains were less than mental ones. Even through his sleep, his worry about Ellie persisted, but his first waking thought was how Ellie would feel about killing that kid on the cross. Though she’d made darker decisions than ending that poor girl’s misery, Joel learned that Ellie could turn a thing over to death in her head. Should’ve, could’ve, would’ve, what-if…

For example: killing that girl on the cross was a greater mercy than leaving her to die in agony, but the kid wasn’t a piglet dying of scours. If only Ellie could’ve saved her before the whole thing started.

He’d heard Ellie go over things like that enough times to know without a doubt her brain would supply her with that scenario.

The gnawing doubt overwhelmed him, and Joel rubbed his face as he pushed away the thought, If she’s alive.

The thought continued as he packed up his meager supplies and began the rough trip downriver. The rock and clay came together into a messy slog worsened by the heat of the sun. It was hard going, especially with his heart in his throat as he searched the rushing rapids for any sign of Ellie.

She was just too damn smart for her own good. He’d never met someone who could turn any situation into the worst-case, but that was Ellie. Hell, even in Jackson she’d been swamped by anxiety and fear. The confounding part was that almost all her fears were plausible even if he
would never in his life come up with them on his own. She had a certain pessimistic creativity.

Joel would never forget nearly coming out of his skin when he heard she’d been escorted to Jackson’s clinic a few years ago. He remembered wondering why it had to be now, when she was finally settling in and making friends, when she’d finally started smiling at him again. Without thinking, he’d sprinted across town still wearing his heavy tool belt, the one Ellie always teased him was an apron.

Turned out that she’d done her over analyzing and had a full blow panic attack. Doc Harriet was kind as she talked Joel down after he rushed into the clinic in a panic himself. Over her shoulder, he watched Gabby drape Ellie’s eyes and neck with wet cloths. Then she propped Ellie’s feet up and rubbed her scalp as she talked quietly to her. Ellie was nodding and responding, which released some of Joel’s immediate tension.

“Panic attack,” the doctor said for the fourth time. “She’s okay.”

Having exhausted all of his questions—’Are you sure?, ‘Could it be something else?’, ‘What did she say happened?’—he moved on to asking: “About what?”

Joel couldn’t imagine anything in Jackson worth worrying about. Not for Ellie. She was apprenticing under experts and spending the rest of her time in school. Shouldn’t be anything to panic about at all unless it was social anxiety. She seemed to be doing okay even with that now that she and Dina were attached at the hip.

“You’ll have to ask Gabby. She’ll be the one to get the truth out of Ellie.” Doc wiped her glasses and went back to Ellie’s side with a book tucked under her arm.

Gabby said something to Ellie, who nodded. Gabby offered Joel a faint smile and motioned for Joel to follow her outside into the heat again. They sat on the bench in the overgrown courtyard with the privacy Joel sensed they needed.

“What is it?”

“Ellie said bled into her canteen yesterday. Dina drank out of it later.”

Joel raised an eyebrow, studying Gabby’s young, serious features. She was a good woman, as trustworthy as Maria claimed, and she’d done right by Ellie with her tattoo. She was one of the few in confidence about Ellie’s condition. The rest of Jackson would remain in the dark. Joel was glad Ellie had a couple of older women she could talk to about everything, but this was a matter he should have put to bed long ago.

“She thinks she can infect her?”

Gabby nodded, her expression conveying pity: for Ellie or Joel he couldn’t parse. “Hence the panic attack.”

“There’s no way.”

“No?” Gabby asked him calmly.

“We bled all over each other. We shared food and water. I’d be dead if she could infect someone else.”

“Maybe she needs to hear you say that.” She hesitated as she stood and then sat back down. “You know about Riley?”
That she did was a pang of unfair jealousy. “Yeah.”

“Ellie’s lost a lot of people she cared about. You lose enough people and you start to wonder if it’s for a reason.”

He turned the thought over and nodded. “Thank you, Gabriella.”

“She’s a good kid,” Gabby replied with a faint smile. “Sit with her a little while, and when she’s ready, take her home. And don’t tell Harry I said this, but a little bit of whiskey might not be a bad idea.”

When Joel sat by Ellie, he was shocked when she crawled into his arms. Ellie didn’t do physical embraces, not with anyone. In his sentimental moments, he sometimes wondered if anyone in her orphanage had thought to hold her as a baby. He tightened his grip around Ellie’s shoulders and just listened to her sob into his shirt. There was something here deeper than panic.

He wished he could protect her from the evils of the world, even her own fears, and just shake happiness into her. He needed her to be happy, and that she couldn’t seem to find it even here perplexed him.

All he could do was hold her close.

When she cried herself out, Joel picked up her bag and led them both out of the clinic. They met Jesse and Dina hurrying towards the infirmary. Both looked worried, and Dina’s worry compounded when she saw evidence of Ellie’s tears. Joel waved them off, sensing that Ellie would be more embarrassed than anything by looking this way to them. “Another time, kids.”

Dina ignored him and reached out to take Ellie’s hand. “Are you okay? Ellie?”

“Okay,” Ellie said dully.

“Can I come back with you?”

“No, I’m okay. Really.”

“Tomorrow then?”

“You have patrol. I’ll be fine. Go, doofus.” Dina’s worry was enough to make her smile at least.

When they arrived home, Joel poured Ellie a finger of whiskey on doctor’s orders, and they sat at the kitchen table together. Ellie drank her whiskey with a dry cough.

“What happened?”

“I ran into Finn during the game yesterday and bit my tongue. Rinsed by mouth out with my canteen. Later, Dina drank out of the canteen. I just remembered this afternoon, and then I just…” She appeared bewildered at herself. “I couldn’t breathe.”

“Ellie, you bled on me before.”

She tugged at her fingers and asked in a rush, “What if all it takes is accidentally biting too hard. Or a kiss?”

What an uncomfortable thing to wonder who she wanted to kiss. Surely not Weston, the boy that had manhandled her and gotten beaten to shit for it. Finn? Jesse? Then he wondered at Gabby’s assertion that Ellie took the blame for the deaths around her. “That girl you were bitten with back in
Boston… Did you have to kill her?”

Ellie didn’t answer—by words or look—which was answer enough. “Did the Fireflies say anything about immune people? You said they’re others like me.”

Joel scratched his beard, startled by the shot of fear that worked through him. It was easier not to think of what had happened or of his lie, to pretend he’d been telling the truth. Her direct question laid him bare. “Just something about past cases. Nothing specific.”

Finally she looked at him, and it was the kind of look that made him think she’d never really been a kid. “I need to know, Joel.”

He nodded but couldn’t acknowledge the real question in her eyes. “It would be good. You’ve been wanting to work on that patrol with Jesse, right? Dina’s on that too. And Finn?”

“What’s your point?” Everything about her suddenly screamed of defeat.

“Why don’t we engineer our own patrol. You bite someone ‘too hard’, and we wait.”

Ellie met his gaze in question before understanding swept her face. Then she dropped her head between her hands and groaned out a muffled, “Fuck.”

“They’d be dead anyway—”

“It’s not that. It’s just… I have to wait it out with Dina. I never thought I’d have to wait it out again, and I don’t know how I’m going to make it through tomorrow without coming out of my skin.” She took another long breath through a shudder that caught her chest. She took a few deep breaths and said, “So you’re saying we can go out to find someone for me to bite?”

“Yeah, I reckon that’s what I mean.”

“Okay.”

Joel knew better than to question her resolve when he saw the clear, steady look she finally fixed on him. This would happen. He just had to make it safe for both of them.

Dina stopped by that night, going almost as far as to demand to see Ellie.

“She’s in bed already. She’s fine, Dina.”

He was always a little surprised by the flicker of distrust that Dina had when she looked at him. She was incredibly protective of Ellie, something that warmed him and annoyed him in turn. Tonight she decided to pick her battles and turned away to go back home.

“Dina?”

She turned back, her eyes shadowed in the darkness. Joel cleared his throat. “It means a lot that she’s got a friend. I appreciate you checking on her. I’ll tell her you came by in the morning. Be safe on that patrol of yours, you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” was her polite reply.

The next day, Joel set out to intercept Jesse’s harebrained patrol route outside of Jackson at dusk. He came upon them unawares and made it a lesson as he strode straight into their camp, startling them all. Joel pinned Jesse with a disapproving stare, his silence communicating more than enough about their stupidity. Dina, who sat beside Jesse, wore a grin of amusement. Lamb to the slaughter.
Jesse was gonna get all these kids killed one day. For now, Joel nodded to Dina, who leapt to her feet to follow him just out of earshot of the other two patrollers.

“Is Ellie okay?”

“Yep. Just a touch too hot yesterday. Be safe. And the next time someone walks into your camp, you’d be safer shooting first.”

“What if we’d shot you?”

“You should be asking what if I wanted to shoot you.” He paused, but the lesson didn’t seem to register. These kids were sheltered from the reality of human violence—for want of the shirt on someone’s back, the pleasure of their body, or the meat on their bones. Joel reined himself in. He only said, “If I had, you’d be shot dead.”

Back in Jackson, Joel found Ellie picking at her food in the cafeteria. He set his full tray of food beside hers and said, “Dina’s fine. Wanted to make sure you were okay though.”

He was discomfited to see uncharacteristic tears rise in Ellie’s eyes. She stared down at her tray and blinked them back. “You checked for me.”

“No reason for you to have to worry until they got back tomorrow. Eat. We’re gonna have a busy week.”

Her suddenly healthy appetite satisfied him. He didn’t give a damn that they were planning murder because it would be worth it if only to see Ellie stop worrying about at least one thing in her life.

It took a week to organize the trip and another three days to find a group of traveling marauders between Jackson and the dam. They killed all but one man, and as Joel held him in a choke hold, Ellie bit him to the bone. Joel had some foresight to rub her blood into his wound too.

Then they waited him out. They holed up in an abandoned shack well away from the normal patrols. Even Jesse’s ragtag group of kids didn’t venture this far out. For three days, Joel and Ellie drank and played cards with their captor tied to a heavy chair. Ellie read a few books, even obliging Joel by reading aloud when he asked. They discussed the logistics of rolling a cow the way the book described and then marveled at the thought of someone being stupid enough to try to pull a calf with a truck.

Their captive went through phases of fear, resentment, anger, and pleading as the hours passed, but Ellie paid him no more mind than Joel did.

“Three days, baby girl,” Joel pointed out on the eve of the third day.

“He’s not infected.”

“No.”

“Okay,” Ellie murmured. She took a long breath, and Joel could see her shoulders rise as a weight lifted from her. Her smile was out of place, especially as she withdrew her pistol from her waistband.

“Ellie, let me do it.” Joel tried to stop her, but she shook her head. The captive began to struggle and cry, but Ellie raised her pistol anyway, snapping off the safety and cocking the hammer.

“I did this. I should end it.”
And she did.

It seemed out of place to bury the man, but Joel didn’t protest when Ellie started on a shallow grave. They sweated in the cool evening as they turned the soil over. “It didn’t feel right to do this with him alive, you know?” Ellie said in way of eulogy.

Joel couldn’t see her in the darkness, but she was steady. He cleared his throat and dumped a shovel-full of dirt onto the corpse. “Alright then,” was all that he could think to say.

He’d wanted to raise Sarah to be the best person she could be. At the time, that meant honest, brave, hardworking, and smart. He’d wanted her to go to college, have a good job, find a good, honest man to marry, and have as many children as she cared to while leading a fulfilling professional career. Being good didn’t do either of them much good did it? Now that he had a chance to do it all over again with Ellie, he’d learned that he wasn’t capable of teaching her goodness or being the ‘best’, but at least he could see her give a full-blown sigh of relief and a grin of hope at the end of this grisly lesson. He’d take her happiness over goodness any day.

The next day, Joel was greeted with the sight of a bare white foot standing tall in the middle of the river like a flag of surrender. Joel used his scope to study the corpse attached to that foot. A cultist man was caught within a snaggle of branches in the fast-moving shallows. His coat had been torn off, and his body was stiff now. Joel studied the corpse, his relief strong as soon as he identified the body.

He had no love lost for these people. They’d wrecked Jackson’s peace for what? Probably some screaming fanaticism that said they had to wipe out all sinners from earth to stop the infection. All kinds of weird cults had cropped up in the immediate years following Outbreak, but he hoped most of them died out one way or another.

The thing that never sat right with him was how women suffered in those things. Murder and sacrifice and worship in screaming tongues, none of that bothered him too much. But the rape and slavery of the women in the ranks of those cults put a rage in him that was hard to stifle.

He and Tommy used to talk about it a lot when Sarah was just a little one. *Keep it in your goddamn pants.* It was that easy. Their father, as big a bastard as he was, put the fear of God in them about that. How did so many men not understand that basic principle? Joel never really figured out how to have that conversation with Sarah even thought she was getting to the age to need it. He’d tried to talk to Ellie about it, but she rolled her eyes at him and said she knew more than he did about protecting herself.

While Outbreak had excused and increased all kinds of violence, Joel didn’t for a skinny minute think that rape and sexual abuse increased. Hard to go up from ‘too-much’.

If these people were part of the cult that took over Memphis, they were still strong despite the miles and years that separated them from what Joel knew. Though they had killed so many in Jackson, Joel just couldn’t summon the hate that drove Ellie so restlessly. He’d already gone down that road before and had gone so deep he’d lost his humanity.

If Joel believed in heaven, he knew he’d never get there. He certainly didn’t believe in hell past what he’d already survived. Losing Sarah, losing himself... He hadn’t anticipated that Ellie would take after him in that. Seeing evidence of her torturing a cultist took him back to days past, the point in his life when he was able to forget other people could suffer. He’d ignored it in his enemies and even at times his loved ones.
Sarah would have kept him good. He knew that. To lose her at the start of everything going to hell put him on the fast-track for wrong decisions. He’d caused as much misery as had been reaped upon him, all for the helplessness of losing his daughter like that.

He’d lost her life, and he’d lost her body. That triage camp they’d used to escape infected and military alike had been chaos, so chaotic that Sarah’s body had been torn out of his arms by medical personnel. They’d knocked him flat after, and even now, Joel’s memories of that night were uncertain. He’d come to with a bandage over a wound on his side he hadn’t noticed before. Tommy found him sometime later, and they’d tried to find Sarah’s body despite Tommy’s fear that the military would be searching for them for killing that soldier.

In the rush of dead, wounded, and the risk of infected civilians, there was flat panic. The only person who spoke to them was an exasperated nurse who snapped, “If you don’t see her on a table, she must be dead. Get out of my way!”

There was nothing they could do as the soldiers herded them onto a bus with other confused, terrified people to be driven to rural Louisiana, and that helplessness was the hardest damn lesson of it all. There was no one to punish, no one to hold accountable, no one to blame except the man Tommy shot. It was only later that Joel would remember the soldier’s hesitation to carry out his orders, and he’d used that as justification to kill anyone in uniform he could.

He killed plenty—by necessity and by choice—but Sarah remained dead. Dead and lost. The losing was the hardest part, Joel found. He knew that she’d died in his arms, but there was a niggle of doubt, the worry about what they would do with her body. He’d needed to bury her.

Even if that was only for him, it was important. The feeling of floating on that long string of doubt without a mooring of truth had held onto him for a dozen years after Outbreak. It was the memory of that desperation that made Joel gather some remains from the mass grave to give to Dina’s parents. They needed some part of her to bury. Didn’t matter if it was actually Dina or not. The goodbye was just as important as the hello, even if no parent should ever have to see their children from Earth.

“Don’t make me say ‘goodbye’ to you, baby girl,” he murmured. Joel swallowed down desperation. He hadn’t found her yet, and as long as he didn’t find her dead, there was hope of her survival.

The next morning, Joel awoke to the sudden recollection of recognizing one of those cult girls. Had that really been Dina? Given what he’d witnessed that day, hopefully not. That girl wouldn’t survive such horror. She was soft in the sweet way he’d never thought he’d see after Sarah died. Dina was just a good kid.

He hadn’t felt her loss like Ellie did. He’d felt some of it, but the greater losses of Jackson in its entirety muted some of his sorrow. Joel hadn’t anticipated how hard Ellie would take Dina’s death. He hadn’t realized how much she loved her. Puppy love, a crush, that was what he’d thought she had, not this rage-inducing fire. Then again, should it be surprising that kids experiencing so much so early wouldn’t feel something deeper than a high school prom crush?

He remembered when he first realized she cared more about Dina than a friend. How long ago had that been? Was it one or two years ago now? He’d come home late from a card game with his brother and a few of the other fathers of Jackson. He’d walked into the house after a rare drink and heard the sound of crying.

Ellie didn’t cry; it just wasn’t something she did. He could count on one hand how many times
he’d seen her actually cry. Hearing her now alarmed him enough to hurry him. He took the steps two at a time and opened Ellie’s door without knocking.

Despite not crying, there she was, sitting beside her bed, wiping tears from her cheeks. She tried to play it off, gasping out a laughing, “Fuck, Joel. You just scared the shit out of me! Where’s the fire?”

He refused her bait. “What’s wrong, Ellie?” He stepped into her room and shut the door. When Ellie didn’t protest—only offered a tight shrug and frown—he sat down on the floor beside her. His knees popped, something that usually drew her teasing about him falling apart, but she only sighed as Joel draped his arm on her bed behind her head.

“Ellie?”

“Stupid shit,” she told her hands.

“Would stupid upset you like this?”

“It really is stupid. I just…” Ellie sank forward to press her face against her knees. She groaned and shook her head.

“Was it that Weston boy again?” They still went on patrol together, and though Joel could get no information out of Ellie or Jesse, he couldn’t forget when Weston and his two friends came home with their faces swollen after Ellie’s first patrol weekend. Whatever had happened had been handled within their group, but Joel sure would like to put the fear of God in that little prick.

Now Ellie shook her head.

“Is it Gabby?”

Another head shake.

“Dina?” Joel guessed. This time, Ellie didn’t shake her head. Joel reached out hesitantly to cup the back of her neck. “Is she hurt?”

Head shake.

“Did you fight?” Fights between those two girls were rare, usually Dina riling up Ellie, and Ellie forgiving her too quick to prevent the next tiff. Those girls cared about each other something fierce.

Ellie choked out a laugh and shook her head.

“You have to help me out, baby girl. I can’t play twenty-questions about this. What’s wrong?”

Ellie finally rocked back, resting her head against his palm. She sighed, blinked back tears, and quietly said, “Dina’s going out with Jesse.”

A shot of alarm worked through Joel. Ellie and Jesse were going on patrol together that weekend. There were other kids, of course, but Joel still didn’t trust they didn’t sneak off to screw in the dark. How had he missed her starting to explore sex? They hadn’t talked much about protection or pregnancy in part because Ellie never seemed interested in boys. But now…

He never realized he confused Sarah with Ellie until moments like this when he was suddenly shocked by how grown up Ellie could seem. He’d think—as he was thinking now—‘But she never
did that’ and realize he was thinking about Sarah.

“I, uh, didn’t know you liked him.”

The look of disbelief Ellie leveled at Joel was out of place. He defended himself, refusing to let a teenager make him feel stupid. “You always just seemed friendly.”

“I don’t like Jesse,” she said slowly.

“Oh.” The word slipped out as Joel’s brain turned that truth over. He pulled his hand away as Ellie shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Joel. I’m gay. How did you miss that?”

“Oh,” he said again. He cocked his head, thinking about the way Ellie lit up when Dina was around, how she bailed her out without complaint, how she helped her and those times he’d noticed Ellie’s eyes clung to Dina longer than friendly. “Oh, it’s Dina.”

“Yeah, it’s Dina. And now she’s with Jesse. I know she’s straight, which makes this—” She waved a hand at her tear-stained face. “—so pathetic. She’s my best friend, and it shouldn’t matter that she’s with him, but… It hurts.”

“Does she know how you feel?”

Ellie scoffed. “Pretty easy way to fuck up a friendship. This is Jackson, Joel, with Sunday Church every week, and she’s really religious. Last I checked, religion hates gays. Gabby is the only other gay person in Jackson, and she doesn’t talk about it. So, no, I’m not fucking up what we have on stupidly impossible odds.”

“You really think she’d drop you because you’re gay?”

Ellie shifted uncomfortably and asked in a small voice, “Are you?”

Oh hell. Joel leaned close and met her gaze. “Now you listen to me. I don’t care who you’re with as long as you two care for each other and treat each other right. So, no, I’m not gonna quit you on account of your sexuality.” He squeezed her shoulder, drawing a vulnerable look, and when Joel tugged her closer, Ellie leaned into his half-hug. She sniffed a few more times before she made a rude noise between her lips.

“This fucking sucks.”

“What? A crush?”

“Being all normal and shit! I used to laugh at this stuff. Crying because Dina and Jesse were making out behind the barn today? That wouldn’t have been a blip back when we were sneaking through Pittsburgh. And with Riley…”

For the first time, it occurred to Joel to ask, “Were you two girlfriends?”

“No. Well, maybe sort of? I kissed her, and then we got bit.”

Carefully, he said, “The important question is: Did she kiss you back?”

That coaxed a shy smile and a faint blush. “Yeah.” Her smile softened into sadness. “We were just horsing around, but it was good. I was happy. I used to regret that I did it because I knew we could have been more, you know? But now I’m glad for what we had. I have those memories.”

“I know,” Joel echoed quietly. He moved his fingers from his watch and patted her shoulder. “Try
not to worry. Either this’ll pass or it’ll fix itself.”

Ellie gave him a wry half-smile. “Fix itself?”

“Maybe she’ll walk up and lay one on you one of these days.” She scoffed in derisive doubt, but at least she smiled. Joel nudged her. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for being okay with it. With me.”

“That was never a danger, baby girl.”

Joel woke up on the riverbank in Washington in that odd mix of memory and dream, soft happiness replaced by gnawing worry. Hell, he’d fallen back asleep. It felt like every joint groaned and ached in the cool morning air, but he’d warm out of his age in a few hours in the sun. Joel considered his meager supplies and ate what he had left as he waited for enough light to begin his journey down the river again.

The river was an eerie rushing roar in the night, drowning out the noises of the forest, but for all the unknown fears it cloaked, it seemed worse in full daylight. The sound was deafening, and the water churned and frothed. Once upon a time, Joel had taken a few white-water rafting trips with Tommy and Sarah, one even with a few of her friends. The difference was they’d been wearing life jackets, had a guide and a big boat, and the water temperature had been upper seventies.

It was a blessing and damnation in one that his search remained fruitless.

He came upon a second waterfall that was nearly twenty feet high at midday. Joel gazed at it with his heart sunk. He settled in for the night a mile downstream from the falls. Sitting still, his worry rose high enough to put his pulse in his neck. He kept telling himself that Ellie was a good swimmer, a strong one. She’d caught on quick enough at the end of that first summer in Jackson. They’d gone down the river just south of town after she’d spent a hot afternoon in the fields. Ellie stripped to her shorts and tank and dunked her head under the water. When she came up sputtering, she predicted, “I’m gonna die if I can’t wear short sleeves next summer.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Joel waded into the creek, enjoying the cool water up around his waist. He’d had a hot day too, up on Levi’s roof repairing it as fast as he could before the next storm blew through.

“Yeah?”

“Dunno if you know, but Gabby has herself a working tattoo gun. Maria thought maybe that could cover the scar.”

Ellie cocked her head and looked down at her right arm. Joel did too, wondering if the scar had changed since he’d last seen it. It smoothed out, softened in color, but he could see the ripple of fungus growing wider than the original bite. “She’d have to know if she did it.”

“We could tell her.”

“You’re saying we can? You, who told me under threat of death not to tell anyone about my ‘condition’?” She mocked him by exaggerating the length of her vowels and adding a healthy twang to the last word.

Joel splashed her lightly. “Maria trusts Gabriella.”
“Oh, well, if Maria trusts her…” Ellie gave up on her sarcasm and shrugged. “What could I put on it though?”

She and Joel alike studied the rippling skin of her scar. He cocked his head. “It looks kinda like a butterfly, don’t it?”

“You’re crazy,” she said flatly, tilting her palm outward to move the scar. Then she cocked her head as if trying to imagine what he saw. “But it’s not surprise, given you see a fucking woman on the moon.”

“There’s a lady with a parasol on the moon. It was in To Kill a Mockingbird.”

“For the last time, it’s goddamn symbolism!”

Joel shook his head and chuckled. “Want me to ask her over for dinner? Gabby, smartass.”

“If you think it’s a good idea… Sure.”

Joel waded deeper and motioned. “Okay, then. Come on in.”

It was surprisingly easy to teach Ellie to swim. As soon as she caught onto the concept of buoyancy with her breath, she was splashing around without a problem. “I can swim now!”

“You can float,” he teased from the shallows. “You keep this up and you’ll beat a tortoise.”

“Tortoises don’t swim,” she corrected predictably. He couldn’t stifle his chuckle as he said, “Yeah, I know.”

He didn’t have to look to know Ellie’s reply was two particular fingers raised in salute.

She tuckered herself out after an hour, and they settled in the sun-warmed shallows to rest before heading back to town.

“Did you teach Sarah how to swim?”

“Nah. Was too scared. Took her to the Y for lessons. YMCA, Young Men’s Christian Association, a kind of sports recreation center for kids after school.”

“What, like the song?”

Joel laughed. “Yeah, like the song. Where’d you hear that?”

“A friend of mine made me a mixed tape with lots of old songs on it.”

“What’s your favorite?”

Ellie seemed to ponder the answer as she wiggled her toes in the water. “‘Sweet Child of Mine’.”

“Guns N’ Roses. Good choice.”

“So you took Sarah to this Y place for lessons because you were scared to teach her?”

“Parenting is scary, Ellie. Terrifying, actually.”

“Well, what did your parents do?”

That reached far back into an unwelcome memory or two. Joel sighed. “My father tossed me in a
Ellie turned her head, resting her cheek on her elbow. “Past in the past?” she asked.

He appreciated the free pass as much as how well she read him. Joel shook his head. “It’s okay. My old man was a drunk and a bastard. He kept my momma from being with Sarah. I could forgive him anything but that. He was part of the reason why I was so wild in my youth, but unlike him, I realized I had to straighten up for Sarah. Sarah’s mother… She wasn’t ready. So I had to be.”

“She left you?”

“Yeah. And Sarah. That was one thing I could never make right. Sarah was starving for a mother, but I couldn’t give that to her.” Joel turned to study Ellie. He smiled after a moment, and she returned his smile sweetly. He splashed her lightly. “Come on, let’s get back and rustle up some grub. Bet you worked up an appetite.”

It had been an uncommonly good day, which made it doubly surprising when only a week later Ellie ran off. It shouldn’t have been a surprise though. She knew him better than Sarah ever had, even from the start. Smart as a whip, brave, and strong, with some kind of built-in bullshit detector. Joel wondered how many broken promises she’d survived to give her such a strong instinct. The thing was, Joel never considered himself a bad liar. He’d always been good enough to bullshit himself when he needed to. Ellie saw through his lies even when he convinced himself of them.

Joel wished he knew her half as well, even now. He hadn’t wanted to believe she’d guess his lie about the Fireflies; there was just too much at stake. But her silences ruled their house in Jackson, and nothing he did seemed to break through that. Sometimes Ellie loosened up: a guitar lesson, a hike through the mountains, a hunting trip, that swimming lesson. Every time he thought he made progress, Ellie would withdraw again. He didn’t know if she was punishing him or herself.

When Tommy told Joel that hot summer morning that Ellie hadn’t shown up to class and was nowhere to be found in Jackson, his gut dropped. Fear and anger enveloped him equally. It was different than the stunt she’d pulled the first time in Jackson. This time, Ellie left no tracks; she didn’t aim to be followed.

A part of him he didn’t want to acknowledge wondered if she meant to come back.

Things had changed between them even before Salt Lake City. Colorado—David—had dug a hole in Ellie’s heart and tore away whatever innocence she had left. He saw it in flashes: the giraffe, the first time she saw a potbellied pig in Jackson, and the vulnerable, longing way she looked at other kids here. But she’d changed.

When Ellie trudged into the house they shared well after nightfall, Joel was waiting for her in the dark at the kitchen table. She jumped and gasped as he turned on the old lamp they used downstairs, and he felt a weird flicker of being in another time and place.

Sarah hadn’t been old enough to sneak out, but Ellie was. Fifteen with a chip on her shoulder and a hell of a lot of attitude. For a sentimental moment, Joel considered what she would have been before everything fell apart: a lot like him. Drinking, smoking, going places no teenager had business being, probably with a string of broken hearts along the way. She was the kind of kid Joel warned Sarah away from. She and Ellie would’ve been so good for each other.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Joel finally asked.

“Fuck you,” she muttered as her initial shock slid away.
“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Yeah, Joel. Because everything’s about you.”

Her sarcasm raised his temper higher, but he took a long breath to gather control again. “Why in tarnation would you wander off like that?”

He wasn’t prepared for her look of pure frustration. Tears came up in her eyes, and she grabbed her hair, turning away before turning back again. Joel was on his feet in alarm before he could think. “Ellie—”

“Because I wanted to, okay?!”

“That’s no answer, Ellie.” He softened as he took in her unchecked emotions. He wanted to fix her, an echo of wanting Sarah’s mother to love her unconditionally too. He had no control over either wish. Joel reached out to gently take her shoulder. “Don’t you know what your life means?”

Ellie yanked hard from his grip. “Fuck you! You can’t pull the value card anymore! My life doesn’t mean shit. I’m worthless!”

“Don’t you dare say that! You mean something to everyone who knows you. You mean everything to me!”

She shook her head and smiled bitterly. “Sure, but if I die, you’ll just move on to the next replacement of your dead daughter to justify your survival.”

The way those words came out meant she’d been imagining saying it for a long time, but Ellie’s face fell in regret as soon as she finished speaking. She looked up at him, and the hurt on her face reflected the hurt inside him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Joel, I…”

He raised a hand. “I reckon you did, Ellie.”

Then he reached out to her, and she came to him, wrapping her arms around his chest and sobbing hard between her teeth. Her entire body was wracked with her sobs the way a child cried, and Joel just cradled her close through it.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, cupping the back of her head. He wondered if the apology should go both ways, but she’d always been better than him. He kept his murmur up until Ellie drew a shaky breath and pulled away. He couldn’t bear to break the contact, eaten up by how much he felt towards this girl. He patted her shoulder, marveling not for the first time the amount she’d physically grown in such a short time.

“Go on in the sitting room.”

From the kitchen, Joel watched her sit on the old couch and drop her curiously full backpack on the floor next to her seat. That thing was getting ratty, too small for her now. He’d have to see if he could trade Levi for a sturdy repaired backpack for her. He was finishing up with Levi’s roof; they’d discussed payment but hadn’t settled on anything but a favor in the future. Joel had volunteered for the job hoping that Ellie could spend more time with Levi’s eldest, Dina. The girl seemed to know every kid in Jackson, and Ellie could use an ally on that front. For someone so desperate to make friends, she hadn’t yet.

Joel sat down beside Ellie on the couch and offered her a finger of whiskey. She sniffed it, made a
face, and chugged the shot, giving a dry cough after.

“What’s going on? The truth.”

Ellie gazed down into her empty glass and shrugged. A smile flickered across her lips before she glanced at him. “I hate going to school.”

“You should be enjoying it, making friends.”

“I can’t. Not with them. They’re… They’re just…”

“They’re good kids.” Joel had a hard time imagining how Ellie was going to end her previous statement. She wasn’t a person to put on airs, so why was this a problem?

“I’m not,” Ellie answered in more ways that one. “I killed people, Joel. What I’ve seen and done… And they just want to talk about and do stupid shit.”

“You did what you did to survive,” he said earnestly, fighting back annoyance for having to explain this again.

“Sometimes I liked what I did.”

“Rage don’t feel good. David scared you, he hurt you, and he was going to kill you. There’s nothing wrong with that moment when you realize you’re the one with power. That ain’t wrong.”

Ellie just scoffed and sank back into the couch, no longer meeting Joel’s gaze. Joel leaned over and set his glass on the coffee table with a snap. “Is this about what that boy did to you?”

“No.”

He tried a more general approach, knowing how bothered she was by the rumors going around Jackson about her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Ellie, you have to help me here. What’s wrong !?”

“I want to work!” she blurted. “I hate this! I eat food, I use water, electricity, I get a new shirt when I rip the old one, and I don’t do shit. I’m a drain! I don’t deserve any of this! All I do is sit in that stupid classroom listening to lessons I already know!”

Well, shit. Joel couldn’t censor his sigh of relief. “Is that it then?”

Ellie nodded, finally meet his gaze. He hesitated, thinking that long, dark look and her complaint didn’t match. Then it flickered away as she offered a wry smile. Joel dropped his head back on the couch and shook it, unable to prevent his chuckle. “So what do you want to do? Doc said you did good when you worked in the infirmary. Levi and Ester think you hung the moon after you stitched up their boy. Tommy said next time he needs stitches he’s requesting you.”

“I hate working on people. I’d rather work in the barn.”

“You don’t always have the luxury of liking what you do.”

“And I want to go on patrol.”

“No,” he said immediately. She glared at him. “You asked me what I wanted!”
“You are not going on that cowboy kid’s harebrained patrols.”

“You wanna bet on that?” Ellie challenged.

“You can work in the fields. You can work in the infirmary. Hell, if you want to work with me, I wouldn’t mind. But you aren’t going on patrol.” He saw her temper rising and amended, “But… I’ll take a look at how that kid runs those things. Lord knows he needs help.”

“And?”

“And we’ll see.” He could read the victory in her eyes and shot her a warning stare. “I’ll talk to Maria and Tommy about school and work. In the meantime, stay out of trouble, and do not go wandering off again. We almost organized a search party, Ellie.”

A flicker of discomfort crossed her face even as she scoffed. Joel touched her knee with his finger, and she met his gaze when he said, “Promise me.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll stay in Jackson.”

Joel let relief wash over him as he sank back on the couch. “Alright,” he muttered.

“What do you have in there?”

“Found some of the trashiest books I’ve ever seen. Look at this…” Ellie dug in her pack and pulled out an old paperback book. She pointed to the cover. “His boobs are as big as hers are! Did people really find that attractive?”

“Huh, don’t know about that. Did you read it?”

“Some of it. Get this, the person who had it underlined all the sex scenes.”

He relaxed back on the couch and watched Ellie’s face light up as she described her finds. In that moment, something settled right back into place between them. Or it did until the next hiccup in their life. Joel couldn’t find it in himself to care. They had each other, and that was good enough.

After two more days of navigating the mess of clay and freezing water, Joel caught sight of a strip of clothing on a tree branch in the middle of another set of rushing rapids. He sighted down his rifle and studied it. Leather, dark brown. Ellie had worn a leather coat, but it wasn’t definitively hers.

He followed the river past a tributary for another dozen miles before catching sight of a pistol in the pebbled shallows of the river. Joel picked it up, turned it over, and found the engraving on the butt. Tommy had carved that beautiful E into the new wooden grip he’d fitted to her pistol.

Christ.

Joel sat by the river bank and cried for the first time in years. No parent should ever have to say goodbye to their child, but the agony of not knowing if he should say it sat heavy. To lose her to a goddamn river... He clenched down on the need to scream out his frustration and instead slipped the little pistol into his bag to give back to her when they met again.

Joel kept going because he had to, but after a week of fruitless searching, he pondered turning back.
He must have come a nearly a hundred miles down the river, but he’d found no traces of Ellie herself.

Had she really managed to kill herself?

She’d scared him for many reasons after the attack on Jackson. That first town hall meeting after the attack, Ellie had gone with him, leaning against the wall despite the dressings that covered both arms and her right thigh. She looked better than anyone with her injuries had any right to look, but she was still gaunt and pained. Joel sat at the front pew of the sanctuary, uncomfortable with the grief that cloaked the room.

Tommy and Maria sat against the pulpit, looking weary and mournful. Tommy started by saying, “We have two options here: go after them or stay and regroup.” It was clear by his expression he felt one way. “I don’t know about y’all, but I’ve seen enough blood for a lifetime. We need to regroup, take stock, and keep this place running. Some of our stores were destroyed, and we lost livestock and don’t have enough hands to work them right now. If we focus on killing, we won’t survive the rest of winter.”

“What if they come back?” Ester asked.

Maria glanced at her husband. “We thought of sending a scouting party ahead to see where they’ve gone, but frankly, knowing they’re returning won’t do us much good.”

“So we’re sitting ducks,” Jesse retorted. He shook his head. “I’ll go. I’ll take any volunteers that are able-bodied. That way, if…” He trailed off.

“He can do it,” Tommy interjected.

“Fuck that.”

They all turned to Ellie, who scowled at the floor. Her face was cast from iron, her rage simmering below the surface. “I’m going after them. And I’m going to find and I’m going to kill every last one of them.”

“Ellie,” Joel interjected. She turned her glare to him, but he continued on heedless of her unspoken warning. “I’ve been where you are. I killed more soldiers than I can remember, but the only thing it brought me was more blood.”

“So what? Forget and move on? I can’t do that, not this time.”

“Nothing good will come of this.”

“I’m not expecting good,” she retorted, all teenage smartass. Yet he sensed she meant it. That scared him more than anything.

“Ellie, we need you here in Jackson.”

She ignored Maria as she turned to the other congregated citizens. “Anyone of you that wants to come with me can, but don’t expect to make it back here alive.”

Joel got to his feet to follow Ellie as she left the church. He took her arm to stay her retreat, and she stopped in stillness of anger. “Ellie, you need to think long and hard about why you want to do this, because if it’s the misplaced idea that it should have been you, you need to wake the hell up! There’s no fate or justice, just luck.”

She abruptly turned to shove him. “I asked one of my guardians once why everyone always left me, and you know what he told me: ‘What’s the common denominator in your life, Ellie?’ Me. I am. I
bring chaos to everything around me, and it’s fucking time I took that chaos to *them*.” She pointed, a gesture to encompass the wide world, maybe the evil within it.

As he struggled to find something to say in rebuttal, Ellie pulled away and left the church, and Joel suspected, him behind for good.

When Joel turned, Tommy stood at the doorway. “Catch all that?”

Tommy’s expression pulled in sympathy. “Never thought I’d say it, but she really does take after you.” He nodded to himself and met Joel’s gaze. “Going with her?”

“You know I have to.”

“I do.”

They said their goodbyes then and there, studying each other in the silence of their needs. Tommy had a son barely walking, and Joel’s daughter was ready to walk out of her own life. They went their separate ways with hope to see each other again in the future and the knowledge that if they didn’t they would always be brothers.

Now Joel was at a loss. He’d lost Ellie’s trail, possibly lost Ellie for good. He could chase after the cult she was tracking. If he caught them, if Dina was still alive, at least he could do some good by getting her back to Jackson. Ellie would want that. Or he could follow the river farther downstream. He could double back and check the few tributaries that branched from the main river. But in all that, there was no set path to Ellie, and that was the hardest damn part.

---

Joel dreamed of Sarah and Ellie having a sleepover. He made brisket in the slow cooker and turned on a teen movie that Ellie scoffed at but Sarah blushed through. When he went downstairs in the middle of the night for water, the girls were curled up with their backs pressed together on an unzipped sleeping bag.

Dina stood in the kitchen, holding out a glass of water. “Which one should I choose?” she asked.

“Ellie loves you,” Joel replied, holding onto the glass.

“She’s dead, Joel,” Dina said.

Joel turned slowly, his fear circling his throat. Every step to the living room raised his terror, and when he looked into the room, he realized they were both dead, shot through. Instead of the sleeping bag, they were curled up in their own blood.

Joel gasped as he sat up, shaking with fear and horror. Nightmare, he realized. Nightmare.

But then he remembered Sarah dying, and he didn’t know if Ellie was alive, and reality weighed heavier than the fear in his nightmare. Which way? There was no easy answer. He needed to find her, but he didn’t know to do anything but backtrack and look harder. He could travel due west to hit the ocean and follow the cult.

In the light of morning, he took the third option: keep moving downstream.

Within a few days, a new feeling settled over him strong enough to distract him from his unrelenting worry. The eerie instinctual knowledge of being stalked settled in his bones and quickened his breath and heart. There was no human activity, and it was far for the cultist scouts to track from the main group. He had the feeling they were continuing on their way to Seattle to
overrun them. Yet there was no one else in this place unless a random hunter in the woods was coming after him.

“You gotta purty mouth, boy,” Joel’s brain echoed at him, and he grinned to himself at his own dark humor. Even across so far from deep Appalachia there were sure to be freaks and rapists.

Joel departed from the river, moving due south, and he circled back west to try to catch his ghost tracker. When he saw the claw marks on the trees, Joel sighed at his own paranoia. Just a goddamned bear.

Seemed too early for a black bear to be out of hibernation, but Joel only knew what information Jerry passed on. The old Jackson farrier had been a prolific bear hunter in his youth. Seemed like every day Ellie worked with Jerry those first weeks, she’d return with another story from Jerry about some hunting trip he’d taken in his youth.

Joel reached up as high as he could to touch the bottom of one long claw mark down a tree and felt a shiver of unease. He reminded himself to be careful. The bear could weigh three hundred pounds, and if it had a cub, he wouldn’t be considered a part of the scenery.

As he retraced his steps over the next several days, he never found the bear, but signs of it increased by the hour. He’d never been much of a tracker though. When Joel stumbled upon the bear, it was almost by accident.

When Joel heard the low rumble of a bear, he broke into the cold sweat of fear. Some part of him would rather deal with a bloater than a fucking bear now that he was near it, an instinct probably instilled in him from his caveman ancestor. Joel took cover and looked down his rifle scope.

When Joel got the bear in his reticle, he stilled at the wrongness of it. That was no black bear. Grizzlies were rare up here, or they had been according to Jerry, but that wasn’t what stopped him. The bear was wrong. One of its eyes was bulging out, framed by a colorful plate that erupted from one side of its palate.

He’d asked for a bloater, hadn’t he?

“Jesus Christ,” Joel whispered under his breath. The bear rumbled, then a ghostly click emerged from its throat as it lumbered by his hiding place. The bear’s heavy shoulder struck the trunk of a tree and shook it. Then the bear turned and to rub its back on the tree. It sneezed a spray of mucus and blood, and it left a hunk of hide on a branch as its skin sloughed off from scratching.

When the bear collapsed onto all fours again, it released an eerie shrieking click and the unmistakable acrid scent of spores.

Just when Joel thought the world couldn’t get any more fucked up.

If a bear could be infected, anything could. How had it crossed species? The sight of that monstrosity stripped any safety he’d felt in these woods. Could it infect other carnivores? Humans?

Joel left a safe buffer zone between himself and the bear, but he knew he had to kill it. Logic told him the first person to see a bloater felt the same as he did now, but that didn’t wipe out the existence of bloaters. Still, he had to blot out that wrongness from the world.

He followed the tracks as well as the mucoid secretions from its muzzle. He came upon the infected bear too quickly and watched it stagger across a wide paved road and unsuccessfully chase a deer. The deer escaped without injury. The bear rumbled and turned around, staggering back in Joel’s direction. Joel began to retreat, but his boot came down on a dry stick that cracked like
gunfire.

The bear shrieked as it turned that rolling beady black eye towards him. Then it charged, all five-hundred pounds of muscle and fungus.

Joel set his rifle on his shoulder and put four rounds into the bear as it charged. Then a different rumble came up the road, and an armored vehicle struck the bear hard enough to send it rolling away. Masked soldiers in uniform poured out of the truck, and they lit the bear up with gunfire, then a flamethrower.

There was nothing to do but stare. After all the quiet of nature, seeing technology and military in all of its noisy chaos stunned Joel dead still for priceless moments. In just those few seconds, a masked soldier gasped in shock when he saw Joel crouched by the road. Before Joel could exchange his empty rifle for his revolver, the masked soldier raised a gun and pulled the trigger. Joel’s entire body seized, and he released a strangled scream as he collapsed on his belly. A taser out here? Two of the soldiers had him cuffed before they released him from its agonizing force. The soldiers sat on him and he took another two taps from the taser before he gave up on immediate escape.

“What do we do with him, sir?”

The man that stepped up to survey the scene wore an insignia of an officer on one shoulder, and his nametag read HERNANDEZ. He pulled his mask off to study Joel in clear annoyance. The man could be anywhere between thirty and fifty, his dark hair and beard streaked with gray. “Scan him. If he’s positive, kill him. Negative, two-day quarantine. Then we get back on the road. We need to rejoin the main forces.”

“Can’t we just kill him, sir?”

“Captain Hare made his orders clear about that,” Hernandez said derisively. “He’ll be Hare’s problem.”

One man yanked him to his knees. “Get up.”

“Let me go,” Joel said, jerking against their hold. Why the hell was FEDRA out here? “I don’t want any trouble.”

The cold press of a scanner on his neck made him pause. “Green.”

“Captain Hare made his orders clear about that,” Hernandez said derisively. “He’ll be Hare’s problem.”

One man yanked him to his knees. “Get up.”

“Let me go,” Joel said, jerking against their hold. Why the hell was FEDRA out here? “I don’t want any trouble.”

The cold press of a scanner on his neck made him pause. “Green.”

“I’m looking for my daughter—”

They shoved him into the truck. Joel kicked out, but he got pepper spray to the face and another shock from the taser. The soldiers rolled him the rest of the way into the truck and took their seats around Joel, their boots framing his body.

“Christ, why did you mace him? We have to smell it now.”

Some good-natured jawing occupied the soldiers for a minute, but even coughing and weeping through the burning in his sinuses and eyes didn’t prevent Joel from sensing the unease among men and women around him. Silence reigned in the truck for a long moment, then one of the soldiers said. “Am I crazy? That bear was infected. It was fucking infected.”

“Yeah, we all saw it. Calm down,” Hernandez said steadily as he buckled into his seat.

“But sir—”
“Nothing we can do about it right now except get to Seattle, clean up their mess, and get back home. No bear, infected or not, can swim across SF Bay. You hear me?”

There was a quiet murmur, then a surprisingly formal chorus of, “Yes, sir!”

One of the soldiers finally dragged Joel into a seat and cuffed him to the car. They were kind enough to rip the taser probes from his skin. Through the burning fog of the residue of mace, he looked around the truck at the uniformed soldiers and tried to guess whether they were FEDRA or Firefly. FEDRA favored navy blue, but these men and women wore khakis. Their dog tags weren’t Firefly though.

“Might better get some shuteye,” the soldier to Joel’s left said to him not unkindly. “We’ll be on the road for a bit.”

In a surprising show of kindness, the man leaned over to pour water over Joel’s burning eyes, offering some soothing in the face of burning agony. Against his better judgment, Joel tried to follow the suggestion. He had no chance of escape at the moment so better to reserve his strength. Contrary to the reality of the situation, Joel felt relative safety within the confines of this truck. He knew this enemy.

In the years that Joel had taken what he needed to survive, he’d rarely been beaten. Only a year after entering Boston’s QZ and setting up a smuggling ring of his own, he was blindsided by the loss of half his payday when a woman dropped in on him unawares.

She had her thug hold a gun to Joel’s head, and he took more than a few licks before the woman called the punches off. She crouched in front of Joel, her smile tight. “Joel, right?”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he muttered, spitting blood on the concrete. “Mind telling me your name?”

“I’m Tess,” she replied lightly. “See, I’ve been wondering why I’ve been losing pay in the last year. Took me a while to pin it on you and your new supply run. I don’t take kindly to competition.”

“Tell that to Robert,” Joel retorted.

“I was going to ask if you were working for him—” Joel scoffed, and Tess afforded him a faint smile. “—but I see that’s a stupid question. You have that going for you. See, if you’d said you worked with him…” She turned her pistol over in her hand and let Joel get a long look at it. Joel had seen too much to be scared of death, but he admired her gumption.

“As it stands,” Tess continued. “I think I’ll just take an investing portion of your proceeds. Fifty-fifty. Sound good?”

“You wanna partner?”

“Word is you have a partner. Though…” She looked around. “Maybe not. I’ll be seeing you around, Joel.”

She and her two goons left him there in the alley with half his earnings in hand. He supposed it was awful generous of her, but maybe Tess needed a partner as bad as Joel apparently did. He could bet he had a better supplier than Tess did. As crazy as Bill was, there was no one better at scrounging supplies. Joel held a big one over his head, and that counted for a lot, even for a paranoid bastard like Bill.
Joel sighed, spat blood and mucus on the pavement, and collected the magazine and pistol Tess had scattered in opposite corners of the courtyard.

The curfew warning blared, and Joel decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. He strapped his backpack on and made his way home across the rooftops and alleyways of Boston’s QZ.

The years between Outbreak and Boston hadn’t been kind to anyone, including him. From rural Louisiana to Atlanta QZ to DC to Baltimore to Boston, he and Tommy moved stepping stone to stepping stone after burning one too many bridges...not just figuratively. Hell, they’d left Baltimore burning to the ground. Tommy set it alight, probably with some ill-conceived idea he could turn their sin to ash. Killing soldiers had turned into killing civilians too easy in Baltimore, and the extremes they went to to keep the infected at bay and keep food on the table never sat right with Tommy.

What Tommy couldn’t seem to get through his thick skull was that moving up in the world didn’t change the killing, just made murdering more sophisticated. Baltimore to Boston QZ didn’t change what they did, just the scope and target. Today, Joel had killed a few men on his supply run before Tess and her crew dropped in on him.

Maybe if Tommy had been there, he could have killed them too. Then there’d be no need to partner with someone else. Another drain, another risk... A risk he was getting damned tired of avoiding.

When Joel entered the apartment he shared with his brother, he dropped a pile of ration cards on the table. Then Marlene walked out of the back room, ignored Joel as she crossed the apartment, and left by the front door. Tommy emerged from the back room a few minutes later, his expression grim.

“You wanna consider next time the risk you take bringing her here? If FEDRA came knocking—”

“I’m not in the mood for one of your pissy fits,” Tommy muttered as he fiddled with the burner in the kitchen.

“Pissy fit?” Joel echoed, his teeth clenched. He shook his head as he dropped into a chair heavily. “Sure, Tommy. No pissy fit from me. Where were you today? We had a run to make.”

“I was busy.”

“With Queen Firefly?”

“Yes, with Marlene.”

Joel drank from his canteen as he watched Tommy take a seat at the table. Tommy’s expression remained grim. They’d been falling apart a bit at a time for over the years, and the man that sat across from Joel was a stranger. He was as infuriating as he’d been as a five-year-old, but there was no affection to stay Joel’s anger now.

“What, are you sleeping with her?” When Tommy didn’t refute his accusation, Joel scoffed. “You’re kidding me.”

“It ain’t like that between me and Marlene.”

“Then what’s it like? You think I don’t know you had your own little operation running for her? Smuggling guns in for the Fireflies, Tommy? Medical supplies? That’s real goddamned stupid.”

“They needed the help.”
“That was a huge risk was what it was. And you say it ‘ain’t like that’ between you two. The way I see it, she’s leading you around by your dick, and you’re eating out of the palm of her hand.”

“I’m joining them, Joel.”

As Tommy met Joel’s glare head-on, Joel decided this was the last fucking thing he needed in his life. He’d nearly been killed today selling their product, warned off another smuggler’s turf, and Tommy was dropping this goddamned bombshell on him too. “Jesus Christ. She really has bewitched you. I never thought you were this stupid!”

“I want to do something good for the first time in my goddamn life.”

“If you think the Fireflies are good, wake up!”

“They’re better than you, and I need that!”

Joel tightened his fist before relaxing it. He and Tommy had gotten into more than their fair share of fights, but this wasn’t worth it. Joel wouldn’t go through the agony of regretting his decisions after the fact, comparing himself to their father. He raised his gaze in time to see Tommy study his clenched fist.

Instead of a blow, Joel injected his voice with his violence. “Baby brother, when you come crawling back here, don’t expect me to do anything but say I told you so.”

“Good. Because I don’t ever want to see your goddamned face again,” Tommy snapped.

He left the next morning with all his supplies, and Joel watched him go, sure he’d never see his little brother again. One less person to worry about. One less person to get him killed. One less person to lead astray into his path of violence.

The grinding squeal of brakes startled Joel awake. It was a shockingly alien sound after so long away from the QZ. He had half a second to gain his bearings before he was torn from his seat and thrown out of the truck. He hit the ground hard enough to wind him, and then the boots came down on him.

It was a hard beating, the kind he hadn’t had in years. By the end of it, Joel faded to and from consciousness. In the uncertain passage of time, he was dragged across the rough ground into a tent and cuffed to a heavy chair.

“Captain Hare will be in soon,” one of the soldiers told him. “His command to beat you. Nothing personal.”

As Joel gained his bearings, he turned the strange dialogue over in his head. There seemed to be little respect for Captain Hare, even if these men followed his orders.

When Captain Hare walked into the tent a few minutes later, he wasn’t the type of man Joel expected. He seemed to be a quiet man. He wasn’t particularly big either, both younger and smaller than Joel. His hair was light and cut short in a neat military pattern. Something about the man’s mouth was familiar. He dragged his chair up and sat in it across from Joel, his expression flat. He leaned back in his chair to turn around the laptop—alien to see such a thing—on his desk. Joel’s Atlanta QZ bounty photo was on the screen.

“Sometimes God works in mysterious ways. One of Hernandez’s men recognized you from your bounty photo. Excuse me, bounty photos. You have a dozen bounties and warrants on your head.
Atlanta, DC, Boston... Last I heard was that you were wanted in Boston QZ for aiding terrorists. What puts you on the road to Seattle five years later?"

Just when Joel lost his way, he was being swept up in a tide not of his making. “Just making my way through. I want no trouble, sir.”

“The thing is, trouble is what finds us. All those people you and your brother killed last decade probably didn’t want any either. For you to land in my lap in this place, to be taken in alive, to be recognized so quickly... I’d say all of that is providence.”

“Sir, I’m looking for my daughter.”

Hare snorted derisively. “Daughter? Sometimes it tests my faith that people like you are capable of the gift of children. Do you know what a blessing that is?”

It was clearly a rhetorical question. Joel swallowed the blood in his mouth and asked, “So what now?”

“I’m glad you asked. I have a priority list I have to follow. As much as I’d like to shoot you in the head and be done with it, SFQZ just released an updated docket: all criminal executions are to occur within a controlled QZ after a fair trial. The closest QZ went dark over a month ago. That means I have to get my forces in place to reestablish the QZ before I can execute you legally.”

Joel raised his glare as Hare continued, “Living within a civilized government requires suffering certain inconveniences, and ultimately the only difference between murder and execution is the hangman. I’m more than happy to fulfill that duty, but I’ll have to ask you to be patient until I can.”

“And the blessing of my daughter?”

Hare had gotten to his feet to leave the tent, but he paused to answer the question. He smiled for the first time, his expression eerily familiar. “If she’s anything like you, hopefully she’s dead.”

Chapter End Notes

I clearly have a complex about details. Hence I spent a hour researching a soil survey of Snoqualmie Pass Area and then looking up what glacial til and volcanic ash soil types are to confirm clay is not uncommon in the area.

On a more serious note, thank you for the feedback so far!
“They are nested with sin. Free them that they may know my love.”

As the words passed her lips, Dina concentrated on the angle of her knife and her grip on the wolf’s shirt. She drove the knife high into the left upper part of his abdomen. He shrieked, but she anticipated the sound of horror as she pulled her blade through him. She’d learned there was no mercy in flinching.

His boot caught the outside of her hip, and she twisted away from his kick as she pulled at his clothing for traction. It took force to open him, complicated by the blood already coating her blade and hand, sticking hot and wet into the creases of her fingers. She had to be careful of the angle of her knife; she kept the blade sharp to make this easier, but that made it easier to cut herself too.

When Dina finished the cut, the man was still gagging and flailing. She slipped her knife into its sheath. With her right hand only—to leave her whistling hand clean—she sank into the soft wet warmth of his belly, grabbed a handful of him, and tugged to rip him apart to expose his viscera.

Dina turned away from her victim’s face as she shook his gore from her fingers. Mark grunted as he raised the wolf’s body on its hanging rope. She was thankful not for the first time that so much thought had to go into killing him that she had no time to think of his horror. Just the visceral smell of it remained.

She turned her head as one of her scouts whistled in the distance, and she motioned for her scouts to follow.

She kept in the back of her mind the memory of cremating their children who had been mutilated by gunfire. She told herself that it was for the children that she reaped, that she would kill any man involved in their murders. But doubt remained. Surely some of the people she killed were as innocent as those in Jackson.

Once upon a time, Dina had believed herself a good person. She’d killed only three men during her life in Jackson, men who would have killed her if she didn’t kill them. She’d struggled with even those deaths, part of her wishing her grandmother were alive to give her guidance. Forgiveness only came from those wronged; dead men could not forgive. Neither her mother or grandmother had been pleased when she announced she was volunteering on Jesse’s patrol, but that had been about her safety, not her morality.

She’d never know what her grandmother thought, at least about those deaths. Dina was fairly sure she’d be damned and loved on the same breath for the murders she carried out under the name of Seraphite.
Sometimes her thoughts strayed to what Ellie would think. It was easier to imagine that Ellie would absolve her. Ellie, who would snuggle with dog and cats, stay up all night to bottle-feed orphaned calves and foals, who always greeted Dina’s dorky little brother by echoing his, ‘Nice scar, dude!’ had always had such a contrary view of justice and rightness that she’d perplexed Dina. Dina had asked Ellie once if killing in self-defense was murder, and Ellie’s reply was incredulous laughter.

Justice was more complex. While Dina believed justice was shaped by redemption and forgiveness, Ellie had a darker interpretation.

Even now, sitting in the quietness of the QZ in the midday sun and watching the grass stir with the faint breeze from the bay, Dina remembered a particular time that Ellie voiced her thoughts about justice. It had been after dark, surrounded by friends in the town hall lounge after a dance. Dina could still remember feeling terribly isolated from Ellie that night. Ellie had sat with her feet up by the fire and played with her knife, flicking it open and closed repetitively, her gaze dark and introspective. At the time, Dina was sure that she and Joel had fought. That was one of many moments that Dina couldn’t ignore her paranoia that Joel was the cause of Ellie’s dark anger and the reason Ellie had pulped Weston’s face for kissing her.

The conversation must have centered around justice, but all Dina could remember from that night was the dark look that turned Ellie’s face so alien as she said, “I don’t know… It doesn’t seem about justice or what someone deserves, just… Some people don’t seem to get the basic principle of empathy. If you can’t empathize with the horror of being raped or hurt or murdered, then I guess the only way to put someone in someone else’s shoes is to do that shit to them. Then they’ll realize it’s not okay anymore. Or they’ll be dead.”

At the time, Dina had thought it was a bleak view on life, but now she knew it was shortsighted. She could empathize with the men she killed, to the point that part of her died with them. Dina stared down at the hand coated with sticky brown blood and wondered what Ellie would think of her now, empathizing but murdering anyway.

“Here.”

She jumped, staring at the food held out to her before she raised her gaze to the man who held it.

“I’m not hungry, Mark.”

“You need to eat, Leah,” he said gently.

Dina accepted the mixture of fat, protein, and fruit, and chewed it absently. She knew Mark was worried about the child she carried. It was such an alien concept that he was the father of her child, not when the Seraphites had the bigger hand in its conception. For now, she didn’t have to lie with him, and that improved their relationship dramatically.

A whistle rang out north of them—a call of alarm—and she swallowed the rest of her food and rose to her feet.

Back to the hunt.

Hours later, her mind settled into the quiet of non-thought, and she realized she’d tortured people to death that day. The Seraphites believed their reapings were blood sacrifices committed for God to erase sin and bring glory to their people. It was a slanderous mutilation of what Dina knew to be true. Fittingly, Dina’s sin only multiplied with each unforgivable murder.

Dina watched the blood wash from her hand down into the shower drain, too tired to even feel
horror. She finished bathing and dressed, her mind a million miles away.

When Dina finally focused, she stood against the sink in the dormitory washroom to study her reflection in the mirror. She willed herself to see the person she remembered. She leaned closer to stare at the scars on her cheeks, the gauntness of her face, and the circles under her eyes. Her reflection was dissociating. She’d changed so much inside and out, but she still expected to recognize the stranger in the mirror. It had been half a year and a mental lifetime since Jackson.

She tilted her face to study the swollen matriarch scars at the corner of her eyes. As Emily had commanded, she took the scars the eve of their attack on Seattle. The knife was worth it. She moved freely now, only limited by Hannah and Rebecca’s orders, and in the chaos of patrolling, those orders weren’t restrictive.

She had feared the knife in her hand more than the one that went to her face. She still did, but she kept her knife sharp and her movements sure. Her only contrary comfort was that her reapings were as fast as mercifully possible.

It had been a busy few weeks. After scattering the QZ forces, the Seraphites had taken over the walled-off military base within the QZ. Potable water, medical supplies, and weapons were all within reach. Though infected infiltrated the areas of wall destroyed by dynamite, the Matriarchs considered the demons an ally in their reaping.

In the chaos of their violence, Dina had seen no one mourn Emily’s disappearance. Rebecca was frantic, Hannah took Emily’s loss with subdued disappointment, and there was a general sense of loss from everyone: of structure, safety, and purpose. Yet there was also relief to no longer be pushed so violently to violent ends.

Dina wondered sometimes if anyone else had imagined killing Emily the way she had.

“Leah?”

She turned her gaze to the reflection of the woman that stood behind her. “Rachel. How are you?”

“Will you help me with my hair?”

Dina tucked her towel and motioned for Rachel to sit on the bench by the lockers. She used her wooden comb to part Rachel’s hair. Her hands moved with precision borne from practice. Rachel shyly offered to return the favor, and Dina accepted. As she sat for the tight crown to be braided in her hair, she wondered at the dread that tightened her gut. Her baby was still no more than the absence of her cycle, but the knowledge weighed heavily on her. She had the burden of an impossible task: making the world a safe place for the child inside her.

“Are we safe?” Rachel asked in an odd echo of her thoughts.

These people were too hardened to accept a lie. “No. We won’t be until we wipe the infection from our lands.”

“But here—”

“Not the way we are, Rachel. We make enemies, not allies when we kill.”

“All our children,” Rachel whispered. Tears and anger both seemed to choke her. Dina took the hand that gripped her shoulder, feeling an echo of her rage. That anger could drive so much violence, but she’d seen the other side of it too. The Seraphites had taken no prisoners from Jackson because they couldn’t afford to feed them. All murdered for lack of food, when Jackson
had stores enough...

Only Dina had been saved because of Ellie’s lie about immunity. She wondered at the morality of saving someone who would become a murderer. But that seemed to be what Emily wanted: a holy army of murderers.

She reminded Rachel, “We’ve killed children too.”

Rachel looked away, unable to supply a rebuttal. Even those separated from their immediate violence couldn’t ignore what they reaped.

The children killed in Seattle were as innocent as those in Jackson, unfortunate collateral to the evil of the adults that should be protecting them. Dina would kill anyone that contributed to the attack, but she knew without a doubt that the Seraphites carried responsibility for the deaths of their own children.

“Not all of them kill our children. We’ll wipe evil off the planet, Rachel, but you know not all of them are. We have to be better than them for our living children, for your son and all the others.”

“Will you bless me, Leah?”

At least Rachel stilled used her name. “Lamb, please bless this member of Your flock with Your blood. Give Rachel the strength to fight for Your cause and persevere when faced with evil so that she may do Your will in all things. In the name of our Blessed First Mother…”

“Amen,” they echoed together.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and realized she was late. Dina dressed, settled her heavy loaded pistols in her holsters, and folded her leather coat over her arm. She entered Hannah’s office in time to watch head scouts step out. They nodded to her deferentially. Paul, Dina’s head scout, even reached out to take her hand gently, his smile tight.

“I’m sorry for being late.” Those words delivered to Hannah were a disconcerting echo of another time. Even when a stranger stared back at her in the mirror, she was notorious for showing up five minutes late. Dina’s friends in Jackson used to joke that the only thing she ever showed up on time for was church: worship and dances.

Hannah flicked her fingers, a command Dina knew meant to close the door. She glanced at Rebecca, who looked back at her neutrally.

“What is it?” Dina asked when their silence stretched too long.

“We found Emily’s patrol,” Rebecca replied quietly.

“And?”

“Signs of animal predation on all of them.”

“Demon animals?”

As Dina pondered the shocking implication of Hannah’s question, Rebecca shook her head and Hannah answered herself. “No, none have been sighted in weeks.”

“John was killed by one of our arrows. Emily died from a blow to her skull. A reaping rope was cut down. A Seraphite did this, an apostate. They betrayed us. What do we do?”
Hannah rubbed her eyes and shook her head in the face of Rebecca’s barely restrained wrath. “We have to take Seattle or die. We need time to regroup and grow strong enough to travel to San Francisco. We’ve been struggling for the last year.”

Jackson had tipped the scales then. Dina felt a flush of satisfaction at the thought.

Rebecca said, “We have to kill them all!”

“We need them,” Dina blurted without thought.

Hannah and Rebecca both studied her with very different expressions. Rachel was incensed. “We are the righteous! The Lamb will provide—”

“Rebecca,” Hannah interrupted. She motioned to Dina to continue.

“We need someone to service the solar panels to stop brownouts. We need people to work the cattle and chickens. We don’t know how the plumbing works, where their stores are, how to pasteurize any milk we gather. We’ve dumped out how many gallons of milk after Matthew and the children got diarrhea from it? And we’re lucky they recovered! We don’t know how to open their armory, let alone the infirmary.”

“And how do we do that?” Hannah asked.

“We assure them we won’t hurt them or their families. We guarantee their safety, access to food and medicine—”

“It won’t be enough.”

“We have to find common ground. A way to unite them with us.”

“If they won’t take our scars or prayers, there’s no union,” Rebecca snapped.

“Then we find something else,” Dina argued. Rebecca’s hand twitched, and Hannah shook her head sharply. “Go, Rebecca. Rest before your next patrol.”

Rebecca clipped Dina’s shoulder as she left, a gesture so immature Dina couldn’t do more than stare after her as the door slammed shut. Dina turned back to Hannah in time to see her withdraw a bottle of liquor from the desk. Hannah poured a finger into two dusty glasses and motioned for Dina to take one. Dina shook her head.

“Of course. Your child…” Hannah murmured, her gaze at Dina’s belt. Dina watched in disbelief as she drank both shots. “Rebecca’s second was killed today on patrol.”

“By wolves?”

Hannah shook her head. “Demons.”

Infected. Rebecca probably dealt the killing blow then. If she was anything like Dina, that would make it all the worse. They were destroying themselves from the inside. Dina felt a shift of sympathy for the woman. Hannah massaged her brow with two fingers. “Finding Emily’s body today with that news… It must shake her faith that Emily was killed by a Seraphite.”

“Who?”

“Yara is missing with her brother.” Hannah poured herself more whiskey, her smile dark. “Lev was warned about the plan to crucify Yara. By Simon, my partner.” Hannah raised her gaze, and a
shudder passed through Dina. Hannah looked back to her whiskey. “I always dreamed of killing her, and I suppose I had enough part in it to be satisfied. I never imagined Yara had it in her.”

This conversation was like hanging over a cliff by her fingertips. Rather that fall into it, Dina clung to pragmatism. “Where are Yara and Lev?”

“Fled. Likely with a wolf. We found five dead clickers in the vicinity. That first night, our southeast patrol was confused by inaccurate whistles, and one of them reported a boy that matched Lev’s description. The wolves wouldn’t break our code so quickly.”

New angles to this woman continued to emerge. Clickers, not demons. “Now what?”

“We try to survive.”

“With half our scouts dead? Surely Emily expected they wouldn’t welcome us here; how did she think we’d survive this? Why did she hold such a pace if we were weakened by Jackson?”

“Back east, the infection spread to animals. Carnivores.”

Dina’s breath caught in her throat. “No. That can’t be right.”

“Oh, it’s wrong all right, but it still happened. We moved south when Anna led us out of Memphis. Discovered an infected bear in the Everglades after her death, and Emily has been driving us hard to cleanse the earth ever since. She’s right. If we don’t find a way to stop the spread of infection, there will be no hope. For us or the wolves.”

“So we kill everyone else? That’s not going to work!”

“I know.” Dina had never seen someone as weary as Hannah was at that moment. “And we knew they wouldn’t welcome us. Anna, though, she worked with citizens in Memphis QZ when the Seraphites invaded. She had us eating out of her hand within a season. It’s the only way I can see us surviving, especially with the infected bearing down on us.” Hannah paused for a long time, stroking her fingertip over the rim of her glass.

Dina clenched her teeth, filling the pun away. Ellie would have snorted at that one.

Hannah finally looked up in the wake of Dina’s silence. “None of us are Anna though.”

“The First Mother?”

Hannah nodded. “She had charisma, but more than that, she had the promise of a cure. She was immune. Without that, there isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell of uniting with the wolves here.”

Dina’s verbal filter was exhausted that day; she asked, “Who are you?”

“You should ask who she was.” Hannah opened another drawer and handed Dina a soft leather-bound book. “Read the first entry. Our Book of Names.”

Dina flipped through the book of ugly scrawling print before she studied the first entry dated half a decade after the outbreak. She looked up at Hannah, who was bent over a QZ map, and wondered if this was a trap. Her curiosity drew her gaze back to the book in her hands.

What was this?

It took a few pages to get used the handwriting, and some words were too blurred to be sure. She could read enough though, and she imagined the writer’s cadence as a long, smooth southern
I’ve been told that with every great acendence must come a record of its circumstances. Mine started a long time back, when the evil that cloked the world was all man-made. I would never imagined what could come, even when I saw evil everyday in the man that fathered me.

We were mighty unprepared for the Coming. Funny how unprepared, given my father’s favorite lessons from the Bible come from Revelations. He was just a preacher before plague came along. He’d been excommunicated from the church on account of his relationship with a teenage girl in his youth congregation. Even though he left the church in shame, he took up a new flock within the year. My momma always said there ain’t no accounting for the gullible.

Deep in Appalachia, my father was seduced by serpent handling. My momma always said he had aspirations to be an actor, but he was too ugly for it. He was a vane man though and could cover his homeliness with carisma alone. He could sell snake oil in his sleep. We knew leaving the Methodist Church was only a hiccup in his plans. He claimed innocence even after the tests proved he was the father. He was the only person not shamed, and he left already thinking of his next scheem.

In just a month, my father moved us to the mountains of Tennessee in Cock County (fitting place for my father) where he already had talked his way into a fire and brimstone church. Within three years, he’d brought the snakes in and withdrew from the Baptist denomination. Denominations are a Mark of the Beast, you see. His congregation hung on his every word. People would drive across state lines to sit at his Sunday worship service. He tempted the serpents every Sunday. After the first bite, he refused to let my mother call an ambulance. After the second, my mother stopped asking to.

“Most bites are dry anyway,” he told me. He told me more than he should’ve. He was right though. He’d even travelled down to the veterinary school in Knoxville to ask about the risks. Keep the rattlers in poor condition, no food, no water, get them used to handling, and the risks of the venom drops even more. It was a gamble, but it was one of the safest bets he ever made.

In the years he handled those snakes, the venom never entered him. It shook my faith to see him live every time. He outlived even my mother. Momma died to the flu. I still haven’t forgiven her for leaving me to his wims.

It was only natural to bring the infection into the church after the outbreak. No one had any hope that the infection would stay out of Appalachia, but it took months for it to spread to our little town. We were ready. So was my father. Only a few days after the collapse, he started planning, and I planned with him. I imagined his death as much as he imagined triumph. I knew what he would do, but he couldn’t tempt an infected like a snake. They were less predictable than rattlers, and infected didn’t have dry bites. My father bet on it anyway. He brought an infected “demon” into the church for Sunday worship. He was bitten, or it seemed so at the time.

He lived.

Within the year, he was not just preacher but Father, the Heavenly Warrior sent to defeat the Demons on Earth. He invented his past, and he repeated the lie so often I nearly believed him. His sermons were all centered on him, and for the first time in my recollection, he seemed to enjoy what he preached. He sure could wip his congregation up into a frenzy. Being such a charletan, he had a talent at bringing people into his fold.

My daddy didn’t do all this for status alone. He took five other wives from the community and had relations with many more, his lust free to rein over all of us. He marked us: our bodies and our
faces. He claimed it was his burden, that God told him he had to spread his immunity through his seed.

In the end, infection wasn’t our biggest threat. The government came through after the infection. We were ready. When my father unleashed us on them, we mowed those soldiers down with fury that was befitting of Revelations. At the time, I was sickened by the violence, but I’ve sense come to realize violence is just another requirement for survival.

I never understood how my daddy earned unshakeable faith in his growing congregation, specially when I realized it was all based on a lie. But my father was a man who could lie his way out of anything by believing his lie so thoroughly he erased all hint of the truth. I wandered how I could believe him and if I was Jezebel for how my faith wavered when it had to be put into a man like my father.

Then I was bitten. I don’t rightly remember where or why, only the look of terror on my father’s face when he saw the wound.

It was then that I saw the truth in his eyes. I thought because his bite was real that all of it was. I bought my father’s snake oil because I was too ignorant to realize he faked the infected. He stacked the cards for himself just the way he did with the snakes.

I laughed in his face right in front of the congregation. He looked like he wanted to kill me, but maybe he worried I could infect him. I turned and shouted the truth to the congregation: I had been bitten and I was being tested by God!

I welcomed death. When they saw me turn, they’d doubt my father, and everything would come crashing down. If my father’s daughter couldn’t survive infection, then why should they open their legs to him? Why should they obey him? Why should their husbands and lovers give my father the only right to lie with their women?

When two days turned to three, I wondered when my time would come.

Those two days of waiting put me in a fevered state. I was reborne, whole and strong, steadfast in my new faith. I realized the truth. My father was the second beast sent by the Dragon. He had horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He was deceiving us, ordering us to worship some part of the evil that surrounded us, and he killed all who resisted him. God reached down to open my eyes to the truth. He blessed me with His Holy Spirit, protected me from the plague he sent upon Earth, and I had a new task to reap the evil of my father from the world.

My immunity was a shield against his evil. He was too afraid of my infection to touch me, but even with repreve, I didn’t become complacent. It took a year to set my trap. In that time, I whispered the truth to the congregation, armed the women around me, and when the time was right, my father was exposed as the beast he was. We hung him up in the center of town, and I remembered all the times that he had pushed himself inside me: my mind, my body, my soul.

I finally could reap what he sewed.

“He is nestled with sin!” I shouted. I remembered his quiet whispers into my hair: breathe he’d say, relax and let me in so that you can know how much I love you. He was now as powerless as I had been. He rocked on the bucket beneath his feet, his throat caught in the rough rope around his neck. “Breathe,” I told him. “Breathe in so that you can know my love!”

The knife was sharp, and his flesh was soft. His belly melted around the blade, and his innards flopped out, as ungainly and ugly as his manhood. I will never forget the look of shock on his face.
as he died. I understood then why he took pleasure in my helplessness.

I wander why I felt such deep sadness that night. I was ready to lead my people to the truth, to burn all men who preached other ways. I would be ready to storm Memphis with more preparation. I had faced down the plague that God sent to test us and proved true. I had faced my father’s sin and knew the truth.

Believing his lie had shaken my faith. I remember his hypocrisy as he survived the second day after his bite. I wandered how God could choose a man that lied so easily, whose faith was malleable to what most suited his own needs, who had preached purity and raped his daughter, who screamed about the evils of ending life in the womb but drove his own daughter to a clinic to kill the baby he put in my belly.

I should have been releaved by his death. I should have been empowered by serving as his executioner. His blood was on my hands, and I had reaped his sins from his body before his death. The thing I can’t never escape is that he was my father. Even after his death, he owned some part of me, a part I still can’t scorch away.

That is my shame, and my shame is for every woman who leads the flock to know. Know from where I come and know to where we go. Use this knowledge as your weapon. We all are sinners, but we all have the chance to use that sin for righteousness.

Amen.

For this swelling force of a cult to have arisen from such horrible beginnings: the darkest of human sin, shook Dina. Lying in the dark solitude of her room that night, she wanted to open her window and shout out into the night that they were fools for following this strange scrapped-together religion invented by a man and the daughter he repeatedly raped. The Seraphites followed their teachings without question, trusted the women who led them, the women that knew the origin of the cult was anything but godly.

Given Hannah’s strange responses that night, Dina assumed she didn’t believe in the teachings any more than Dina did. Rebecca, though, she was a true believer. Surely she hadn’t been shown the Book of Names? And Emily… Whether she believed or not, how could she have thought her actions would do anything but weaken the cult?

The hardest part about it all was the selfish doubt that filled Dina about her own faith. What made her Bible any less adulterated than the taped together text that the Seraphites used?

Dina reminded herself forcefully of the feeling of rightness she carried about her God, the teachings her grandmother rooted so deeply in her. There was no death and purging in her faith, only the need to live as close to God’s plan as possible.

She’d asked her grandmother once about the holiness of words written by humans. To this day, Dina could remember the rhythmic creak of Bobeshi’s rocking chair and the sweet scent of her pipe. Tommy had made her the chair, and Jerry supplied Bobeshi tobacco almost year-round. Even as Dina’s mother scowled at the habit, she would giggle with Dina’s father that the old farrier was sweet on Dina’s grandmother.

Dina paused her reading of David’s so human lament to ask, “How do we know it’s holy if men wrote it?”

“What are you who reads that text?”
Dina didn’t understand the question, but Bobeshi answered for her: “We are imperfect humans too. The reading can adulterate just as easily as the writing. Yet we find godliness in it anyway.”

“What if we’re interpreting it wrong?”

Bobeshi smiled tenderly. “Do you trust me to protect you in this world?”

“Yes,” was Dina’s easy, immediate answer.

“Why?”

“I...just do. I know you.”

“Am I strong like your father? A good shot with his pistol? Can I run fast and shoot an arrow through an infected’s head?”

“That doesn’t matter.” Dina knew her grandmother well enough to know she was being led into a lesson, but she couldn’t anticipate this one. Bobeshi smiled dryly and continued, “You have faith in me. Just as you have faith in God. That faith in inexplicable, and it will lead you right. If it feels right here—” Bobeshi tapped Dina’s sternum. “—then it’s right. Does this feel right, what you’re reading?”

“Yes.” In that moment, Dina knew exactly what her grandmother was telling her.

It had seemed so simple. Even when she’d pondered the godliness of having sex outside of marriage and loving Ellie, those doubts were nothing like what swamped her now. There was the rub: was this God’s plan for her? Murder and sacrilege? Or was it more godly to accept the hammer and die, even knowing she carried a child, even with the whisper of hope that she could change things for good?

More practically, Hannah was right. Without the claim of immunity, it would be hard to sway the Seraphites’ deeply rooted beliefs.

If only Ellie’s bluff hadn’t been a lie.

What a good lie, though. Ellie had always been a good liar, and she’d been good enough to fool Emily for at least a short while. Whatever Ellie hid under her tattoo had to be convincing. Dina wouldn’t know. That was the one place on Ellie’s body that Dina was never allowed to touch. She’d tried stupidly to kiss it when she was drunk, and that had ended in an uncharacteristic fight between them. Even when Dina could bury her face between Ellie’s legs, she wasn’t allowed to touch the scar underneath the tattoo.

She’d thought it was a burn scar or a brand, something that Ellie was too ashamed to bare. It escaped no one in Jackson during that first summer when they didn’t see Ellie without sleeves even on the hottest days. Then again, they didn’t see much of Ellie at all that first summer.

When Dina finally managed to coax her out to swim with her friends at the end of the season, Ellie left alone within the hour, and Dina had to follow her back to Jackson. When she finally tracked Ellie to the barn, Ellie had sneered at Dina and said, “You can’t fix people, Dina.”

She hadn’t wanted to see what Ellie meant, but Ellie pinned Dina with a sharp stare and reiterated, “I’m not your fucking class project.”

Then Dina realized pity had shaped a lot of the way she felt about Ellie. After Ellie beat Weston’s head in for touching her, it was clear she’d been raped, and that twisted Dina’s heart. She’d wanted
to mend, soothe, and to draw Ellie out of her shell to show her the wonderful safety of Jackson. Trust Ellie to see through that bullshit and call Dina out on it.

It took her a week to gather the courage to find Ellie again. She’d never been so mortified in her life, even when her parents sat her down for a tongue-lashing for spreading a rumor that Jerry could give people infection with his spit. The only person Dina had to apologize to was Ellie this time around, and she’d meant every word when she said, “So I’m sorry. For what you said about fixing people. I didn’t mean to be like that.”

“I was mad.” Ellie shrugged.

It was a lukewarm response, but at least it was a response. “Want to come home with me after this and hang out? My family’ll be home, but as you already know, they’re lame. We can hide in my room.” Dina cocked her head, measured Ellie’s lack of response and said, “I have some whiskey?”

Ellie finally cracked a soft smile, and Dina wanted to do a shimmy in joy for earning that expression. She leaned closer. “And a bed. A chair? Hats? Dirty socks?”

Then Ellie laughed softly. “How can I turn down dirty socks? But seriously, have any books?”

“I never thought books could get a girl in my room,” Dina joked, earning another shy grin. “Yes, I have books. And some comics if Samson hasn’t stolen them.”

“Okay.”

And it really had been that easy.

Now folded into the fluid darkness of coming sleep, Dina rolled over and sighed as she imagined Ellie climbing into bed behind her and wrapping herself around Dina. She imagined her scent of hay, leather, and sweat. She imagined Ellie’s lips brushing her neck.

The memory of the murders she’d carried out that day threatened and woke her up. She imagined her brother, her parents—so different yet so compatible—her grandmother. But Bobeshi’s expression was tight with disappointment.

Then she felt the guts in her hand and rolled out of bed as her gorge rose without warning. She retched into the bucket in the corner. Dina leaned against the wall and cried. She needed sleep. She needed rest. She needed sanity. But it was only right that those men should torment her in death when they couldn’t defend themselves in life. Even if they could forgive her, what right did she have to ask for their forgiveness?

Sometime later, a soft knock sounded on the door. “Leah?”

Was that…? “Abigail?”

She opened the door, and Abigail slipped into her room. She set the lantern she carried on Dina’s bedside table and opened it to allow more light to brighten the room. Abigail reached out for her, and Dina choked down her tears as she accepted the embrace. She’d been summoned by someone on the hall to comfort Dina, and Dina couldn’t begrudge that.

“What’s wrong?”

“What isn’t?” Dina asked in desperation. She accepted the comfort of Abigail’s childish hushing as her mind moved between subjects. She wondered what had made Abigail good enough to join the Seraphites when so many others were deemed unworthy. “Why weren’t you killed with the men
you were with? When the Seraphites found you.”

“Because Yara was the Matriarch leading them. They came on us as they were using me. Emily would’ve killed me because of my impurity. Yara gave me a choice: join them or die.”

“That was it?”

“Mmmhm.”

“Then why not take prisoners in Jackson? The place I came from had food, supplies, women, and children…”

“All the scouts died. When all the scouts die, there are no prisoners.” At Dina’s unvoiced question, Abigail explained, “Peter is my partner. He said none of the forward scouts made it back.” She hesitated. “He and his group went back to look for them, and there were people who survived, but they didn’t tell Emily. They’re tired of the violence too.”

The thought of survivors in Jackson was a rush hope when Dina was sure she had none. It was invigorating and terrifying. Then crushing, selfish disappointment set in again just as quickly. There was no going back to Jackson, not after all she’d done.

But, even if Jackson was still no longer an option, maybe there was hope to change the Seraphites. Maybe she could take the risk to bring about change for good. Yara had used her authority to save Abigail, and Dina now carried some of that authority by the scars on her face.

She turned that thought over in her head as she followed Abigail back to the women’s quarters. She was relieved to receive their murmured greetings. She missed these girls, separated from them now by station and duty. After a few minutes accepting the comfort they had to give, Dina lay down among them and closed her eyes.

She couldn’t face this continuous cycle of torture and death. There had to be another way, even if she had to make it. Without the claim of holiness by immunity, Dina would have to find a way to bring about change. She wouldn’t survive this path without compromise, but now at least she had hope she could do it.

The next day, Dina’s scouting party discovered a group of ten men, women, and children trying to travel through an infection-laden region in the north portion of the QZ. Dina’s scouts killed the infected that converged on them and subdued the adults. Dina offered the adults a different option than had been offered before.

The conversation was fluid, like talking to a wavering wall of fear, but Dina saw a few coming around she promised them more than death. Then one woman asked, “What do you even want?”

“To survive,” Dina replied quietly. She was able to make more eye contact as the civilians became more willing to listen to her. “As a group, we’re searching for a way to stop the infection. The woman who led us before wanted to wipe out anyone who could be infected, but that’s not the way we’re going to do it now. We can’t afford to, not with infected animals spreading across the country.”

Every adult in that room stilled, and it was only after a pause of true belief that someone said, “We can’t trust you.”

“You can trust that your death will be worse than living. I’ll hang you, gut you, and your children will be taken into the cult and scarred like I was: without choice.” Dina was surprised as tears
blurred her vision. “I don’t want to do that. Please don’t make me.”

Whatever emotion was on her face or in her voice, Dina convinced them. They were wary and terrified, but they agreed to return to the Seraphite’s headquarters peacefully. As Dina passed through the gates with her prisoners surrounded by her scouts, she caught Rebecca’s enraged stare.

With that wrath in mind, Dina assigned her scouts to guard the QZ citizens. As Dina had promised, they were fed, clothed, and could rest in relative safety.

During debriefings that night, Dina announced her intentions to the Seraphites, that they needed help to survive this place. Hannah offered no rebuttal, though the next day, Hannah cautioned her against trying to save anyone in uniform. “We don’t need them, and we won’t accept them. I can help you protect the others, but not them.”

The situation dictated that Hannah’s violent compromise was right. Dina reaped anyone in uniform captured, but the citizens were another story. Dina’s patrols didn’t always end with anything but blood, but she saved more QZ citizens than she expected. By the end of the next two weeks, she had enough people to start working the cattle, the pasteurizer, and the chickens. They had pasteurized milk and eggs soon after. The solar panels were fixed to provide more reliable power and hot water within a week.

Things settled more comfortably every day that passed. Morale increased, even among the non-Seraphites, and tentative peace began to form between the groups. A young QZ man named David even volunteered to show the Seraphites the location of Seattle’s rooftop greenhouses.

“Why help us?” Dina asked him.

“Hell, this isn’t much worse than when Matias ran things. We didn’t have a choice when he rolled in either. Matias isn’t one of us, but SFQZ didn’t care. They took our land, crops, and hard work all the same. He killed my best friend by making her patrol outside the walls last year.” David worked his jaw, fighting tears before he said, “There was no reason for that.”

Outside the compound, things were less ideal. All of their scouting parties encountered the wolves that had been terrorizing them for weeks, but despite losing scouts to them, the wolves slipped out of their grasp time and time again. Even Dina felt the frustrated wrath that bubbled within her scouts. She would enjoy killing the wolves when they flushed them out.

Then respite occurred in the last way Dina expected: a mutilated man falling out a window to his death at her feet. They found two other pulped corpses upstairs. All three victims wore military uniforms, and they’d marked their kills on their rifle butts. These were the child-murdering wolves they’d been hunting from the start. While Dina’s scouts moved through the building to find other occupants, Dina came upon a woman slipping from the building.

Her first thought was a crushing personal betrayal:  You aren’t my wolf . After all this time, she’d still had hope that Ellie had survived, that she had come to save Dina from this madness. Instead, a stranger looked up at her in fear. Dina studied her swollen knuckles, the bruise on her cheek, and the blood all over her hands, and she knew this woman had been responsible for killing the others despite her military uniform.

In the end, Dina let her go. The woman had killed her own allies for their actions against the Seraphites. There was something admirable in not being caught up in the tit-for-tat. She’d just done what was right…or maybe just smudged out what was wrong.
Two days later, Dina returned to the compound to hear the news that the entire west scouting party had been killed. Twelve dead, nearly a third of their remaining forces. Even Luke, with his impressive height and weight had died. He carried a hammer, and he’d been senior enough in the cult to lead his own patrol.

“Beheaded,” Hannah told her behind a closed door. “No other dead, so whoever killed them escaped.”

No one? Dina couldn’t imagine how the attackers escaped unscathed. She rubbed her forehead, feeling a tension headache creeping in. Just as she was making headway, something else happened to stir the Seraphites up into a frenzy of killing. Had the wolf she’d released done it? Should she have killed her? More importantly, how could she protect the QZ citizens?

“We have to post guards with the QZ citizens. I’ve guaranteed their safety.”

“My scouts—”


“Your scouts just came off patrol.”

“Then I’ll stand guard. Rebecca would kill them if given half a second.”

“You’re exhausted, Leah. My scouts are trustworthy.”

“I need you to publicly back me, Hannah. I need you to denounce the violence.”

She shook her head. “I can’t preach that message, Leah. I’ve spent years killing them from inside.”

“You can’t just—”

“Preach on Sunday.”

Dina was stunned silent. Hannah’s smile was tense. “You’ve already preached twice for us. Preach again. About what you feel is right.” She leaned forward. “Do you think I didn’t know what Yara’s plan was? She whispered among the women before she rose to be Emily’s second: about freedom and peace and searching for a cure with goodness, not killing. Why do you think Emily brought her into our fold? She wanted Yara closer for a reason.”

“To monitor her,” Dina said softly. She remembered abruptly, “You told your partner to warn Lev. You needed Yara alive.”

“Yes. I need someone young, charismatic, someone who believes in something other than this violence Emily was killing us with. For my daughter. But I can’t do this without your words. You have to own this, Leah.”

Startled to be the focus on Hannah’s goals, she asked, “Who are you?”

“Does it matter? I lived in Memphis before and after Outbreak. We were safe in Memphis QZ for nearly five years before the Seraphites came, with Anna at their head. She rode a white horse.” Hannah seemed to find that fact funny, but her smile dimmed. “I had a husband and child by then. Anna killed both of them.”

“Why?”

“Why else? Searching for a cure. She was hoping to discover immunity the way it happened in her.
It rarely did. The QZ was struggling with overpopulation, but she solved that problem within a year. She had a few immune kids survive. As soon as they were old enough, she tried to breed them. Their children weren’t any more likely to resist infection though. I realized it was better Jamie didn’t survive. To be forced to breed…”

Dina clenched her jaw at the hypocrisy, and Hannah winced. “Change takes time.”

“Why follow them?”

“What else could I do? I didn’t want to die; I was terrified to be reaped. You saw what happened with Adah: the wolf had mercy even when Emily didn’t. Anna was worse. And any change that happens has to happen at the top. I had to get here.”

“What changed? Why did Anna stop her eugenics project?”

“Eugenics,” Hannah said as if tasting the word. “She had an about-face. Dementia, I think, though she wasn’t that old at the time. Maybe the fungus ate away her brain. One extreme to another. We left the QZ to kill any susceptible to the infection to cut off its ability to spread…”

Hannah rubbed her fingers together and faded into silence for a long moment. Then she sighed. “Anna was just a woman. Even after she murdered my son, I forgot that.”

Their patrol was long and bloodless the next day. They came upon a group of elders and children, and a few men and women that were guarding them. No one put up a fight. By now Dina knew their lean look of hunger. These people hadn’t eaten in a long time, and they looked to her with desperation. The half dozen infected her scouts had killed outside their building could explain that look too.

Paul stood at Dina’s shoulder, surveying the group. She met his sidelong look with a sharp shake of her head. She stepped toward a huddled group of three young children and holstered her pistol to remove a lump of pemmican and frybread from her coat pocket. The two adults that shielded the children melted back from her in fear.

The children were too hungry to look to their parents. They ate without hesitation. Dina turned to one girl who looked to be worse off than just hungry. She bent close and studied her pale, gaunt features. “Hi,” she said, her scars stretching awkwardly with her smile.

The girl looked among them all and shivered in fear. Dina reached out, not quite touching her. “I’m Leah. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Stay away from her, you bitch!” a man, presumably her father, shouted. Dina turned a quelling stare at Mark, who looked to her before he reacted. She met the outraged stare of the fearful man. “Please keep your voice down or you’ll bring infected and kill all of us.”

She held out her canteen to the girl, who drank from it in small sips. “Are you sick, sweetie?”

The girl nodded. “Cancer.”

Dina held out her hand, and the girl rested her palm in Dina’s. A child with cancer... “That sucks major balls, huh?”

The girl looked at her without a smile. “Alright. Tough crowd. What did the triangle say to the circle?”
A beat of silence passed. Dina said, “You’re pointless.”

To that, the girl offered a shy smile. “That was one of my best friend’s favorite jokes. What’s your name?”

“Rose.”

Dina tightened her grip gently, and the girl shook her hand respectfully. “It’s nice to meet you, Rose. You seem pretty darn brave.”

Dina stood to address the group. “I’m Leah. Would you like to come with us? We have food, water, and safety from the infected. Some of your friends have joined us already.”

“Will you kill us like you killed the others?”

“We don’t kill children,” Paul said quietly beside Dina.

“We won’t be prisoners,” a woman in the corner said.

“Then offer no danger and cooperate with us. There will be no scarring, no killing, no rape. Help us so we can leave you in peace.”

The Seraphites flanked her, and at her look, her scouts began to pass out their food and water. She could feel the weight of their curiosity, and she wondered what conclusions they would draw. Her scouts were quiet through the entire exchange. They’d been in unanimous agreement with Dina from the start to curb the violence. Even losing a dozen of their brethren the day before, they were still with her.

That was that. There were only a few questions and a few concerns, but hunger and desperation gave these people no alternative.

At the end of the day, sitting in the worship hall with the entire congregation gathered, Dina listened to Hannah announce their status: the loss of their scouting party, the sharp warning against retaliation, and that Dina would be leading the next Sunday worship. Hannah had Dina rise to lead them through their closing prayer.

“One day there will be no curse. Our Blessed Mother will return to Earth where Her servants will serve Her and Her Blessed God. We will see God’s face, and His name will be on our faces. There will be no more night, no more sickness. Under Him, we will reign for ever and ever. Until that day, we will carry out Our Mother’s task, reap sin from this earth, and endure. Amen!”

Dina pondered her sermon that night as she lay in bed. She remembered her grandmother’s quiet, wise words, and she remembered too with a smile that Jackson as a whole liked to listen to her lessons over their Christian preacher, Reese.

That evening, she’d paged through a separate journal of sermons penned in Anna’s cramped hand. The sermons were powerful, even with their odd mix of fatalism, fantastical hopes, and the worst parts of the Christian Bible. Fitting for a woman raped by her self-proclaimed holy father, who eviscerated him and went on to lead probably the largest cult in the country. Dina was annoyed that every sermon Emily ever gave was here, verbatim. Dina chose the most moderate sermon she could, and by the time she adapted it for her purposes, she had a new message.

She found hope and justice within scripture and chose hymns that were less adulterated than their token favorites. She wrote her own prayer. That Sunday of worship, when Dina stood in front of the sanctuary facing the congregation, she had a moment of déjà vu.
Through the long day of rest after her service, everyone who approached congratulated her on her words. She saw hope, not fear or anger, on faces of the Seraphites. She believed for one moment that she could pull this off. She could bring change, usher in peace, and bring her child into a world that wasn’t drenched in blood.

The rest of Anna’s journal was blow after blow of sadness and poor decisions. Dina chose to read it the night after her sermon, stirring caution against presuming too much. She was responsible if this all went tits up too.

Children are our future. They are the most likely to be immune. Several years within the comfort of the QZ, I’ve realized that the only way to select for immunity—for purity and purpose and those of us who can withstand to sin on this earth—we must test everyone.

Since we’ve taken the QZ, we established a quarantine instead of killing all exposed to infection. Nearly 5% survive 48hrs. Those that survive 48hrs survive indefinately. Too few are exposed naturally. We must begin testing everyone, including the children. Including my children.

The next entry was nearly six months later.

After several months of testing, it’s become clear to me that immunity doesn’t arise from breeding. My children didn’t survive infection, and my children were fathered by my father. I was so sure… May they forgive me. I can’t forgive myself.

The entries that followed were more regular, but Dina scanned to find pertinent paragraphs. As the years passed in the log, the handwriting became shaky and the thoughts jumbled.

We have began harvesting fluids from different stages of infection. There is no difference in infection rate between them, though we herd of a new infected that releases spores at will. Breathing spores in causes death as much as infection. Newmonia is a natural result. Thow immune can breath spores for pro-longed periods without developing respirtory siens.

There is unrest. Are numbers are low. Emily begged me to stop testing children. Well, its her vershon anyway. She makes good points, but we have to weed the chaff from the crop, even if that leaves us with little wheet. At some point, breeding immune to immune will have the results we need to survive this plage.

I grow ill, and I wander if its from my faith waning. I lost hope. Even the children of two immunes are only a little more likely to survive infection. There is no breeding purity, and that is something I lost site of. My hole faith was centered around something that I just now relized was a lie from my father.

We cannot breed immunity. To survive, we must kill the infected. To kill the infection, we must kill all susceptible to it. I founded us by reaping the sin from my father. It was right in front of me the hole time. Now we will leave the comfort and safety of Memphis to begin are reaping of the sin from Earth. The holy war begins.

That was Anna’s last entry. The entries changed to neater handwriting—Anna’s handwriting trembled as she aged—more tactical words, better spelling, and simpler language. Emily penned short entries every week, including small notes like the one that put ice in Dina’s gut:

The weak are easiest to persuade. Just put a knife in their hand, and they will follow. Betraying their goodness turns them away from it; their unwilling violence cements their loyalty.
It was disturbing how right Emily was. She had known more than Anna ever did how to hold people under her sway. But... While Anna had apparently fostered loyalty, Emily did the opposite. Emily had micromanaged to the extent that the cult became dependent on her. Emily had lacked Anna’s imagination and creativity even with her knowledge of human psyche; she followed Anna’s last commandments to the letter without the ability to judge Anna’s messages came from dementia, not God. Emily had weakened the Seraphites with her strength and fanaticism.

Instead of training others to take her duties, she’d killed and ousted those who could lead, leaving her most inexperienced Matriarchs alive and her least-liked Matriarch to take her place. Emily had killed Adah, who was just a child, as an inexplicable warning to her cult. She’d forced out Yara, who was well-liked and well-respected. Leadership wasn’t just thin, it was in flux. Emily left a power vacuum that Rebecca lacked the confidence to take and Hannah was too disliked to.

And here Dina was, in perfect position.

The situation was ripe for justice but so fragile.

Dina awoke the next morning with her face wet from tears. She wiped her cheeks and sighed as her mind echoed at her the sorrow she felt for losing their children. In her surreal dream, she’d counted her own child among those that had been gunned down.

How was she better than those men that murdered the children? Dina had used the children’s deaths as justification for reaping the men they’d encountered on the streets, and she realized with a start that it really was just an excuse, something to make her feel better about her violent sin. She didn’t feel rage for those they lost, and it certainly wasn’t righteous.

She’d burned with righteous rage only twice: once against Emily—and that was snuffed out now that the object of her rage was dead—and once in Jackson for...had it really been over such a silly thing? As with most of her heavily emotional moments in Jackson, that anger had dealt with Ellie.

Dina thought back to the first moment she’d realized that anger. She and Jesse had just had sex, hadn’t they? They were lying together in bed, talking quietly as sleep settled over them. Dina pondered the comfort and safety she’d felt in Jesse’s arms, even knowing she didn’t love him the way she’d hoped she could. That night, she’d broached the question that had burned at her for over two years. “What happened during Ellie’s first patrol?”

Jesse stirred as if she’d woken him from sleep. He sighed, lifting Dina with his chest. “I promised not to talk about it.”

“I think I earned a little secret.”

“Not my secret to tell,” Jesse said, but his tone indicated he would break with a little wheedling. Then, without her even asking, he said, “Wes and his older brothers volunteered to patrol with Ellie. I figured it was a show of good sport. It’s life or death out there, you know?”

Dina’s heart dropped to her gut. “You let them?”

“Hey, I asked Ellie if she wanted to go with me instead. She said she was fine.”

“You shouldn’t have given her a choice! What did they do?”

“Like Ellie would have taken that well... Anyway, they were just fucking around. They left her alone.” Jesse chewed at his lip and finally continued, “And five marauders showed up.”
Ellie could have died. Dina’s assumptions went the way of hazing, even harassment, but nothing that could have resulted in death. “Jesus.”

“Is that weird for you to say?”

His teasing tone drove her anger higher. Dina climbed out of bed to yank her clothes on. “I’m not joking, Jesse. What the hell happened?”

“Ellie happened,” Jesse replied, studying her incredulously. “She killed the marauders. Hell, I’ll never forget it. One of them came staggering out of the building with one eye, screaming his head off, an arrow in his shoulder. Then out comes Ellie, swinging a machete. Put it through the top of his head.” He used his lips to make a popping sound as he mimed swinging a blade downward.

“I’ll kill them,” Dina whispered.

“She already took care of that.” Jesse grinned, but Dina couldn’t suppressed her rage and she snapped, “I meant Wes! What the hell were they thinking?! She could have died!”

“Dina, that was three years ago. Kim and I beat the shit out of them, and they let us.”

“And Ellie?”

“She just said if they fucked with her again, she was going to kill them. Pretty sure they still believe her.” Jesse chuckled. “I do.”

“They still go on patrol together.” They had just the week before. Dina yanked her boots on, her gut going cold as she remembered Wes patting Ellie’s shoulder. Ellie had grinned at him—they’d exchanged some joke—and at the time she’d been struck by the oddly intimate exchange. The ugly jealous part of her had hated Wes for earning that grin. Now that jealousy roared back with the rage he’d almost gotten Ellie killed.

“Where are you going?” Jesse asked, sitting up all the way. “It’s all fine, Dina. Ellie proved herself in her own way. They’re good. Don’t go; come on. We haven’t been together in a week.”

“How can she stand to even look at him after all of that?”

“They only meant to scare her. They were upset as hell when they realized how much danger she’d been in. Dina, it was years ago. Everyone’s okay now.”

“I’m not okay!”

Jesse’s gaze was dark as he studied her expressionlessly. He shook his head, got out of bed, and pulled on his clothes too. It was a clear signal that he wasn’t going to try to change her mind about leaving. When he turned back to her, he said, “Sometimes I wonder who you’re in a relationship with.”

The words were arrows, and they struck true. She was dumbfounded as she watched him touch the doorknob. Before he opened his bedroom door, Jesse said, “Tonight was supposed to be about us. Every time we’re together, you talk about her. Every time we’re with her, you only pay attention to her. Do you want to be her girlfriend? Because I’ll thank you not to be your second-best.”

She had no rebuttal. By the time they got to Dina’s house, Dina realized this was probably the end. “So I guess we’re taking a break.”

“Until you figure out what you want, yeah. Night.” Jesse left her there on the dark porch with more
emotions than she knew what to do with.

She’d planned revenge on Wes and his brothers in a variety of ways before realizing not only was Jesse right, but that her anger wasn’t godly. She was enraged by the thought of Ellie being put in danger. Dina’s plotting—even if it was just flaming cowshit in boots—would only make Dina feel better. It was pointless and worthless, even if it did illustrate a truth to herself.

After a week of pondering her relationships and her emotions, Dina went in search of Ellie. She didn’t expect to find Jesse sitting on a paddock fence by the barn. He was watching Ellie lunge horses. He loved horses, but he’d never been very good with them. He was too good a person to be jealous of Ellie’s ease with them though.

Ellie was one of Jackson’s best horsemen, and it was no secret that Jerry was slowly incorporating her into his profession: Jackson’s farrier, veterinarian, butcher, and caregiver in one. One day, Ellie would take on his tasks full time and have to step down from her patrols.

Jesse acknowledged Dina with a tight smile as she climbed up beside him. They watched Ellie work her horse through lead and pacing changes. She was grinning in only the way she did on a horse. Her hair was coming out of its bun, and the sun caught it and turned it fiery red. She was beautiful.

“You were right,” Dina murmured, swept away by the inevitability of her feelings for Ellie.

Jesse glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

“We should break up. Officially.”

He took a long breath and released it just as slowly. “Alright then.” Jesse climbed down from his spot and raised a hand to wave goodbye to Ellie. Ellie brought the horse over at a gallop and stopped her on a hair, kicking up dust.

“Going already? Thought we were going to dinner together.”

“Something came up,” Jesse told her. “Catch you next week.”

Ellie watched him go, her brow furrowed. Then a grin opened her expression when she focused on Dina. “Hey, you.”

“Howdy, cowgirl. I have something I want to talk to you about. Want to come over to my house after dinner?”

Now lying in her lonely private room on its rickety bed, Dina wished she could recapture some of the nervous anticipation of those two weeks that led up to drinking too much and kissing Ellie at that dance. She missed Ellie. She missed happiness. She missed the hope for good things to come. And here in private, Dina gave herself permission to weep over those selfish things. She’d give herself a few minutes to mourn all she’d lost and then rise with the strength to face the horrors of the day. She had no choice.

Though Dina took a more active role in worship, organization, and leadership of the Seraphites and their QZ guests, she still kept her boots on the ground with her scouts. She could sneak, shoot, and kill easily enough. These days she felt fear less keenly; she could think through the sound of infected and gunfire. Maybe living in terror so long increased her tolerance for it.

Her patrol had a hard fight on their hands one weekday over a month into their invasion. Two
Seraphites were killed and one wounded to flush out three soldiers from hiding, and they only managed to capture them because Rebecca’s patrol flanked the group. Their prey was captured alive.

The three wolves were bound, their bravado not enough to hide their terror. Dina watched them for a moment, letting them get used to seeing her. It was time to test her flock again. “We can take you back, feed you, and find a comfortable place to rest. If you—”

“I’ve seen what you do to us.” The man who spoke wore military fatigues; he’d carried a scoped rifle. He was likely the reason for two of their dead. His nametag read LEE.

“Unlike you, we don’t kill children,” Dina retorted. “We have two dozen others from your QZ that are living and working with us peacefully by choice. Return with us, and I can guarantee the same for you.”

Dina studied the three soldiers, lingering on the man with officer stripes on his shoulder. His uniform was surprisingly clean. She removed her overcoat—dirty with blood and mud—and withdrew her revolver from its holster. She extracted her cleaning set from an inner pocket of her coat and began to clean the gun. Let them stew in the silence they’d created.

Mark and Paul stepped close to murmur, “They killed Ariel and Caleb.”

“Peace is difficult. Too many have died already today,” Dina replied quietly. She felt the deep ache of more losses and wondered when she’d go numb. “If they accept our terms, the violence ends. This is the real test.”

Paul glanced at Mark, who took a long breath. They nodded to each other and stepped away. As Dina worked on her gun, she turned back to address their prisoners. “There are two choices. Work with us or die.”

“That’s no choice,” the officer said.

“It was for me. It was a hard one, but I made it. Respectfully, I don’t want to gut you, sir.”

His face shifted in rage, and his teeth were bared through his sneer. “You come into my QZ, you kill half of us, destroy our infrastructure, and you use all our supplies. And you want me to work with you?”

“I do, yes.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“It’s a zero-sum game. We both gain something. You live, keep your community intact, and I don’t have to kill you.”

“What’s your fucking aim?” the sharpshooter, Lee, asked her.

“To survive. And to not kill so many people in the process. If you mean the cult, ultimately we want what everyone else does too: immunity. We have infection in animals spreading across the country, and that means we don’t have much time left.”

Like most people presented with that information, all three paused in alarm. The woman finally asked, “Who are you?”

“They named me Leah. The place I came from was a lot like this. The Seraphites didn’t give us the
luxury of keeping it intact. They burned it all to the ground, and they killed everyone that I loved. So this is a gift, as much as it doesn’t seem like one, like my life was a gift that doesn’t seem like one.”

“They’re looking for a cure?” the woman asked. “Is Sarah Miller alive?”

“Ines,” the man said sharply. The woman ignored him. “She’s a big woman, blond hair, blue eyes. Big scar across her left side. She’s a doctor. She worked on a vaccine for a long time in Chicago and SanFran QZs.”

Dina recalled the wolf she’d seen crouched in the grass over a week ago. She would never attach that history to that face and body. She nodded. “I’ve seen her. She killed a few of your raping monsters.” Dina still remembered the three pulped bodies they’d found vividly. She didn’t think she could carry the kind of rage required to do that damage. “As far as I know, she’s alive.” She started packing black powder and wads into her pistol and asked, “What will it be?”

“We can’t trust you,” the officer said.

“I’m not asking you to. But you should trust what’s going to happen when you refuse.” Dina made eye contact with them all. “I try to make it as fast as possible. I aim up in the left side of the belly and bring my blade down diagonally. I hope to hit the spleen to let you bleed out fast, but so far everyone’s been alive for me to reach inside them and pull out their guts. Don’t make me do it again.”

“Matias,” the woman murmured.

Dina could see the officer, Matias, was wavering, but Lee spat and said, “Fuck you.” Whatever softness Dina saw in Matias snapped shut, and his jaw clenched. The woman sagged in her bonds. So, all three together, then? Inevitable, and it dropped a leaded weight in her gut.

Dina finished loading her weapon and confirmed the hammer wasn’t cocked and that it was set to the pistol firing nipple. She settled it in her holster and checked her second four chambered pistol. She whistled on her fingertips, tasting gunpowder and oil, and her remaining scout, John, materialized out of the darkness.

“Set up for a reaping.”

Her men made short work of setting up nooses outside and dragging their captives in place. When ready, Mark asked, “Who first?”

Dina pointed to Lee, hoping his death would sway at least Ines. “That one.”

He sneered and struggled, but the noose had a way of equalizing men. Dina waited until he was held close and slipped the bucket under him, dodging a kick. Then gravity did its work, and the man was too focused on balancing to kick her.

Dina wondered what he’d do. A few chose to swing themselves off the bucket, making the reaping harder. This man stared at her, but when she drew her knife, he looked to it. Anger filled her abruptly. How dare he not take this burden from her shoulders?

“They are nested with sin,” she declared. She had a brief flash of Anna’s words and slurred, “Breathe in that you may know my love!”

At the last word, she sank her sharp blade high into his belly. His blood gushed as his tissue parted, and the scent of his bowel was immediate. She put her blade in her sheath and pressed her right
hand into him, grabbed a handful of viscera, and she yanked it out of him, feeling the snap of vessels and ligaments beneath her grip. He gagged and died while she wiped her hand on her coat.

“Oh, god!” Ines wretched and shook her head. As Dina’s men walked to her with a noose, she dropped her head. “I submit! I surrender! Please don’t…”

Dina’s scouts looked to her, and she waved them away. They turned to Matias, who was gazing up at the dripping viscera with his eyes wide in terror.

A shout cut through the square, and Dina turned in alarm when she heard screaming. She stared at the figure that was being dragged out into the street. That was Rebecca pulling another woman by the arm. Their captures were usually punctuated with clear signals, and none of those signals had been given.

“I found the apostate!” Rebecca pointed at the girl on the ground between them. The girl screamed as if in real pain, and she rolled over to display her mutilated left arm. This was too much noise out in the open in this part of the QZ, but Rebecca didn’t seem capable of thinking past her lust for vengeance.

This had to be...

“Yara?” Dina bent closer, her gaze drawn to Yara’s unstable arm. It bent at a wrong angle. Even after dissociating from the pain of the man she’d just killed, Dina felt Yara’s pain as her own.

“She lost her right to that name. She murdered our High Mother!” Rebecca spat. “Set up for another reaping.”

There was hesitation among all the scouts. Dina felt reality crash around her; the world moved faster than she could. She watched Mark pick Yara up reverently and set her feet on the bucket instead of yanking her by her neck. John braced Yara’s back to help her balance even as the rope held her up.

Then Rebecca unsheathed her knife with glee.

Dina’s pistol was in hand, and she cocked it. The sound broke her from the slipstream of time. Rebecca turned and stared at Dina, her eyes wide. Dina gazed back at her. She didn’t recognize her own voice when she said, “Cut her down.”

“I knew you were part of it,” Rebecca hissed. “Apostate, come to test our faith. You offer the temptation of peace, but it’s just the whisper of the Beast. You’ll ruin us!”

“She’s just a girl, Rebecca. She doesn’t deserve this.” She blinked the blurring tears from her vision. The threat of death had never felt so right before. “Cut her down now.”

“Kill her! Kill the apostate!” Rebecca’s gaze darted to her scouts, but no one moved. Dina took another long breath. Rebecca tightened her grip on her knife and sneered, some desperation creeping past her bravado. She looked again for reinforcement, found none, and turned back towards Yara, saying, “You won’t—”

Dina pulled the trigger. Rebecca’s neck opened in a mist of red. She gagged and gasped as she collapsed on her side. She thrashed on the cracked pavement for less than ten seconds before she went limp. In that time, Mark and Paul moved quickly to loosen the noose and release Yara.

An alarm whistle cut through the silence, and they all stilled. Even knowing what she’d done, Dina was surprised to see one of Rebecca’s scouts bearing down on her with his blade held high. Then a
blur emerged from the grass beside them, and a machete sliced through Timothy’s shoulder after he parried a blow from an unexpected enemy. As he fell, the blade caught him in the neck, and his blood stained the grass. Dina’s sticky hand grasped at her revolver again, and she cocked it with her left hand.

A wolf had saved her life, but it turned towards Dina with dangerous intent. A beam of sunlight illuminated the wolf’s crown of red hair and the dark pattern on the wolf’s arm. Dina’s shot went high as she jerked her arm upward.

In that moment facing the shining arc of her wolf’s blade, Dina realized she was meeting her fate: dead to the sword of her lover, reaped from the earth with all the other chaff in the wheat. Then the clang of Ellie’s blade meeting Mark’s hammer rang out. Ellie hissed as she dodged Mark’s counter. Without thought, Dina raised her left hand to sharply whistle ‘halt’, and every scout hesitated.

In that frozen moment, a shout echoed up the street. “Ellie, run!”

A figure was sprinting down the street with a Seraphite, who whistled an alarm again. Dina’s befuddled brain processed watching the soldier and Seraphite run together before she heard the sound of infected coming from all sides.

“Leah!” Mark held out his hand as if to take hers. Dina turned to see her wolf seize Yara under her right arm and drag her in a clumsy sprint down the street. Matias and Ines had risen to their feet and followed even with their hands bound behind them. Dina whistled a ‘halt’ command in panic when she saw Elisheba draw her bow with her arrow pointed at Ellie’s back. Rebecca’s scout flinched when Dina whistled, and her arrow went wide.

Mark seized Dina’s arm and dragged her away. The fear of infected finally registered, and they were all sprinting away from the square. She remembered her responsibility and whistled ‘follow’ as she ran alongside her scouts. They’d never been caught out like this, but they’d never made as much noise as Rebecca had. Behind them, one of Rebecca’s scouts tripped and lay stunned. Dina turned to help, but Mark nearly pulled her off her feet as he kept her moving. The man’s scream of horror as the infected swarmed him was drowned out by the shriek of a clicker.

Up ahead, Ellie and the big wolf lifted a heavy garage door. Ines and Lev scrambled inside as Ellie shoved Yara in before following her. Dina knew they would drop the door on them if given the opportunity. There was no time, not with the infected on their heels. Dina shouted for her men to get under the door, turning to fire into the crowd of infected charging them. Dina followed a second later.

The garage door slammed down on three infected. A clicker shrieked as it crawled across the floor. Dina flicked her gun’s hammer face down and blew its head open with a slug. She whistled the halt command again. She scrambled back to her feet and stumbled into Mark and Paul, who stood in front of her in a wall of strength.

Beyond them, Ellie, the soldier, and a Seraphite boy stood at the ready, forming a wall in front of Yara. Matias and Ines had tucked themselves in the corner, apparently putting their lot in with the wolves. Dina was beyond processing their dangerous intent, not with her desperate need for Ellie to acknowledge her.

She pushed between her scouts, reaching up to yank her hood back. Her voice cracked as she gasped, “Ellie.”

Ellie had her blade ready to bleed, but her expression opened from rage to shock. Her eyes
widened, and she didn’t resist when Dina collapsed into her. Dina’s entire body went limp as she pressed as close to Ellie as possible.

She smelled like Ellie; she felt like her. Dina wanted to bury herself into Ellie, curl up in the safety that cloaked her, her love and the overwhelming joy of being with her again. Ellie was alive. Ellie had come for her. Ellie was her wolf.

In this moment, she knew she could do anything. She was no longer alone and no longer hopeless. This was a miracle and a blessing.

Dina kissed Ellie because a part of her was still terrified to wake up in her cot to lonely reality again. Ellie was stiff against her for a frozen moment, then she took painful hold of Dina’s hair and met her with a hard bite of a kiss. Her other arm rounded Dina’s shoulders and dragged her tight against her body.

Ellie tasted like home, felt like it. They gulped each other in, wrapped up tight in their own worlds until words could emerge from the tears closing their throats.

Ellie mumbled something against her neck. Dina pushed her back and said the most inconsequential thing to ever drop out of her mouth. “You finally cut your hair.”

Ellie looked at her with the ghost of her old smile. She reached out as if to touch Dina’s face, but a sharp voice startled them both into the present.

“I hate to break this lovers’ reunion short, but what the fuck is going on?” Matias snapped. Ellie pulled away abruptly, but before Dina could reach for her in desperation, Mark said, “Leah.”

She didn’t want to acknowledge him, but his tone alarmed her. Mark motioned to John, who displayed a bite wound high in his arm that was dripping blood. He was pale and slowly sank to his knees.

“Oh, John.”

“Blessed Mother, will you...honor me?”

So many lost today... Only a part of her acknowledged the rote nature of the words she’d speak, but John needed this. Dina stepped away from Ellie to cup his bald head and kiss it. “Do you need more time?”

“Send me to the seat of heaven, Mother.”

Dina blinked tears back as she drew his head to her breast and said, “Noble is this sacrificed lamb, John, for he will live in the embrace of the One Mother eternal forever and ever.” She slid her knife into his heart knowing she didn’t have the luxury of hesitation and withdrew it in a pop of suction. Her strike was true. John shook against her and grunted, and as he died, he whispered, “Amen.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you people?” Matias asked sharply. Dina gently rested John’s head against the wall. Mark and Paul arranged him and removed his weapons, black powder container, and canteen. Elisheba touched John’s cheek with the back of her hand before she stood to face the group of outsiders. Dina slipped her blade into her sheath and felt no satisfaction for having to whet it again.

“Sound off,” she finally thought to say. Her remaining scouts said, “No injury.” Dina felt the pressure in her chest ease slightly.
“Leah?” Yara asked from beside the blond woman.

“Yes.” Dina glanced at Yara’s broken arm, shaken from her weird meeting of the realities of Ellie’s presence and still being Leah, a Seraphite Matriarch. Yara nodded to the boy beside her. “This is Lev. Is Hannah High Matriarch?”

“In name. I’m her second.”

“We follow Leah alone,” Mark said, coming to stand at her shoulder. Paul flanked her other side, and she took strength from their size. For the first time, Dina noticed they wore her braided bracelets on their wrists. That they would stand so firm after seeing her with Ellie… Perhaps she’d stunned them stupid. She felt a little stupid, balanced on the fragile edge of calm.

Elisheba remained quiet as she stood beside John’s body and watched the proceedings. Dina could only read fear on Elisheba’s face.

“We should all introduce ourselves,” the big woman said.

“Are you fucking with me? This isn’t the first day of military prep,” Ellie said in disbelief.

“I’m Commander Sarah Miller, FEDRA doctor,” the woman said, undeterred. She reached out, and Dina raised her bloody hand, palm up, making her pause and withdraw. Dina didn’t miss Ellie’s long look at her bloody palm. Miller smiled anyway and said, “Thank you for saving my life, Leah.”

“Did you save theirs?” Dina nodded over to Yara and Lev. Dr. Miller cocked her head, looking at the siblings too. “I like to think it was the other way around.”

Dina nodded to her men, and they dutifully introduced themselves as Mark and Paul. Elisheba haltingly did so as well, coming to stand closer to Mark and Paul, probably drawing on their strength as Dina did.

“Captain Matias A, FEDRA overseer of the QZ.”

“Lieutenant Ines I, FEDRA. I was one of the quartermasters.” Ines turned to Dr. Miller. “Glad to see you alive, Doc.”

Miller nodded. “Same, Ines.” Then she turned to Ellie, who was looking around at the roofless garage they trapped in. Ellie rolled her eyes and grudgingly said, “Ellie. Anyone think we should get the fuck out of here?” Her question was punctuated by a particular aggressive strike of an infected on the garage door.

“Know this building, Ines?”

Ines nodded to the barred door beyond them: “Spores and a bloater past that door, but the first floor goes through to the old QZ. I guess climbing over isn’t an option with her arm. Anyone have a gasmask?”

“I have one,” Dr. Miller said. She glanced at Ellie. “You okay in spores?”

“Not an issue. You ever fought a bloater?”

“Killed one or twenty.”

“So I’ll walk the mask back, then?”
“If we kill the bloater without dying.”

“Always so positive, Sarah,” Ellie muttered dryly.

“I don’t understand,” Dina heard herself say from far away. “You can’t go in without a mask, Ellie.”

“I can breathe spores.” She paused and explained, “I’m immune.”

Everyone stilled, and Dina felt things snap back into place.

It hadn’t been a lie, even if the transmission of it had been. And that was just too much. If Dina felt any emotion towards that truth, she’d shut down. So she just accepted it.

Dr. Miller and Matias unlocked the FEDRA seal, straining with its weight as they dropped it away from the door. As they worked on the seal, Ellie pulled a small can from her pack and asked for black powder.

Dina looked at Mark, but it was Elisheba who handed her powder over without question. She looked at Ellie with her eyes wide. Ellie took it absentely, muttering, “Thanks.” She poured some black powder into her can along with several twisted bits of metal, cursing as she did it. She attached it all to an arrow. Dina wondered if Elisheba had imagined all the cussing when envisioning someone blessed with God’s Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God.

Ellie waited for Miller to pull on her gas mask and stepped into the room thick with spores, shutting the door behind them. Dina wondered if it was petty to notice she hadn’t earned a backward glance from Ellie.

“Leah. You’re bleeding.”

She glanced at Mark in question before she recognized the back of her right forearm stung. She turned her sleeve and noted a tear in her coat with a small amount of fresh blood around it. She pointed to the sharp edge of broken concrete on the floor. There was a smear of blood on it. Mark reached into his coat, likely for dressing, and she waved him away. Her arm hurt no worse than the rest of her.

Dina approached Yara to sit beside her, noting her gray, clammy skin. Yara shook her head at her brother away when he put his hand on his knife. She looked ill, and when Dina got closer, she smelled infection—bacterial kind—and noted the warped twist of Yara’s left arm wrapped in a makeshift sling.

“She was going to crucify you.”

Yara looked down at her arm and nodded. She raised her gaze to Dina with a question in her eyes, but an explosion rocked through the building, and they all waited with bated breath until the door swung open. Ellie emerged from the building in a cloud of spores that caught sunlight in a strangely pretty display. She wore no mask.

“Sarah?” Lev asked in alarm.

“Waiting on the other side. Yara, you first. Draw straws or something for the rest of the order.”

“Ines and I will go next,” Matias said.

“No,” Dina said. “Lev before you two. Then my scouts alternate with you. I’ll go last.”
Ines and Matias exchanged glances and offered no argument.

Ellie helped Yara cinch on the gas mask and checked its seal. “Feel like you’re suffocating?”

“Yes,” Yara gasped.

“Good. That means it’s working.”

Eventually, only Ines and Dina remained on this side of the building. Ines sat quietly for a few minutes before she asked, “How do you do it? Killing us like that?”

Dina considered her hands and had nothing in her but honesty. “Make it as fast as I can. And hate myself for it after.”

She caught Ines’s surprising look of pity before Ellie led her through the door. Being alone made the wait long before Ellie finally came back for Dina. Infected still scraped at the garage door, and they were losing interest in the relative quiet. When Ellie emerged from the spore-filled building, Dina stood still as Ellie approached.

She felt strange to draw Ellie into another kiss. She smelled like the musky scent of spores, sweat, and blood. She felt so familiar but seemed so much a stranger. Despite that, Dina wanted to take whatever opportunities she had left with Ellie.

Ellie came to her readily, but she drew away before Dina was ready to let her go. Dina rested her head against Ellie’s neck as she gathered her courage to ask, “What happened to Jackson?”

Ellie took a long breath and released it as she pulled away to tug on one of her index fingers. It was so like her that Dina ached with familiarity. “We lost a lot of people.”

“How many?”

The hand wringing stopped, though Ellie winced with her truth. “About half. But your family made it.”

Dina sank down the wall and collapsed on her backside, her tears hot and immediate. She hadn’t disbelieved Abigail’s claim, but Ellie’s account sparked no doubt. Dina swallowed to regain her voice. “Samson, Daddy, and Momma? And Jesse?”

“Yeah. And Jesse.”

She wanted to name everyone from Jackson, her friends and neighbors, but there was no time. She had hope now with the assumption of survival, not death, and that was enough.

“How did you know I was alive?”

Dina touched Ellie’s tattoo for the first time. She felt the nodular tissue she’d assumed was a brand and leaned close to kiss it for the first time. “You saved my life, Ellie. Emily kept me alive because I might be immune. I thought they must not have attacked Jackson because there were no other prisoners.” She wiped her eyes, realizing she was crying. “Then Emily told me they did, and I almost gave up.”

Ellie pulled her close, and Dina sobbed into her shirt for a few brief, weak moments. Then she wiped her face and cupped Ellie’s cheek, again drinking in this new version of her best friend and lover. Ellie was hardened and firm, her gaze steady and unreadable.

“How did you know I was alive?”
Ellie’s jaw tightened. She pulled Dina’s hand from her cheek and was suddenly unwilling to meet her eyes. That stranger that Dina so rarely saw in Jackson was on Ellie’s face now. “I didn’t.”

“Then why come all this way?” Then she realized. Their wolf had been hunting for revenge, not rescue. She sank back against Ellie’s shoulder and took her hand. Then she tilted her head, and Ellie met her mouth with another kiss that felt an awful lot like goodbye. She needed Ellie to know she wasn’t alone. “I did what I could to survive because I thought Jackson was still okay. Then after, I did what I could to survive to bring the cult down.”

“What changed?”

“Emily died. And there are a lot of Seraphites who are unhappy with the way things are going. They want to stop killing, live, and be safe. If I can appeal to that, if we can find a way to make them think we can stop the infection, then maybe I can stop the madness.”

“We could just slip away right now, go home, and forget this ever happened.”

Dina stroked Ellie’s cheeks, brushing over a new scar. “Neither of us can forget this. If I made it through all of this just to leave now… It’s not right, not after all I’ve done. I’d rather die trying to make it right than run away now. I have to make some part of this nightmare right.”

Ellie studied her for a long moment, her thoughts indiscernible. Then she nodded. “Tell me what to do,” Ellie said, and Dina felt the weight of her decision.

They found food and water in a neighboring building and paused to rehydrate. Yara approached to settle next to Dina. “Will Hannah kill us if we return?”

“She won’t. She had her partner warn Lev for you. She’ll give me the Seraphites, and the congregation will thank me for it. I’ve been leading the folk essentially since I was scarred. With Rebecca dead and the other scouting leaders on my side… I have a clear path ahead.”

Yara took a long breath. “I’d been instilling a new message in the patrols and children for nearly the entire journey before Emily found me out.”

She explained her duplicity and its expected results, and Dina explained Hannah’s part in the entire mess, her hopes of creating a new leader—or, a chilling thought occurred to her, a martyr. “Which is why they’ve accepted me.”

Yara shook her head. “You were the last to come to safety against the infected. If that’s your instinct, it was because of your loyalty and courage. The message was favorable because you echoed it.”

As Dina reeled from Yara's characterization, Ellie asked, “So what’s the plan?”

“We go to the Seraphites. All of us,” Dina answered, tearing her gaze from Yara to face Ellie in time to see her scowl.

“What’s the real plan?” Ellie asked.

Yara looked at Dr. Miller. “Sarah researched the cure, and Ellie is immune. The Mother brought together the two people we need to bring hope and unity to our people. And you’re here to usher the message in. This happened for a reason.”

“Immunity,” Dina said softly, closing her eyes. She had thought she would usher in peace despite
lacking immunity, but now she had Ellie. “Anna was immune. That’s what Hannah said we’d need. So that’s what we’ll do to encourage cooperation and peace.”

“Who?” Ellie asked before she shook her head. She opened her knife and closed it with a snap. “Whatever. The Fireflies wanted to kill me for the cure. The Seraphites want to wipe infection off the planet—with or without killing off humanity in the process. So seems like a pretty fucking uniting cause.”

“And what do you want?” Matias asked Ellie, accusation sharpening his tone. “If you’re still alive despite the Fireflies wanting your immunity for research.”

“I didn’t have a choice about that,” Ellie snapped. “I would have let them.”

The big doctor stood up, brushing dust from her pants. Dina noticed for the first time the blood stains on her shirt. She tapped her fingers on Ellie’s shoulder lightly. “Then there’d be no cure, would there?”

“So here we are again. I’m the fucking cure for humanity.”

Dina studied her lover, taking in the new, bitter angles of her face. She’d known all along that she never really knew Ellie, not every part of her. Now Dina realized she had so much more to learn. “Ellie, you have to be more than the cure for humanity. You’ll also be the Lamb of God.”

It took more convincing, but the entire party eventually put their trust in Dina and Yara’s faith their rightness would protect them. It was Dr. Miller who swayed Matias and Ines; she and Matias were in intense quiet argument for several minutes before they came to some sort of agreement. Just like that, Dina accepted the responsibility of the safety of more lambs within her flock.

Standing outside the compound, Dina whistled their return and got a few answering questions back. She whistled ‘all clear’ and ‘return’ several times before the gate opened to the Seraphite compound. Hannah herself stood at the entrance, and she took in the bedraggled state of Dina’s patrol and their willing captives.

“I gather we have a lot to talk about.”

Dina nodded. “Gather the congregation. I have an announcement.”

Hannah studied the group before nodding slowly. She whistled and turned to walk away quickly, barking her own orders. All around them, women and men melted out of Dina’s path, murmuring their deference. She strode into the gathering hall that served as their worship building.

They stood as a group within the old choir room. The quiet murmur of conversation picked up as the congregation filled the worship hall next door. Dina studied her bloodied hand and took a moment to look at her reflection in the small mirror over the piano. She had blood on her face and a scrape up one cheek. She tried to look at the stinging cut on her arm even at this awkward angle and was satisfied it was bleeding only a small amount. A flap of skin lifted from it, but the wound wasn’t too deep.

“Leah.”

She turned, accepting Rachel’s relieved embrace. Rachel’s gaze tracked around, fixating on Yara in shock. She handed Dina a canteen, hesitating in her approach to Yara to address Dina first. “Are you alright?”
“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” Rachel touched Dina’s bloodied hand before she turned to Yara. Yara smiled, and Rachel pulled her into a gentle hug and kissed her temple. Rachel wrapped her right arm around Yara’s back, and they stood like that for long quiet moments. “Your son?” Yara asked. Rachel nodded with a smile. Then Rachel leaned over to kiss Lev on the cheek, and even he had a smile for her. “I knew she would bring you both back to us.”

Dina was startled to realize she was the center of Rachel’s faith. She was humbled and felt a stirring of belief that she could do this. Yet Dina was no closer to knowing what to say to her people.

By the time Dina stood in front of her congregation, she was living in that fluxing state again. She gazed around at the people were ultimately so trusting, who looked to her for hope of change in their future, and she proclaimed, “I stand before you as testimony to the truth of God’s plan.”

Words poured out of her, about her faith, trials, lost souls, and violence, and about the need to end it. Their natural violence, the one that cloaked their earth, was that of animals. They were men, raised by God to be greater. She had endured so much to stand here before them, to find Ellie once more, but it couldn’t be for her alone. Dina’s faith firmed and swelled; she was here right now to preach this lesson and usher in the age of peace and immunity.

As she spoke, her gaze moved around the congregation, catching sight of those in the flock who sat with their right wrists exposed and covered by her burning man bracelets. These people were hers, and she had to accept responsibility for their safety and their sins in one.

This would be the true start to their rebirth.

The next hour was a blur. Dina finished her sermon and stood at the front of the sanctuary to accept the touches and thanks of her congregation. Dina shook their hands with her bloodstained palm and named each one of them in her individual blessings. Ellie stood beside her awkwardly, shrinking from the long looks of hope and worship on the Seraphites’ faces as they filed by her. No one went so far as to touch Ellie, which was well enough. Even in the midst of the surrealism that enfolded Dina, she knew Ellie would skitter away like a wounded cat if anyone crossed that barrier.

Minutes or hours later, they stood together in the courtyard of the compound as Dina’s congregation moved around them to finish the tasks Dina had interrupted for her sermon. Dina had her hand up, the question on her lips if Ellie would come with her to rest, to talk, to figure out what the hell they were going to do, but Ellie looked at Dina like she was a stranger and pulled her hand out of reach. The small smile she offered was no balm. It was like Jackson all over again, wounded by Ellie’s sudden enforcement of a physical barrier between them.

“I need to go with Sarah and get started.”

Dina watched Ellie walk away. The hope that blazed so hot within her moments before faded one step at a time. It had been inevitable, hadn’t it?

Dina turned back to the dormitory to meet with Hannah. There was too much to do to linger on Ellie. The day blurred by, so much accomplished and yet so little in the same hand. At the end of the long day, Dina considered how Ellie had looked at her that last time. Dina imagined the thoughts behind her eyes: *Did you even hear yourself, you hypocrite?*
Her lover was gone, grown into something darker and stronger, someone who could see through Dina’s bullshit to the darkness below it.

That night, the wet tile of the showers was cool on her hot cheeks. Dina pressed her burning scars to it as she cried warm tears silently, for the first time mourning the definitive loss of her lover.

When Dina pushed past her selfish grief, she scrubbed herself down, hissing in pain as she soaped the burning wound on her arm. After her shower, she wrapped it and pulled on clean clothing, adding her laundry to the stack to be cleaned. The familiarity of her actions was comforting.

In the hallway, Dina considered the lonely cot on the High Matriarch hall. She wondered if she’d hoped Ellie would join her in that bed. She couldn’t face that bed or the echo of her hopes. Instead, Dina turned to the communal dormitory. She climbed into the bunk over Abigail and took comfort in the familiarity of the sounds the girls made in their sleep.

Feverish and too exhausted to sleep, Dina’s mind rolled through thoughts smoothly, playing a terrifying fade of falling into deeper and deeper holes. Then a thought snagged her and yanked her back to wakefulness: Gabby must have known about Ellie’s immunity. She’d applied Ellie’s tattoo, something that had made Dina seethe in jealousy at the time. She’d been, what, eighteen? Eighteen and coveting all the time that Ellie used to spend with her now spent with Gabby.

Dina rolled over in bed and faded into dark rest as she remembering thinking she’d lost her best friend to someone older, kinder, and cooler.

After the tattoo was finished, Dina had some respite to her jealousy. Ellie went right back to spending her time with Dina, but something had changed. Their physical intimacy—horsing around, hugging, holding each other—faded. Ellie pulled away from those embraces in discomfort.

Dina still wondered what had caused that withdrawal. It had hurt her immensely, nearly as much as when Gabby let slip that Ellie was gay. Dina had thought Ellie pulled away from her because she’d sensed some of how Dina felt, feelings that she was only just admitting to herself.

The dark swirl of Dina’s ugly realizations and unfair assumptions had ultimately resulted in her accepting Jesse’s casual proposal to try a relationship out. Not that she didn’t think Jesse was attractive or that she didn’t like him as a person. Their relationship hadn’t been bad at all, and maybe it would have been enough if Ellie didn’t exist. Then Dina’s grandmother died. Jesse was there for her, but so was Ellie.

Ellie had been her rock and her comfort. Dina didn’t realize she was falling further in love with her best friend until Jesse accused her of wanting to be with Ellie more than she wanted to be with him. He’d been right.

Now Dina put her palms over her aching eyes and sighed. Funny how she could miss Ellie more than ever even knowing she was within reach. She missed their intimacy, the comfort of their exchanges, how Ellie effortlessly got her humor and never seemed to take offense to Dina’s most offensive words.

She missed their happiness.

Dina had shared almost every secret—ultimately every secret after their kiss. But there was so much about Ellie that she’d never been privy to. The life Ellie lived before Jackson was a mystery. The subject of Joel was untouchable. And Ellie’s immunity…

The fact Ellie hadn’t trusted her enough with that truth despite how much else they shared sat like
a stone in her gut. It felt like betrayal, and that betrayal ate her up inside. How much of Ellie had been real? Dina had thought she could read every thought, but she was beginning to realize she’d never scratched the surface of Ellie’s self.

Despite that, despite her anger at Ellie’s lack of trust, Dina ached for her more than ever.

Then she shook herself from sleep with new determination. Even if the Seraphites had taken away their future, she wouldn’t take away her greatest spot of joy in this world: her memories of Ellie.

What Ellie had shared was all the sweeter for how little she did. Opening up didn’t mean any less for holding back a dangerous truth. It could have been about protecting Dina herself. Dina couldn’t judge, and she refused to let that secret sour what she knew to be true love between them. Dina needed her best friend back; the last thing she would do was doubt the truth of Ellie’s emotions.

They would survive this, and if any goodness existed in this world, they would find a way to be happy together again, even if just as friends.

Chapter End Notes

This got a bit long, but the coming chapters seem to be doing that.
I loved the research for this chapter. LOVED IT. In the interest of not getting bogged down in even more details, I handwaved some stuff away so let me know if something reads completely unrealistic. And in case anyone is as nerdy as I am, here are the (poorly referenced) articles about Ophiocordyceps I used in the writing of this chapter:


“Welcome to your first day in hell.”

It wasn’t the first orientation she’d given to a few freshly trained doctors; she continued to be dubious about surviving to the next group. When Sarah had sat in the same chair as these kids, Lieutenant Commander Walsh began her orientation the same way.

Sarah fell into the promotion of Director of Research of the CBI Lab in Chicago by virtue of being alive. So far, she’d outlasted her previous directors by six years and counting.

The kids today were predictably startled, but they tried to laugh her off. Another hopeful group. Statistically, Sarah wouldn’t see any of them last longer than a year. Burn-out, transfer, death, and suicide created a revolving door of research assistants.

She went through the rest of her talk, focusing on safety. When none of them seemed scared, she told them the truth. “The reason y’all were brought up is because my last assistant decided not to wear kevlar gloves when I wasn’t in the lab with her. One of the subjects bit her, and she became part of our control group. If I catch you cutting corners on safety, you’re out, and that’s if you survive it. This is your only warning.”

Half an hour later, she took a volunteer with her into the lab. She’d done the same on her first day and realized the truth of Walsh’s words. Sarah’s volunteer followed her instruction for suiting up without question or complaint. She had to give him props for that.

Nitrile gloves went on first, then the bulky biohazard suit. It always took a few minutes to get a full
breath again as the heavy material came over her head. Her breath caught and wouldn’t come again, and the feeling of a hand on her back over the thick layers of suit made her jump.


“Sorry, ma’am,” she panted, hearing the impatience in Walsh’s voice. She didn’t want to piss off her new boss on day one. She couldn’t see Walsh within her green faceplate, but she could imagine the scowl hidden behind the red suit labeled with Walsh’s name.

“Don’t be sorry. We all do this on our first day.”

Sarah nodded in her suit, gathering her wits. When Walsh prompted her, she pulled on her kevlar gloves. She followed Walsh’s bulky form through double doors marked as BIOHAZARD FIVE - NO ENTRY WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION. PPE REQUIRED. EXPOSURE RESULTS IN IMMEDIATE TERMINATION OR QUARANTINE.

Sounds were muted behind the hazard suit. Primate screams used to echo down these halls; at first Sarah thought that was what she was hearing. She’d always been scared of chimpanzees, and the thought of them rattling their cages with her in this bulky suit scared her more than she wanted to admit.

“Don’t breathe into your microphone, doctor.”

Sarah made an effort to soften her panting breaths. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

“Stop apologizing,” Walsh snapped.

Sarah drew up short at the sight of fourteen people strapped down on gurneys. They were lying in their own piss, tears tracking down their temples, and their gags wet with saliva as they struggled in their restraints. These sounds weren’t animal noises.

“Help me check their restraints, doctor.”

The crack of that calm voice startled Sarah back into the present. Before Walsh, she’d considered her title well-earned; Walsh made it an insult. Word was she’d been a nurse of some sort before Outbreak and had no patience for doctors. Sarah hesitantly checked the restraints, watching Walsh tighten one down with a hard snap of fabric. Then Walsh pointed to the refrigerator in the corner.

“First tray. Load ‘em up. Careful with the needles. We’ll start administration as soon as they’re prepped. Intranasal, modified live so don’t expose yourself.”

Sarah’s hands shook as she administered the diluent into the vaccine vials. Her bulky gloves made her clumsy, and Walsh prepared eleven vaccines in the time it took Sarah to draw up three.

Walsh held up a sign to the camera on the wall that read, TRIAL 2, MODIFIED LIVE A45. It listed the date and serial number of this strain. “Last trial did nothing,” she said as she set the board down. “No IgM, no inflammation. No morbidity.”

Walsh picked up the first syringe and ordered Sarah to hold the first subject’s head still as she pressed the cannula into the woman’s nostril. Even through the gag, the subject’s shrieks of ‘No!’ were understandable. The human words loosened Sarah’s grip, and the woman jerked away from her touch. The sample splashed into the subject’s right eye.

Sarah had never seen terror this up close before.
“Do you want to administer the vaccine, doctor?” Walsh’s tone was even despite her anger. Sarah realized that vial had been worth months of research, extraction, and preparation. She imagined the fungus taking root in the subject’s eye, causing anterior uveitis, glaucoma, exophthalmos, and osteomyelitis of the zygomatic arch… At best she’d wasted the sample. At worst...

Sarah steeled herself to her task. Better to hold than to administer. She knew that in just a few minutes. She’d imagined CBI research as an ivory tower. Now that she was here, she discovered the misery. This wasn’t healing; this was torture.

Wary of apologizing and setting off Walsh’s notorious temper, Sarah remained silent and did her job. The next dose made the subject sneeze and choke. She lay sobbing behind her gag as they moved down the line, one at a time. Some begged for mercy, others screamed out their rage.

Then a chant rose among the subjects in their cells. Sarah stilled as she recognized the familiar cadence: “Monster Miller; Monster Miller; Monster Miller!”

They packed up their samples as the echo of that chant worked through the lab. By the time they exited the germicidal UV light decontamination hallway, an alarm was blaring loudly. When Sarah’s helmet came off, the alarm’s volume increased dramatically enough to jolt her.

Sarah gasped as she sat up. Her clinic in Seattle was alien for a moment of confusion, and then relief and dread warred within her. What a weird mix of timelines. She’d been the one to design that modified live trial late in her career in Chicago. She’d gone into that lab for the first time with Walsh though and wondered how Walsh ignored the horror she committed. How quickly Sarah learned to do the same.

She turned off the alarm, her eyes burning from lack of sleep. She crossed the room to look in the window at Yara, who stirred in her bed. She was too weak to walk between the clinic and the military barracks that the Seraphites had claimed so she was here to stay.

The thought of that weird sermon and the rising fervor of the Seraphites the day before filled Sarah with more horror than her nightmare ever could. She knew what mob mentality was, and seeing it backed by religion was like watching someone juggle live grenades. Though Leah seemed sane, the way she preached to her people convinced Sarah she believed at least part of what she said.

The thought of god having any part of this world made Sarah scoff. She rubbed her face hard, trying to wake herself out of the drooping exhaustion that cloaked her. Sarah told herself she’d slept here to stay with Yara and get ahead on whatever the hell she’d do to figure out why Ellie was immune, but part of her acknowledged she was avoiding the exhausting responsibility of the medical decisions of the QZ citizens that now lived within the Seraphites’ fold. She dreaded the first person to walk through door and call her Doc.

“What time is it?”

Sarah glanced over at Ellie, who grimaced against the light Sarah turned on. She was surprised Ellie chose to sleep here and not with Leah—the kiss they shared hadn’t been subtle—but she knew there were plenty of reasons, including that sermon they’d sat through yesterday. It wasn’t her place to pry, no matter how fond of the girl she was becoming.

“Time to start.”

As fearful as Sarah had been about the state of her lab, it had been undisturbed. Even her reading glasses were where she last left them, sitting beside a very moldy cup of tea. Sarah finally got around to dumping out her tea cup and inventorying her medical supplies. She’d only set up an
antibiotic CRI for Yara last night, but the catheter needed to be replaced. What Yara really needed was to lose the arm, but just the thought twisted Sarah tight with anxiety.

One of Leah’s scouts arrived with breakfast supplied from the Seraphite kitchen a few minutes later. He looked around the lab again before warily watching Sarah set up a fresh IV catheter. Ellie emerged from the adjacent radiology room and asked, “What the hell is that thing? Does it beam you to space?”

“CT scanner. It’ll give you cancer if you sit in it long enough, but best imaging we can do inside the skull now. MRI is better and safer, but it isn’t available here.”

“FEDRA really did train you, acronym lady,” Ellie muttered. She stared at Sarah’s shaking hands. “Let me do that.”

Sarah massaged her fingers. The bruising was going down on her knuckles, but the shakes had never been about that. She’d accepted Leah’s plan out of necessity for Yara, but now the reality of what she’d promised scared the piss out of her. She wasn’t stupid enough to overlook why she’d had that nightmare.

“How many IV catheters have you placed?”

“Supervise if you want, but you’re going to stab her in the eye with those hands. So what’s a CT scanner?’”

“Computed tomography. It’s a 3D x-ray. MRI is magnetic resonance imaging. I heard Boston’s went down a few years after the Outbreak when some idiot carried in his rifle. Yanked him into the tube and crushed the person inside. Pictures were grisly.”

Ellie grunted.

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed. “I never liked being near one. The plate in my leg always seemed to hurt when I was close.”

“What’s that from?”

Sarah got up to gather papers and her reading glasses before she sat back by Yara’s bed. “Broken leg when I was a kid. Shot too. They would have put me in a cull pile just a month later, but being it was the first night of the outbreak, the ‘save everyone’ motto wasn’t beaten out of doctors yet.”

“You were shot?” Ellie asked, her brow drawn. When she looked up from prepping Yara’s wrist, she grinned. “You’re fucking with me.”

Sarah looked up over the rim of her glasses and rolled her eyes. She turned back to the papers in her hand. “You should hope to get old enough to need reading glasses. The cells in the lens—”

“I saw you break a bloater’s arm with a pipe, and now you’re wearing fucking old lady glasses.”

“I was aiming for its head ironically. Let’s focus on why we’re here.”

Ellie’s laugh faded into a sigh. “Yeah, for whatever’s going on in my brain. Hey, this’ll sting a little. Stay still.” Before Sarah could stop her, Ellie inserted the IV catheter and T-port with speed and skill, flushing it easily. It so far removed from what Sarah had grown to know from this gritty young woman that she was momentarily speechless.

Then she said, “I’d guess it could be more your dura than brain. But I do plan to get you in that CT
“Jesus, Sarah. Can you be less annoying? It’s CBI.”

Ellie’s irritated tone surprised her, and Sarah, in turn, was annoyed. “Ophiocordyceps.”

“What?”

Sarah got up to set up the fluid line and drugs for Yara, patting her leg as she did mental calculations for the rates. “Okay?” When Yara nodded, she continued, “Ophiocordyceps. That’s the genus, but some idiot forgot the classification system changed.” Sarah nearly qualified her own criticism by explaining the fungal naming system was in flux for decades before Outbreak and that ophiocordyceps had some perplexing endophytic properties, hence the misconception that the US Outbreak originated from contaminated crops. She could tell Ellie was growing impatient and abridged herself.

“The name is important. Ophiocordyceps sapiens sapiens. That’s our lovely parasite. And nitpicking about where and when and what and how is the only way we’re going to figure out why you’re immune.”

Ellie slowly nodded. She leaned against the hospital bed, her arms loosely folded. She was clean for the first time since Sarah met her and prettier than Sarah had presumed under the pale lights of the lab. Her jeans were snug to her strong thighs, and the tattoo was a striking contrast to her skin.

Sarah wondered if Ben, her old CO, used to look at her this way and mentally rolled her eyes at herself. She pulled up a chair and started a new case file. Over the rim of her glasses, she watched Ellie fidget uncomfortably. “Let’s go over your medical history.”

They talked for nearly an hour. Bitten five years ago, outliving the initial neurologic stage and experiencing no known sequelae. She’d felt febrile for a day, but that was it. Never bitten again, but as Sarah had witnessed, she had been exposed to spores at least three times without issue. She professed to exchanging blood, saliva, and vaginal fluids in a variety of ways with others, but she hadn’t spread anything.

“I was scared I could infect Dina the first time…” Ellie blushed, refusing to look at anyone. “She, you know…” She glanced at Yara, who looked right back at her.

“You laid together.”

The only way to describe Yara’s tone was patronizing. Ellie turned even redder. “Jesus fucking Christ! Does he know about sex too?” Ellie pointed at Lev, who rolled his eyes. “Fine, whatever. When Dina went down on me the first time. I tried to stop her, but… Anyway, she was fine.” She fidgeted. “Can we stop talking about this?”

“Have you had sexual contact with anyone else?”

“No.”

“Have you ever bitten anyone?”

Ellie seemed no more comfortable to admit, “Yeah. My dad and I found a group of bandits, guys who came to attack our town. I bit one of them, and we waited three days. He didn’t turn.”

Sarah didn’t have to ask what happened to the man afterward. Ellie swung her legs, glancing away uncomfortably. “I was worried about it, but I guess I never thought about infecting people before
wanting to be with Dina. Joel and I bled all over each other one way or another.”

“Not something someone usually thinks about while fighting for survival.” Sarah wondered who
Joel was. She ignored the twitch of familiarity at that name and considered her next question. Sarah
tapped her pen to her paper as she recalled Ellie’s earlier injury. She hadn’t mentioned it since the
first night. “Let me see your shoulder wound.”

Ellie dutifully peeled back her shirts. Sarah studied the twisted pink pucker of the center of the
wound. The edges of the wound had contracted down nicely, and it would be healed within a day.
The original abscessed puncture healed in one week with only two sugar-bandage dressings. Sarah
probed the flesh unconsciously. “Have you ever been sick?”

“Nearly died of pneumonia when I was little. They drove me across the QZ to the main hospital.
Prime treatment for an orphan.”

“And after you were bitten?”

Ellie’s brow furrowed. “I never thought about it, but my friends always joked that I never got
anything going around at home.”

“So no?”

Ellie shook her head. “Guess not. You think my infection is protective?”

“The ant ophiocordyceps reproduces nearly a month after its host dies. It preserves the body from
decay and degradation. A logical but unfounded conclusion would be that it does the same to you
and your body. That was an area of research: the benefits of many of ophiocordyceps’
byproducts.”

“Like penicillin.” Ellie cupped her arm and traced her tattoo. Sarah was impressed by her
knowledge. “So why don’t we have a cure yet? I never heard anything about research.”

“Research went quiet after continued failure sparked unrest. So a lot’s been done. Nothing much
has come of it. We didn’t know immunity was real for a long time, and FEDRA propagated that
misconception by killing any that scanned red. We were stuck trying to create a vaccine from
scratch instead of studying cases of natural immunity.”

“Why did the vaccines fail?”

“Effective fungal vaccines are hard to create in general. That aside…” Sarah decided to break it
down further. “There are a couple different kinds of vaccines. There’s a killed vaccine, meaning
the agent you’re inoculating with is dead. When it’s dead, the body doesn’t care about it and won’t
form memory. At first, we used a killed vaccine with the ophiocordyceps because of its reported
one-hundred percent morbidity rate. Other diseases like that—”

“Focus, Sarah.”

Sarah pulled her discussion back, aware she had drifted a bit off mark. “DCQZ tried a modified
live vaccine, which uses living fungus, and that lab was overrun because the fungus transformed
back to its infective state.”

“So they basically injected the fungus itself hoping someone would be immune?”

“Not in theory, but in practice, yes.”
“So the killed vaccine is the only way?”

“No. We had a different result with our modified live in Chicago. To back up, killed vaccines require an adjuvant, an irritant, to stimulate an immune response. We tried all adjuvants under the sun with a killed vaccine from a lot of different parts of the fungus, but we only had a few that were almost successful.”

“Something tells me ‘almost’ only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades.”

Sarah chuckled. She hadn’t heard that saying in years. “My daddy loved that idiom. The vaccine was successful because subjects didn’t die from CBI; they died from the vaccine itself. Seraphite successful, I suppose.

“Even our best efforts weren’t good enough. At best, vaccination lengthened the incubation period by an average of five hours, but our sample size was too low and the variation too high for natural infection to make that a statistically significant result. Recombinant vaccines didn’t work. Our modified live vaccine did delay neurologic sequelae, but it caused osteolytic sinusitis.”

“Hey, doc, I don’t know what any of that means.”

“Instead of CBI, the subjects’ noses rotted off.” Sarah remembered their pain and the smell of their dying flesh. No neurologic signs but their palates had split just like a clicker’s. Every test subject chose euthanasia.

As if sensing Sarah’s guilt, Ellie asked, “Who volunteered for that?”

Sarah shook her head. “One difficulty with researching CBI is that there are no viable animal models. The fungus is species specific.”

Leah’s scout lifted his head. “The plague is in animals. We’ve seen it.”

“I know you believe it, but it can’t be true. We would have heard reports.” If CBI jumped species, Earth was up the creek without a fucking paddle. Ellie’s brow wrinkled as if she was perplexed by Sarah’s vehement denial. She rebutted, “The Fireflies were able to transmit it into monkeys at their lab in Colorado. The lead researcher even killed himself because he was infected after one bit him.”

“I don’t…” She hesitated, chilled by the possibility. “It replicated in him?”

“Fuck if I know. We weren’t there long, just saw his skeleton and listened to his recording. Moody bastard. The Fireflies moved to Salt Lake City years before we got there.”

“And Salt Lake City had nothing useful after it collapsed.”

Ellie’s expression darkened. “So who were your unwilling test subjects?”

“Criminals and deserters.” That the CBI immunity lab served as death row in Chicago QZ was the height of irony. Enforcers used to bring them their worst bounties, gleeful at the thought of horrific justice.

“I was on my last strike at my last MP. Maybe I would have been sent to a testing lab if I’d been kicked out of that one.”

Ellie seemed amused, but Sarah steered the conversation away from that jarringly uncomfortable topic. She rolled out an old chalkboard from the supply closet. When she looked up, Yara, Lev, and
Ellie were all watching her like schoolchildren.

“If we break down your immunity, we’re left with two possibilities.” She wrote NON-PATHOGENIC INFECTION and tapped it with her chalk. “This would be if the fungus inside you has transformed into something that is incapable of producing clinical signs. It appears to protect you from becoming reinfected with the wildtype in that case.”

“And the other option?”

Sarah wrote IMMUNE SYSTEM. “If your immune system crippled the fungus, your immunity is preventing the fungus from replicating and protecting you from reinfection. But what makes your infection and immunity so rare?” Sarah pulled off her glasses and focused on Ellie as she collected her thoughts. “Ellie, I’m going to need a lot of samples from you.”

“What samples exactly?” Ellie seemed appropriately cautious.

“We can start with non-invasive diagnostics.”

“I guess that means there are going to be invasive ones.”

“I’m going to need every fluid you produce.”

“Goddammit,” Ellie muttered.

They were collected to walk down to the cafeteria in the old military dorm for supper. Ellie disappeared like a skittish cat after Sarah collected her samples, but everyone else from the lab traveled together in the coming darkness. As Leah promised, the street was clear, and makeshift barriers had been erected to prevent infected from wandering through. A variety of hand-painted signs proclaimed: INFECTED BEYOND.

The old military base was bustling in the evening. It was well-lit to spot infected; that and the ability to run the CT scanner meant power was in stable supply. Seraphites guarded the walls, and people moved through the quiet evening calmly. It was odd to see a mix of scarred and unscarred faces. The two hanging ropes set up in the courtyard drew Sarah’s cautious gaze.

When their group stepped in the cafeteria, they were met with a wall of noise: quiet conversation, rare laughter, and the sound of cutlery on plates. Lev carried a tray to where Sarah set Yara down in a group of scarred girls her age.

Sarah scanned the room, curious about who would be sitting where. The sight of Rose and her parents in the corner filled her with relief and sadness in one. She pushed past several tables to approach the corner of the room that the QZ citizens occupied. She returned Rose’s quiet smile and motioned to the seat next to her. “May I?”

Rose nodded, her pale face lighting up with a wide grin. She had barely touched her food, but Sarah still found herself asking, “How are you feeling?”

Rose’s smile dimmed. “I’m glad you’re okay, Dr. Miller.”

“Same, kiddo,” Sarah replied. She glanced from Rose to her parents. “Why don’t you come to the clinic tomorrow morning?” They offered tight smiles. Their fear of the present situation didn’t depress the worry both parents carried about their child.

“What do you make of this situation?” Marvin finally asked.
“Not the worst people I’ve worked for. We’re trying to find a cure.”

Both adults scoffed in disbelief. Sarah shrugged. “One of the girls that followed the cult here is immune. If I can figure out why she is, maybe we can figure out how to treat or prevent infection. At least they let me back in the clinic. That’s more than Matias gave me.”

“What do you make of their leader? The young one?”

“Leah?” Sarah pushed away her uneasy memory of Leah’s teeth bared, her blood-stained hand raised in revelry. “She seems honest. Just trying to make peace when she can.”

“She murdered our people.”

That statement irritated her. “So did I. I killed Patrick, Orwell, and Darren because of what they did. The cult had me tiptoeing on a bucket that night, and two Seraphite kids saved my life. I reckon that means we’re all on the same side one way or another. If we want them to leave us in peace, we have to work with them.”

Their surprise turned to wariness as a Seraphite girl waved Sarah to follow her. Sarah left half her dinner behind in the cafeteria to obey the summons of the High Matriarchs.

She waited beside a closed office door. After a few minutes, Matias emerged, his expression thunderous. Matias judged at the two hulking Seraphite guards that hovered nearby before he settled on the wall next to Sarah. This was the first time they had a moment of privacy since he’d put Sarah on forced leave.

“Quite the vacation,” Sarah couldn’t help but jab.

His face shifted into a frown. “Miller, what do you make of this shithole situation? Now that you’ve got me in their clutches—can’t even leave this fucking hall without permission—you can be honest.”

“Like I said, we may as well make the best of it. I have an immune girl willing to undergo a battery of tests to sort out why. First opportunity I ever had. And—”

“Fireflies tried.”

“Their lead researcher...” ‘Don’t speak ill of the dead,’ her daddy had warned her more than once. She took a long breath. “His training was lacking.”

“And you’re so much better trained?”

“Yes.” Sarah imagined tacking on an Ellie-toned ‘dickweed’ with amusement.

Matias studied her. For the first time he didn’t hide his disdain. “When SF told me they were sending me a CBI research doc, I thought they were blowing smoke up my ass. I was told Chicago’s research lab was a horror show. People’s faces melting off, that kind of shit. Doctor Bengal stuff.”

“Mengele.”

“What?”

Sarah shook her head, fighting the temptation to laugh bitterly. She’d never been compared to a Nazi before, but damn, was that comparison painfully fitting. “His name was Josef Mengele.”
“That why you’re such a loving doctor here? To make up for what you did in Chicago?”

“I’m allowed to treat my patients here.”

He scoffed. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Coming from a man that condoned his men’s torture and rape of kids, who would have sentenced Ines to die because his pride was too big to accept surrender, who let Lee sacrifice himself for nothing… Sarah felt her anger crest and rise, and she slammed Matias up against the wall, bracing him to prevent him from gaining leverage. He struggled but couldn’t wiggle out of her grip. It was deliciously satisfying to see men shocked by her strength.

“Don’t test me, Matias. I haven’t forgotten what you let your men do to those kids. I tore them apart.”

His fear was abrupt, and he raised his hands. Sarah met his gaze and gritted out, “Are we clear?”

“Clear,” he said. His voice shook.

After Sarah released him, he feigned a casual stance, but his hands shook. Matias glanced at the Seraphites and turned his gaze away when one of the men offered a grin and a wink. Sarah had forgotten about them. Apparently they respected her more than Matias; it wasn’t a comforting thought.

The office door opened, and Leah called Sarah inside. The office had been stripped of its furniture. Only the desk and two chairs remained. A faded picture of Caucasian Jesus still hung on one wall. Through the open window, a crack of red sunlight bisected the desk. Leah stood behind the desk, her hunched body casting a shadow over the marked map of the QZ on its surface. The big black woman next to her made no attempt to hide her measuring gaze. Sarah stood at ease and waited.

Leah offered introductions. Hannah had scars across her knuckles, a strong grip, and a steady gaze. Sarah studied her right back. Hannah didn’t feign any pleasantries. After they shook hands, she left the office. Sarah sat down to avoid towering over Leah. The door shut behind her, leaving them in awkward silence.

“Matias says he can’t open the armory.”

He’d thrown away the key as part of his compromise to turn himself over to the Seraphites. Better to lose access to their weapons than to gift the cult superior firepower. Sarah didn’t disagree. Leah studied her quietly, but she didn’t press. She looked a little pale today and seemed tired. Maybe the fire of her faith had burned off.

Sarah finally asked, “How’s Ellie?”

Leah’s cautious attention was immediate. “I haven’t seen her since yesterday. Did something happen?”

“Put a few more holes in her than she expected.” Sarah remembered Matias’s comparison and hastened to clarify, “She’s fine, just didn’t enjoy the process.”

“What did you do?”

Sarah couldn’t suppress her smile at Leah’s abrupt protectiveness. “She told me during the spinal tap that I put the needle through her bladder and set her foot on fire. Then she told me to go fuck myself if I planned to stab her again and left.”
Leah seemed to file that away. “Did she say where she was going?”

“As she put it, to find something to fucking ride.”

Leah’s eyebrows rose. Her smile was bitter, and her gaze darted away. “She won’t talk to me. It’s like when we first met all over again.” Leah rubbed the outside of her right eye. The gesture looked like she was wiping away tears, but Leah was only tracing one of her scars. “Are you...?” Leah swallowed. “Is she talking to you?”

Good lord. What was she asking? “Not like that.”

“I love her so much, but... I know it’s unfair to hold on. I should let her go, but I still have this hope that we’ll find what we were again.” Leah turned back towards Sarah, struggling for words.

Part of Sarah shrank from the emotional plea while another part surged in anger. How could it be anything but hypocrisy to want Ellie so much and still use her as a religious idol? Sarah took a moment to word her objection. “How does it feel to tout your lover as the next Messiah?”

Just like that, Leah’s expression shuttered. She closed herself off; her tone shifted from vulnerable to calm in a second. “I haven’t.”

“You told your congregation that Ellie is the only proven immune while reading scripture about the Lamb of God. What other conclusion will they draw?”

“A greater one than I do.”

Sarah sensed the end of their conversation. She stood up, and the new angle revealed the hanging ropes in the courtyard. “And those?”

“For rapists. One is a Seraphite.” Leah stood next to her and stared out into the evening. She was so small, yet she exuded so much presence. “Justice. Hanging, not reaping.”

“A little precarious to kill one of your own right now.”

“They already know I killed Rebecca for Yara.” Leah’s expression firmed. “We can’t hold peace without enforcing consequences for violence.”

That she hadn’t answered the question was confirmation enough. Sarah gritted her teeth. “How will you protect us if they butcher you?”

“Give me the cure, and we’ll all be safe.”

There was the true reason for this little meeting. Leah had probably been obligated to ask about the armory, but she didn’t want to arm her mob any more than Matias did. Sarah’s defensiveness rose. “Don’t hang a death threat over my head. This lab isn’t outfitted for more than basic PCR and gel electrophoresis. I’ll do what I can, but don’t make me your salvation. You promised to protect us.”

Leah studied the hanging ropes and sighed. She looked...not forlorn, just alone. “If I kill the QZ man but not the Seraphite, there’ll only be more unrest. I can’t ignore what happened, especially not after I promised them safety and they promised cooperation. I have to deliver justice and trust my people will understand.”

There was enough truth in that statement to strip Sarah’s anger. Dallas’s collapse could have been averted if the citizens got what they wanted: a trial and execution of the person who pulled the trigger on that little girl killed at a scanning station. When that justice wasn’t delivered, the citizens...
made their own.

The following evening, Sarah stood at the gate of the compound and watched two men hang to
death. She marveled at how justice could swing so wide sometimes and be dead center others.
Then, with a sigh, she returned to her lab for another sleepless night.

Long before Matias chastised her for the unauthorized transfusion, Sarah was no stranger to official
dressing downs. She’d been comfortable in her position of authority in the Infectious CBI lab a
decade after starting as a junior assistant, but she was raked over the coals at her annual review
every year for lack of progress in anything but creative ways to kill her test subjects. She’d risen in
the ranks quickly, in no small part because of Lieutenant Commander Walsh’s abrupt departure
from Chicago. Walsh had left her unqualified and overwhelmed assistant as the head of the lab, and
he’d lasted less than a year.

When Walsh’s assistant promised Sarah he’d stay on as long as he could for her, she’d assumed he
would postpone his retirement. As it turned out, Walsh’s disappearance delayed his suicide. Less
than a year later, James set up his own vaccine trial and failed his subsequent CBI challenge.

After that, Sarah figured Director of Clinical Research was a short lifetime appointment.

Nine years later, Colonel Benjamin Hare’s office was a familiar place. In the few years he’d taken
up the new office to reflect his promotion, he hadn’t moved a thing. His walls carried a few
plaques, and his desk held few personal effects, including a picture of his wife. Sarah had never
liked coming into his domain, but today carried an added weight of dread.

“Lieutenant,” he greeted as he walked in after her.

Sarah saluted, and he returned her salute. At his gesture, she took a seat. She stiffened when he shut
his office door. Ben settled against the forward edge of his desk, as always taking a position a little
too close for comfort but still impeccably proper.

“Sir, can I help you?”

He studied her, his green eyes lightened to gray in the sunlight. He still looked far younger than his
age with a smattering of freckles and thick blond hair. He was a popular target of single women in
uniform, though Sarah never knew him to dabble. Ben held her gaze uncomfortably long before he
opened a drawer in his desk and withdrew a small bottle of amber liquid.

The sight of that alcohol was so far removed from the man she knew that Sarah felt her mouth
open. Ben smiled tightly at her as he poured liquor in two glasses. He handed her one. Sarah
cupped it between her palms and watched him raise his glass. It was sure to be good liquor, but she
contented herself with its scent alone.

“So this is where you draw the line?”

“So this is where you draw the line?”

“Sir?”

“So this is where you draw the line?”

“Sir?”

“After all you’ve done in the name of science, you’re content to abandon the cure over this?
Because they’re young?”

The way he looked at her filled her with ice. He knew, and that he could coax such shame in her
flushed her with contrary rage. Just as Sarah’s anger crested, Ben offered her a gentle smile. “Good
for you, Sarah. Glad you have some morality left. To leaving Chicago for good.”
She couldn’t toast to such a bitter defeat. Even so… There was selfish relief in escaping this hell. Despite her past experience, Sarah had hope it couldn’t be worse where she was going. After a moment, Ben set his glass aside and leaned closer. “I’m coming with you.”

She was as surprised that he seemed to think she’d welcome him as by the announcement itself. Ben was set to retire or lead Chicago QZ in a decade. He’d been here for nearly fifteen years. “Did you give them an ultimatum?”

“I should have years ago…” Ben’s voice trailed off.

Sarah had asked for his help only twice, and he’d betrayed her both times. She could still remember seeing the proposal for quarantine that she spent years writing in his trash pile not an hour after she submitted it for evaluation. He’d ripped away her last motivation for her career that day, willfully blind to the consequences of his ignorance.

The bitterest part of it all was that Sarah knew the end of Ben’s statement would be, ‘…for my wife’. Everything had always been about his wife, even how he viewed Sarah. After an awkward moment, Ben continued, “I never guessed how unhappy you were.”

Unhappiness? Depression, anxiety, attempted suicide… Just another day in the lab. Either she hid it well or everyone around her was in a similar state. Still, Ben didn’t owe her a damn thing. “I’m not your wife, sir.”

His jaw clenched and he exhaled heavily. “Sarah, she’s dead. I’m not married anymore. An alliance between us could be what we both need.”

His audacity was excruciatingly characteristic. He had his pick of women here yet he pursued the unwilling. She could empathize in part why she was his pick: the head of the CBI lab, young, female. She, however, was nothing like Walsh at all.

Over the years, Sarah had come to respect Ben’s uncompromised principles, but she’d also come to know he wasn’t a smart man. Once again, she repeated, “We’ve talked about this. I won’t shackle myself to you.”

“There would only be the illusion of intimacy. A child, Sarah. We could have children. We work well together. I don’t care if you take a lover. We both need life and career partners.” His expression shifted almost in embarrassment. He set his glass aside and took a more rational tone. “We have a chance at a new start—”

“Colonel, this is inappropriate. I didn’t protest those trials because I wanted to elope with you. We’re talking about kids being put in a new vaccine trial!”

He flushed red. She’d finally pricked his decency. Ben set his untouched drink aside, rounding his desk to sit behind it. “I supported you because I agreed with your decision to boycott the project. Now we’re both out.”

She cupped her forehead, pressing her fingers and thumb into her temples. “Where are we being reassigned?”

“San Francisco.”

Dread settled over her like a weight. FEDRA had barely wrestled SFQZ back from the Fireflies. She remembered the way violence had escalated in Dallas and didn’t relish returning to a war zone to live. But maybe that was her due.
When Sarah returned to her apartment after the meeting, she locked the door and rested a chair under the handle. She completed strength exercises, sweating her nervousness out. Over a tasteless MRE dinner, Sarah sorted through the notes she’d smuggled from the lab over the years. In particular, she lingered over Walsh’s journals.

The woman had been a genius with more promise than any other researcher in the CBI field. The reason for her disappearance had never been disclosed. When Sarah had innocently asked Ben about it a year after the fact, he’d ordered her out of his office in a rare display of temper.

Sarah had gathered only one fact from his clipped dialogue that day: he blamed the Fireflies for his wife’s disappearance. At least Walsh had left most of her research notes in journals that Sarah flipped through when she had the rare opportunity to read them.

When she’d first taken over the CBI lab, inexperienced and reeling from her mentor’s suicide, she’d used Walsh’s notes to guide her research. Walsh had been focused on a possible hyperparasite of ophiocordyceps and had created a primer based on the natural infection in ants. Sarah used the hell out of that primer, looking for the hyperparasite in every strain of infection that went through her lab. It took her three years of fruitless search before she stopped. Either the primer was off, the ant hyperparasite wasn’t closely linked to a potential human one, or the hyperparasite didn’t exist.

Sometimes she wondered if there had been code hidden in Walsh’s nearly illegible scrawl. As Sarah flipped to a random page in one journal, she cocked her head and leaned closer. A sentence drew her gaze:

*When you’re lost in the darkness, look to the future. Look to the children.*

The QZ alarm blared, and Sarah was outside, tiptoeing a bucket. Ellie was dragged into the light and thrown down, and the man raising the hammer to break her arm looked back at Sarah.

“Daddy!”

Sarah woke up at her own cry. She gathered herself as her breathing returned to normal. These horrible vivid dreams were only the product of her poor, restless sleep, nothing more.

Yara shifted in the cot adjacent to Sarah, and her presence dragged Sarah to the reality around her. Sarah blinked away sleep blearily and got up to set up the next set of samples. By the time Sarah finished, Yara awoke. Her face pulled in misery, and Sarah squeezed her right shoulder.

“Bad?”

Yara nodded silently, and Sarah assigned her an eight just for how stoic she usually was. She crouched beside Yara’s cot and studied her. “Have you thought more about amputation?”

“My fingers don’t work anymore.” Yara blinked back tears, as brave as the night she’d spat on Emily. “It smells. It’s not a part of me anymore.”

“Do I have your permission to amputate?” Sarah’s mouth was dry. Yara nodded resolutely.

She wished it were different. She didn’t want to do this, but there was no choice. She should have done it yesterday. “This afternoon then, if I can get everything set up. Don’t eat anything.”

“I’m not hungry anyway.”

Sarah found herself in the barn less than an hour later. Ellie was helping in the dairy; her arm was
up the rectum of a cow, her brow drawn in concentration. “Open. You ever considered just letting the bulls just do their job? Because you seem to suck at it.”

“We’ve been a little preoccupied,” the young man, David, responded with a blush of anger. He turned his head and brightened to see Sarah. “Doc! I’ll be damned! You really did make it.”

Sarah accepted his hug; his affection startled her. She pushed him away gently and nodded to Ellie. “I need that one.”

Ellie glanced back at Sarah and winced as she pulled her arm from the cow. Her tone was too sharp to be taken as a joke when she declared, “I’m not letting you stick me again.”

“You have medical experience. Have you ever attended an amputation before?”

Ellie hesitated, her gaze darting away. She nodded after a moment.

“Good. You’re scrubbing in with me.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

*I don’t want to do this either,* Sarah wanted to say. Instead, she said, “I threw my last assistant out a window a couple weeks ago. I need a partner on this. Keep my hands steady and talk me down if I get nervous. Ines will monitor for us. The OR is ready.”

“Shit,” Ellie swore. She nodded after a long breath. They shared a moment of silent understanding even as the lo of cattle rose around them, and Sarah knew she had an ally. Ellie was as scared of this procedure as she was, but they could do this together.

A few hours later, they talked each other through an emergency flow sheet. They reviewed Yara’s CT scan—Sarah was still bitterly disappointed Yara’s cubital joint was trashed too—the surgical textbook, briefed Ines on Yara’s anesthetic goals, monitoring equipment, anesthesia machine, emergency drugs and doses, and the process of induction.

“See you on the other side,” Sarah told Yara, who smiled at her. The trust on her face was an arrow to the heart. Sarah leaned close to kiss her forehead because she had to in that moment. That intimacy was so far removed from intubating her five minutes later.

She and Ellie scrubbed in together. Though Sarah forgot to go over proper gloving protocol, Ellie did it right without prompting. They draped in Yara’s prepped arm, and Sarah studied the landmarks as Ellie administered a local infusion.

“Just above the elbow?” Ellie prompted her when she took too long to start.

“Distal humerus.” Sarah took a deep breath, attached her blade to her scalpel handle, and palpated Yara’s skin. Now or never. Sarah made the first curved incision. Ellie handled the cautery unit proficiently, cleaning up small bleeds. When Sarah was to the muscle, she took a long breath and leaned over the surgical book to identify muscle bellies. She separated the muscle bellies bluntly, sliding her hand under them as she transected them with cautery. They jumped violently with every touch.

It was a delicate balance, working with speed while double-checking the anatomy, all the while balancing anesthesia issues. They battled hypotension the entire time. Ines ran the fluids open, tweaked gas levels, and administered meds as Sarah barked at her as she worked. Ellie worked behind Sarah, injecting the nerves they transected with local block and isolating vessels for ligation.
Finally, they were at the last phase of disarticulation. Ellie put the threaded OB wire handles in Sarah’s hands. She seemed to be prepared for the next step before Sarah could turn her mind to it. Sarah looped the wire around Yara’s humerus and sawed several inches proximal to the elbow joint while Ellie flushed the area with sterile fluid. Funny how bone bled. Ellie wordlessly handed Sarah the rasp to smooth the edge of Yara’s humerus. Ellie flushed it copiously with sterile saline.

As Sarah clamped the needle into her needle drivers, her hands shook violently.

“Can you...?”

Ellie took the needle drivers from her. “Just show me where to stitch stuff together.”

Ellie took direction well. Sarah hoped she identified the triceps correctly as Ellie sutured the tendon to the anterior fascia. There was no time to second guess; she helped Ellie place a jury-rigged closed suction drain before Ellie closed the skin beautifully. They attached the drain tubing and bulb to the wrap around the stump and hovered while Ines discontinued anesthetic gas.

About fifteen minutes later, Yara was awake enough to be extubated. Her pressures came back up, but she moaned softly in pain or dysphoria. Sarah calculated another dose of analgesic medication. It would be touch and go, and Sarah prayed against complications. She prayed Yara would survive to heal.

After they rolled Yara back into the main room, Sarah returned to the surgery suite where Ellie contemplated Yara’s detached arm. Their surgery tray was in disarray, the bloody drapes were still clamped together, several bloody lap sponges littered the floor, but the sight of that arm startled Sarah for a moment.

“You okay?”

Ellie jumped but continued to stare at the arm. “I have this weird self-cannibalization dream sometimes. This made me think of it.”

“I’ve never met anyone as fucked up as I am.” Then Sarah laughed out of sheer pent up nerves.

“Don’t act so surprised, Sarah.” Ellie offered a faint grin. “Do we burn it?”

“I didn’t think to ask her. We can put it on ice for now.”

Without being asked, Ellie wrapped Yara’s arm in cloth and plastic and settled it respectfully in the freezer. When she returned to the main clinic room, Sarah peeled off her mask and couldn’t think of anything to say but, “Thank you. If she makes it, it was because of you.”

Ellie shrugged. “You knew what you were doing. Should have seen some of the hack jobs in Boston.”

Sarah turned to thank Ines as she took her place by Yara. Yara’s blood pressure was holding, and overall, she was recovering better than Sarah would have guessed. They wrapped her hand and feet, and ran warm air through a perforated blanket to get her temperature up and settled into the hard part: waiting.

Yara ate her first full meal the next day, smiling as her worried brother hovered. She actually laughed when Sarah admitted they kept her arm. She tired easily but claimed to be comfortable for the first time in weeks. Every hour that Yara survived softened the weight of dread on Sarah’s back. Sarah had been so unconsciously worried about Yara, but she was just starting to believe
she’d fixed her. It was just once less worry on the thousands she carried, but it was something.

Ellie only came by the lab to check on Yara, or so she claimed. Sarah knew some of Ellie’s curiosity was Sarah’s work. Sarah should have felt free to focus on Ellie’s immunity now that Yara was stable, but medicine was a revolving door of problems. QZ citizens and Seraphites alike visited her for care, and Rose’s decline gnawed at the back of Sarah’s mind constantly. Sarah wasn’t naive enough to believe Rose’s story would have a happy ending. Thankfully, most of Sarah’s research was hurry up and wait: loading samples and waiting for the next step to come up hours later.

The week flew by until Ellie wandered into the lab one morning and claimed to be there to avoid Sunday service. Sarah glanced at Yara, who had bathed and changed into fresh clothing to go out for the first time since her surgery. Sarah had already loaded her samples and had nothing to do but read for a few hours. “Yara’s going.”

“Fuck. Are you crazy?”

Sarah had plenty of reservations about Yara even being carried out of the clinic, but she didn’t have much say in Yara’s decisions. It had been four days since the procedure, two since she’d pulled the drain. Yara claimed to feel much better. Maybe being in so much pain before the procedure raised her tolerance.

Yara was exhausted by the trip to the sanctuary, but she seemed to gather strength from the Seraphites that approached to offer thankfulness for her recovery. Sarah and Ellie were both thanked more than once when Yara said they’d led her procedure. Sarah even shook a few hands.

Sarah escaped the service, but Ellie was collected by a couple of young scarred girls to sit between them. She shot Sarah a look of outrage as Sarah slipped out of the room.

She hoped to get more information from the QZ citizens, but there was no mirroring congregation among them. They were divided in their tasks, and given their abrupt silence and clipped answers to her greetings, she’d been ostracized. They’d trust her for their medical needs, but she’d apparently lost her place in their community. Even David, who had been so excited to greet her just days before, turned away with an uncomfortable frown.

Matias had poisoned them against her. Sarah didn’t want to give a damn, but it was betrayal. She’d given them every part of herself emotionally over the last ten years, and this was their repayment.

As Sarah approached the worship hall, the guard outside motioned her inside. She was self-conscious as she stooped and entered the service during Leah’s sermon. She took a seat just down the bench from Ellie, who watched Leah and stroked the bracelet on her arm. Sarah only had to listen for a couple of uncomfortable minutes as Leah closed her sermon with a prayer that the congregation murmured in a deep, sonorous chant.

It reminded her of the few services she’d attended during Bible School. Her daddy had enrolled her for lack of other childcare options during the summer. Sarah had liked the making new friends, but she’d always viewed the worship a little skeptically. When she was older, knowing what damage religion could wreak turned her away from faith in anything but science and human violence.

Yara was swept away with the other girls her age after the service. Ellie was on her way out the door when Leah emerged from the crowd and took her wrist. Even from across the room, Sarah could see Leah’s gaze was gentle and longing as it moved over Ellie’s features. Whatever she said had Ellie nodding and following her.
Sarah found Yara in the food hall. Ironically, she was far more warmly greeted by the Seraphite girls than the QZ citizens. Yara picked at her food and faded within ten minutes. One of Leah’s big scouts volunteered to carry her back to the clinic. It was about time for her next antibiotic dose anyway.

Sarah pushed herself out of the small mess hall to find Ellie and let her know they were going. She heard Ellie’s voice down a quiet hall and stepped past Paul, who must be guarding his High Matriarch.

She paused as she turned the corner, her eyebrows raised as she witnessed Leah and Ellie in each other’s arms. It would be a chaste embrace except the girls were pressed front-to-front, and they rocked in a slow dance. Sarah retreated, but Ellie saw her and pulled away.

To her embarrassment, Sarah saw the long look the girls gave each other as Leah held onto Ellie’s hand. Then Ellie disengaged and walked abreast with Sarah as they exited the compound.

Despite herself, Sarah wondered what kind of fear had pulled Ellie from Leah’s arms. “She was your lover.”

Ellie shrugged.

“Now what?”

Ellie shoved her hands in her pockets and blew air softly between her lips. “Dina wants to make this right. I guess that means we have to find a cure before we go back.”

“What do you have a place to go back to?”

“Yeah. Jackson, Wyoming. There would be a place for you there if you wanted to come with us.”

Sarah appreciated the gesture even knowing it was a diversion. “Do you still love her?”

“I do. I just…” Ellie pulled hands from her pockets to wring them. “I’m not sure if she’s Leah or Dina anymore. You know?”

Sarah had no advice to give. She only nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

Though Sarah had protested her ability to find a cure, her crushing disappointment with her results belied that claim. She went back over her samples, her cultures, and the resulting data, but there were no mistakes to be found. It made no sense. She’d run into a concrete wall with her research after only a fucking week.

Out of desperation, Sarah went down to the barn to summon Ellie. She found her there boot-deep in the muck, working on the feet of the dairy cows. One look had Ellie stripping from her coveralls, boots, and farrier apron to follow Sarah back to her lab.

Sarah tutted at Ellie as she tried to walk into the lab, and she rolled her eyes when Sarah pointed at the shower. Ellie strode into the clinic five minutes later showered and clean, made a beeline to Yara, and coaxed a smile out of her as they exchanged a private word. When Ellie came back over to the other side of the clinic, she asked, “So what’s the problem? Lost my samples? Am I dying? Need to dissect my brain?”

“I do need your brain.”
Ellie tensed.

“Your intellect,” Sarah corrected more sharply than she intended. “It would be a little counterproductive to kill you.”

Ellie’s shoulders shifted perceptibly. She met Sarah’s gaze as if judging her intent. “No needles? Surgeries?”

“Not today.”

Ellie relaxed and sat on the corner of Sarah’s desk. “So why do you look like your horse died?”

“I hate horses.”

“Dick. You’re in a mood. What the fuck is wrong?”

Sarah walked up to the chalkboard and tapped IMMUNE SYSTEM. “Remember this? One of the theories is that your immune system crippled the fungus. The problem is you have no antibody to the fungus. You have a latent infection.”

“That means my body doesn’t think it’s infected, right?”

“Yes. And that means putting your immune system’s memory in someone else won’t stop an active infection because you essentially don’t have any. So strike one.” She crossed out IMMUNE SYSTEM.

“So what about the fungus itself?”

“Arrests early in culture media. It tries, and it does grow a little, but in comparison to wildtype fungus…” Sarah showed Ellie pictures of the culture media, and it didn’t take a doctor to see the difference between the colorful blooming wildtype to Ellie’s culture that didn’t progress further than pink fuzz. “The media and climate are the most viable settings for ophiocordyceps to grow outside of the human body. Maybe there’s a gene that turned on that changes its growth requirements, but… It’s the same as wildtype on electrophoresis. I got some weird junk in the process, but…”

Sarah threw her glasses on her desk and rubbed her fingertips into her eyes.

“The question now is: how bad do you need a drink?” Ellie asked with dry humor.

Sarah only sighed.

“So why haven’t I become a runner?”

“What I can tell so far is that your CBI strain can’t sporulate—reproduce. It stopped at an early stage of infection, one that doesn’t seem to bother your body. It hasn’t died off, but it can’t progress. I don’t know why it prevents an active infection from taking over though. It’s just sitting on your cortex, apparently secreting all sorts of things we salivated over in my Chicago lab, but it isn’t reproducing within you.”

“Why?”

*Ask a harder question*, Sarah wanted to sneer. There were so many complexities of the parasite’s life stages; part of Sarah was distracted by the purely academic possibility that Ellie’s infection couldn’t progress past the proliferating yeast stage to induce hyphal outgrowths to form infective
spores. It was irrelevant guesswork at this stage, and that frustrated Sarah immensely.

“Maybe it’s a gene that got switched on that changes the temperature or pH requirements of the fungus to proliferate, but I need more time and better equipment to test that. The insect ophiocordyceps tended to vary not based on genetics but epigenetics.”

“What the fuck is epi…” Ellie paused to watch a Seraphite stride into the lab and murmur into Yara’s ear. Yara called for her brother, spoke briefly to him, and Lev ran out of the lab posthaste. Sarah hadn’t missed the increased traffic of Seraphites in the clinic—discounting the ones asking her for medical care—but this level of fear alarmed her.

“What’s going on?” Ellie asked cautiously.

Yara glanced at them both, then at the big Seraphite man that slipped out of the clinic doors. “I sent Lev to get Leah.”

“Why?” Ellie asked sharply.

Sarah could guess that answer, and it was confirmed when Lev led Leah into the clinic a few minutes later. She was flanked by her guards, one of whom sported a new swelling bruise under his eye. Leah alone seemed calm as she surveyed the clinic curiously. There was a girl with them; Yara greeted her. “Abigail. Thank you for helping.”

“How are you feeling, Yara?” Leah asked.

“Esau is moving against you, Leah.”

Leah nodded as if Yara had pointed out the weather. She removed her coat and her guns, looking them over as if to occupy herself with something. Two of her scouts approached, looking from Leah to Yara. “Where do we flee?”

“I’m not running away. Esau has five men,” Leah responded calmly.

In the face of Leah’s calmness, Yara grew more agitated. “Who are our last scouts and will kill you! Hannah won’t protect you, Leah. There are so few of us left, mostly children. Abigail’s presence won’t stop them next time.”

The girl in question sat delicately in a chair and looked around the lab curiously.

“I know what Hannah wants. If martyring me works as well as raising me up, she’ll allow it.” Leah carefully holstered her weapons and fiddled with her cuffs. She rolled her shirt to her elbows, cupping her neck as if to cool it. She looked at her palm and then raised her gaze to Sarah. “Do you have the cure, Dr. Miller?”

So that was her hope. “I told you—”

The rippled margin of erythema near Leah’s right elbow drew Sarah’s gaze. All of Sarah’s attention jerked to that mark. She lurched off her desk to find the old scanner she kept in the junk drawer in the lab. She walked back to Leah, who shifted from her perch on the desk in confusion. Yara’s warnings hadn’t earned her concern, but the look on Sarah’s face apparently did.

“Stay still.” Sarah pressed the scanner to Leah’s neck, and it took three seconds for it to flash red. She didn’t scan people often enough to reset the alert sound—scanning stations turned it off to avoid civilians panicking before they were euthanized—and it blipped an angry chirp.
“What the fuck?” Ellie shouldered past Sarah and stared at the scanner. Sarah walked two steps and scanned Yara. Green, negative. She scanned Leah again. She set the scanner in Leah’s hands, and she stared at it in confusion.

“When, Dina?” Ellie gasped, her voice choked with fear.

“I don’t…” Then her brow lifted. She tilted her right forearm to look at the mark on it. Sarah could imagine the shape of one dental arcade in the nodular tissue. Perhaps the other side only bruised. “That was the day we met. Nine days ago.”

If Sarah had the ability to think past the reality of Leah’s immunity, she could have appreciated the beauty of Leah’s expression as she faced Ellie. Her smile was wide, a grin Sarah could never have imagined for her before this moment. She looked as if she’d been healed, not infected. Leah reached up to cup Ellie’s cheek, drawing Ellie’s forehead to hers. “Oh, Ellie… You weren’t lying. You spread your immunity to me.”

Ellie pulled away and puked in the trash can by Leah’s feet. Leah reached down to brush her fingertips over Ellie’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m fine. You saved me.”

“Fuck,” Ellie gasped, resting her head against the leg of the desk.

“But she bit Isaiah, and he turned.” Lev leaned over to get a better look at Leah’s scar.

“Maybe a kiss is different than a bite.”

Sarah shook her head, waving off their words like flies. There was a pattern there, albeit with little data to back it. She turned to pace towards the chalkboard before turning back. “The timing. How much time passed between Ellie biting that man and him contracting CBI?”

Lev and Yara studied each other. “Over a season.”

“Months,” Sarah whispered. But if Leah was kissed right after she was bitten—within minutes if not seconds… “Christ, could it be possible…? Ellie can spread immunity but not infection, and it may be on a timeline.” She sank down in her chair and closed her eyes. “Her immunity doesn’t prevent infection altogether, but it castrates it…”

The word triggered a memory. A cold spark went up her spine, and the hair stood up on her neck. Of course. She’d worked on the concept like a dog on a bone at first before losing hope, but she’d never had the opportunity to study an immune person.

She clambered to her feet, pushed Ellie out of the way, and sorted through all the papers in her bottom drawer. Research in this field had died off so quickly, but… She pulled a stack of yellowed notebooks at the bottom of the drawer and tossed it on the desk. Then she strode to the chalkboard and wrote the word: HYPERPARASITE.

“The woman who ran the lab in Chicago before I came in was focused on this. Before Outbreak, scientists hypothesized the ant ophiocordyceps had a parasite itself, and that parasite castrated it and limited the infection of the hosts. There was a theory right at the start of the outbreak that that hyperparasite could be used against CBI. My predecessor was the person to name it: Hostishostis sapiens. Enemy of our enemy. She’s the reason we have a primer for it in the first place. She flew down to Brazil to gather the samples right after Outbreak on that hope.”

Sarah underlined the word, her force causing the chalkboard to shriek. She rounded to point at Ellie. “What if that junk I sequenced with your ophiocordyceps wasn’t junk? I’m so glad I saved all of Walsh’s notes and samples. I looked for that damn thing but never found it, but FEDRA killed
all our immune with the infected!”

Ellie gazed at the chalkboard before she picked up the notebook and flipped it open. She blanched visibly, and her brow gathered. “Who wrote this?”

“My brilliant bitchy boss, Walsh. She ran Chicago’s lab before I came in and then just disappeared. I could never convince brass to put more research into hyperparasites since I could never find it. But it makes sense. The hyperparasite cannot live without its host, which is our parasite. So the hyperparasite can only exist on a timeline around infection. Of course we wouldn’t see it in the wild, not when we were searching for blooming samples. We don’t need a vaccine; we need a post-exposure treatment!”

Leah glanced at Ellie, who was still staring at the paper in her hands. When Ellie finally looked up, Sarah saw youthful innocence on her face. “What was her first name?”

It took Sarah a moment to comprehend Ellie’s bizarre question. “What?”

“This Walsh woman. Was that her second name?”

Here Sarah was describing what could be The Cure, and Ellie wanted to know about Walsh? “Um... Hannah? Ann? Why does it matter?”

Ellie smiled wryly as she digested that. Sarah waited for the fire of her own excitement to catch Ellie, but Ellie only set the notebook aside gently. “So I guess you need more samples from me. So much for no needles, dickhead.”

“Leah...?”

Leah nodded, looking as galvanized as Sarah felt. “Tell me what you need.”

“Just wait for the spinal tap,” Ellie muttered.

As Sarah gathered her supplies, Mark approached Leah. He settled on his knees before her, his face open in worship. Mark drew a glare from Ellie, but he spoke earnestly. “Leah, you have to tell the flock.”

Leah looked as though he’d reminded her of something she’d forgotten on purpose. She blew out a breath and nodded. For the first time since she’d entered the lab, Sarah saw fear on her face. Mark continued earnestly. “You’re the Second Mother. The First Mother spoke of another who would follow, another immune to the world’s sins. She said the Second Mother would fight the final battle needed to welcome the Lamb of God back to Earth and marry...”

Mark trailed off and looked to Ellie, who rolled her eyes. “...marry her. The Lamb of God. They will all come under your fold now, even Esau’s men, even Rebecca’s loyal. They’ll know you were sent to us by the Mother.”

Leah abruptly burst into tears. Yara ordered both of the men to another room, and they obeyed without question. Abigail pushed Leah back in her chair. Leah sobbed hard into her hands, breaking down even when she managed to gather herself again. Ellie reached out to brush her shoulder. Leah wrapped her arms around Ellie’s waist and cried into her shirt.

“Did you lose the child?” Abigail asked softly.

Ellie froze. Her voice was dark and quiet when she whispered, “What the fuck?! Is there anything
they didn’t take from you?”

Leah’s voice was thick with emotion. “Believe me, Ellie, opening my legs was easier than gutting a man.”

“Leah?” Abigail asked. “Is the baby alright?”

“Yes. I don’t know,” she murmured. She darted a look at Ellie’s feet before meeting Sarah’s gaze. “Is there a way to check the baby?”

Not for the first time in her career, Sarah wanted out. She didn’t want to be here and witness what would surely be an intimate struggle. Instead, she manned up and booted up the old ultrasound machine, glad she kept this delicate unit for human patients. Leah unbuttoned her shirt, baring the subtle roundness of her abdomen. Sarah flipped through an old handbook as she waited for the machine to start. She sprayed Leah’s skin with alcohol, raising goosebumps on her skin, and set the probe on her belly. After a few minutes of fruitless search, Ellie took the probe from her impatiently. She found the fetus within a minute.

“What is that?” Leah asked quietly.

“Heartbeat.” Ellie stared at the screen with the sheen of tears in her eyes. Abigail, Yara, and Lev crowded around to watch the screen too. Sarah studied the image, referring to her book. Normal rate, and as far as Sarah could tell, normal anatomy. She pointed out the major landmarks, but kept to herself its gender. She had to caution, “Leah, the likelihood of this pregnancy remaining viable is...well, impossible.”

“Maybe it doesn’t get to the baby.”

Sarah glanced at Ellie, surprised by the turnaround in her attitude. “The fungus crosses the blood brain barrier readily; it’ll cross the placenta.”

“What about the hyperparasite?”

“We don’t even know if there is one. And if there is, the ophiocordyceps has to take root in the tissue for the hyperparasite to arrest it. I see no way for the fetus to survive.”

“Except a miracle. I’ve always been their miracle.” Leah said tightly. She pushed off the table and buttoned her shirt. Her hands shook. For the first time, Sarah witnessed her anger. “I don’t even believe in it. I can’t be their Messiah!”

Yara’s voice was firm. “You have a part to play, Leah.”

“My name is Dina!” Leah seized a plastic chair and flung it across the room in a surprising show of force. It bounced off a filing cabinet with a clatter.

“Hey! Don’t break my stuff!” Sarah snapped.

Leah pressed her hands to her cheeks before exhaling heavily. She rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry, Dr. Miller.”

“Dina.”

Leah turned to stare at Abigail, who smiled at her. “My name was Cunt. The Seraphites gutted the men that tortured me, and they gave me a pretty name and taught me how to read. They don’t eat people, and all I had to do was lie with gentle Peter and sing their hymns. There are more like me
than like Rachel… But the ones like her are the ones you have to convince.”

“You can do this, Leah,” Yara encouraged. “Come here. We’ll talk about how. You’ve already done most of it.”

As Sarah worked, she wondered how these girls learned to twist a murderous mob around their fingers. Yara and Abigail spoke earnestly about alliances within the cult: names, families, favors, and beliefs, ways to drag everyone into their circle one way or another. Their advice calmed Leah and firmed her. Ellie was uncharacteristically quiet during the exchange; she was engrossed in one of Walsh’s old journals.

Abigail left the laboratory. Leah paced and brooded the few minutes she was gone. “It should have been me.”

“They’ll listen to her. Peter is Esau’s second. He won’t let them hurt Abigail.”

“He may not have control over that.”

When the door opened again, Leah stood up. Abigail led a group of five men. Sarah withdrew the pistol from her desk drawer, and Ellie’s knife was in hand. The oldest man, grizzled and scarred by more than Seraphite marks, knelt before Leah and cradled her arm in his hand.

“My Lord and My God,” he said quietly. He drew a shuddering breath through his nose. “Forgive me, Mother, for my doubt.”

“Do you trust me?” Leah asked him.

He nodded. “Where you lead, I will follow.”

“Righteous is the faithful lamb for he will receive the Mother’s blessings.”

Sarah watched with incredulity as the other men knelt to receive Leah’s forgiveness and blessing. Then she remembered her induction ceremony into the ranks of FEDRA. There were all kinds of religions in this fucked up world.

There was little dialogue exchanged as Sarah locked up her lab and the cohesive group returned to the military compound and the worship hall there. After her people filed into the room, Leah proclaimed her blessing of immunity, and it was over. They were totally and completely under her thrall.

It was like a Bible-thumping, serpent-tempting bunch of ignorant hillbillies stirred up to frothing zeal at the thought of God blessing one of their own to be greater than human. Maybe it was just that fervent hope they would experience a touch of that blessing themselves.

Maybe it seemed less crazy to Yara and Lev and Abigail, but Sarah only saw the insanity building. Their faith scared the tar out of her. Only Ellie radiated Sarah’s fear, sitting hunched and tight in her seat, her expression tense as her gaze jerked around at every gasp and breathless murmur of prayer as Leah’s voice cracked while she preached.

Despite the feeling of fervor, the hall was quiet except for Leah’s strong voice. The Seraphites were respectful worshipers. High Church, even when they gutted their victims.

For half her life, Sarah had dreaded going into the lab to churn out failure after failure of the cure. For the first time, she found a place she dreaded worse than the lab: church.
It wasn’t all sunshine and daisies, given the rumors that Sarah overheard by virtue of Yara and Lev, and Leah’s frequent visits to the lab. Despite the bumps and bruises, Leah had cemented her role and her safety as she navigated the complex loyalties and alliances within the cult. By protecting herself, she also ensured the safety of Sarah, Ellie, and the other QZ citizens.

Sarah’s research remained hurry up and wait. Her idle time was spent reading Walsh’s notes and treating any patient that sought out her care. The QZ citizens were still close-lipped. Sarah couldn’t ignore the long looks her frequent Seraphite visitors got.

Only Rose and her parents remained warm, or as warm as they could be. That made it even worse when Sarah struggled to keep the girl comfortable. She gave her worry, her grief, and her blood, and none of it seemed to help.

After another fruitless visit, Ellie entered the lab. She held the door for Rose and her father, turning to watch them walk out. Ellie turned away from the door and walked into the room, her expression shifted in sympathy by whatever she saw on Sarah’s face.

“She’s the kid with cancer? I’ve seen her in here a few times. Is there anything else you can do for her?”

Sarah was drained by the visit, and that had nothing to do with the unit of blood she’d given the girl. “No. Nothing other than making it an easy ending.”

“Kill her, you mean?”

“Euthanize,” Sarah murmured, trying to draw the distinction clearly to herself. Yeah, Dr. Mengele. Fuck Matias. “With drugs. Make it feel good.”

“Why not try the post-exposure treatment in her?”

When Sarah turned to stare at her in shock, Ellie shrugged. “You said my infection is keeping me healthy, helping me heal. Why not try on her?”

“I’d have to infect her with CBI first.”

Ellie shrugged so Sarah repeated it more clearly. “Subject a dying girl and her grieving parents to a possibly horrific infection? Her immune system is horribly compromised. No, Ellie.”

“It has to be better to try something than to kill her. Or even let her die.”

“Just because we can do it doesn’t mean we should. Her last moments should be in peace with her family, not burning up with infection. I can make it easy.”

“That’s such bullshit. If I’d taken that way, I would be dead, not immune.”

Maybe part of that outlook was her age. Sarah didn’t doubt what was right, but she still took the blame Ellie cast on her. Sarah put her hand on Ellie’s shoulder and squeezed, and Ellie’s voice trailed off. Sarah didn’t want to disappoint this girl, but it was bound to happen one way or another. Ellie pulled away angrily. “She’s just a kid. Why does she have to be sick?”

“Because shit happens. Your situation isn’t the same as hers. None of her pain is on you.”

Ellie whisked on her, her gaze accusatory. “Then why do you take it on?”

Sarah raised her face and pinched the bridge of her nose. She tasted salt and wiped moisture from
her face. How did this girl know her so well? “There’s a difference in surviving and killing.”

“Then who did you kill?”

Sarah shook her head, dancing away from the thought. “I stopped wondering why some people make it and others don’t a long time ago. You just keep going. You find something worth doing, not to make up for what you’ve reaped but to have one less regret in life.”

The accusation on Ellie’s face faded. She offered a tight smile. “You’re a lot like my dad.”

“Sounds like a pragmatic person.”

“I guess you could call him that. We got separated just outside of Seattle. I hope he went back home. I…” Ellie’s expression twisted up tight. Sarah felt panic close over her that this strong woman was going to cry because it was hard enough to keep herself together. “I just hope I have the chance to tell him I’m sorry.”

Sarah patted Ellie’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Then she nodded to her chalkboard, which was full of her script. Time to change the subject. She outlined some of her theories about infection and immunity, including the test results so far.

Ellie considered all the information. “Can it take hold though?”

“That’s what I don’t know. There’s no good way to test it except trying it in people.”

“You really don’t think CBI can go in animals?”

She felt a chill. “I hope I’m not wrong, but I should have heard reports about it already. We’re not that far removed from SFQZ.”

“If the infected animals started east maybe they haven’t spread this far yet. Hell, FEDRA could be keeping quiet about it because they’re afraid of causing panic.”

It was too plausible to sit comfortably. “I hope you’re wrong.”

“If Dina isn’t, then we need that treatment as soon as possible.”

“How long do you think this peace is going to last?”

“Until we fail to find a cure.” Ellie’s certainty was crushing, at least until she pulled a face. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Everyone is hanging on to the hope of a cure, and they’ll keep hanging on until you give up.”

Gratitude for the help and support Ellie gave her twisted Sarah up tight, and she found herself doing what she told herself she wouldn’t do. “Your girl asked me about you.”

“What? Dina?”

“I think she thinks we’re together.”

Ellie’s shattered expression made Sarah sorry to have said it. “They took so much from her. I don’t want her to think that she has to be what she was before.”

Though Sarah didn’t agree with Leah’s methods, these girls had survived hell to find each other again. After all that, pigheadedness shouldn’t be the only thing stopping them from rediscovering what they could be together. “Ellie, she loves you. She still wants you, and seems like she’ll take
whatever you’ll give her.”

Ellie wrung her hands, her expression shifted into grim disappointment. “I killed a lot of people to get here. I don’t deserve—”

“Do you know how many people would die for a second chance like you have? Don’t punish her by punishing yourself. She loves you, she wants you, so take what she’s offering if you want it!” The last sentence was heavy with emotion, drawing out her buried twang. She sighed and softened her tone. “Ellie, you’re better than I am. You deserve to be happy.”

Ellie blushed. She cocked her head and stared at Sarah with her brows drawn as if she was seeing her for the first time. “Where are you from?”

The door to the lab opened abruptly enough to startle them both. Ellie’s knife was in hand, and Sarah stood up in defensive stance, but it was only Lev who stood in the doorway. His eyes were wide, and Sarah first alarmed conclusion shot through her like ice. “Yara?”

“There’s an army on the radio.”

“Fuck.” Ellie’s swear echoed Sarah’s emotion as her gut dropped. So much for their fragile peace.

Of course they talked in code. Sarah sat in front of the radio and tried to get them to communicate in standard English, but it was like talking to a wall. It didn’t help that Leah, Hannah, and a couple of their scouts were crowded in the room behind her. Claustrophobia compounded her frustration. Sarah didn’t want Matias anywhere near this radio, but she wasn’t sure she’d have a choice if these idiots wouldn’t communicate with her.

Just as Sarah was about to lose her temper, Ellie took the mouthpiece from her and spoke in a jumbled mess of numbers and terms. Her brow furrowed as she listened, and then there was a long pause.

“What are they saying?” Sarah asked as the silence stretched.

“They didn’t make you learn this shit in MP?”

“I’m old, Ellie. They didn’t use this standardized system until I was out of the position to learn it.”

“They asked if we’re secure, if we’ve been overrun by infection or terrorists. They’re stationed five miles south of the old QZ barrier. I asked who’s in charge.”

The radio crackled. “CO, Captain Benjamin Hare. SFQZ deployed to backup Seattle QZ.”

Sarah needed no translation. Disbelief flooded her.

 Fucking hell. She’d finally escaped Hare when she transferred to Seattle, and here he was again, barging back into her life. How selfish that was her first thought, about herself and her relationship with him? He’d been demoted since Sarah left SFQZ, but she couldn’t take any satisfaction from that knowledge.

Deep dread enclosed her a moment later. Ben was going to do nothing but wreak havoc. He would burn Seattle to the ground to accomplish his literal goal of reclaiming the QZ. He wouldn’t suffer the Seraphites, and he’d hang the lot, no matter their age, gender, or culpability.

Sarah realized Ellie was looking to her for information, and she pushed her dread aside and held
out her hand again to take the mouthpiece. “This is Commander Sarah Miller. Please relay to Captain Hare that we are not under duress, but travel into the QZ at this time is inadvisable because of an increase in the infected population in the area. We have no room for a caravan in our perimeter. I will meet with Captain Hare tomorrow morning at your camp’s location to discuss particulars.”

A tense minute passed, then the radio crackled. Apparently plain English was good enough now. “Commander Miller, Captain Hare will await you at 0800 tomorrow. We’re transmitting our location.”

“Yes, sir,” Sarah replied. She glanced at Ellie and cracked a half smile that belied her fear. Ellie looked back at her calmly and said, “You know I’m coming with you, right?”

“I’ll take Ines.”

“Do you really trust any of them not to spill about the situation? I grew up in Military Prep. I can fake it. You know I’m good in a fight, and I happen to be a fantastic liar.”

“You’re just terrible at taking orders.”

“Yeah. There’s that.”

Sarah set the radio mouthpiece down and accepted the cloak of dread that descended on her. From the elation of hope of the cure to the crushing fear of losing it all. It was time to rehearse what the hell she’d say to Ben the next day. She hoped their shared history would count for something in this situation.

There were uniforms to be scrounged from the locker rooms. Without armory access, the ill-fitting pieces would have to do to outfit them formally the next day. Ellie sneered when Sarah tossed a tacvest at her.

“No way.”

“Wear it or don’t come with me. Don’t test me.”

“Fuck you,” Ellie muttered, grunting as she tossed it onto her pile of FEDRA clothing. “I’m not wearing a fucking cap. Those things are so stupid.” She rolled one of her boot’s laces between her fingers and asked, “So what’s the plan, Commander?”

“I know the man coming. Maybe I can convince him—”

“The plan, Sarah.”

Sarah glanced up at Ellie and realized she shouldn’t try to bullshit her. “Bargain for mercy for the Seraphites.”

“Bargain with what?”

“Something valuable.”

“Something like the cure?”

She hadn’t wanted to admit it, but there it was. Ellie was just too damn smart. No doubt she would see what made Sarah hesitate. Ellie met Sarah’s gaze without fear. “Yeah, something like the cure.”
Ellie nodded and picked up her clothing. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Wait for me.”

Sarah could already guess she’d get no sleep that night. In the end, she went back to her research and considered her options. She’d rather out-thinking than out-kill so it was time to start thinking.

Based on testing, Leah’s infection was the same as Ellie’s, the same as wildtype except for the few segments of junk DNA. Sarah combed through Walsh’s notes before finally finding her description of the ant hyperparasite’s segments on gel electrophoresis. She could make a strong argument the junk was a match.

It was a tenuous conclusion, especially without the primer Walsh had so carefully transcribed in her notes, but this was the biggest breakthrough of CBI research since Outbreak. Here, in Seattle of all places.

Sarah hypothesized that Ellie had saved Leah’s life with her kiss after Leah had ophiocordyceps transmitted through a bite. The hyperparasite could take root in Leah only because she had ophiocordyceps replicating in her body. Where Ellie was exposed to the hyperparasite, Sarah couldn’t guess. It had to live in the environment, but apparently the hyperparasite couldn’t exist in the host without ophiocordyceps. Though the timeline between failure and success of post-exposure was anywhere between minutes and months.

If this really was the hyperparasite, Sarah was still stuck on how to isolate it. Potentially she could skip that step for now by inoculating a subject with Ellie’s castrated ophiocordyceps strain, presuming the hyperparasite was along for the ride. Or she could inoculate a volunteer with the wildtype ophiocordyceps and have Ellie attempt to transmit the hyperparasite to the subject.

The latter option landed Sarah right back in CBI Research territory. She couldn’t ask someone else to sacrifice himself just test her theory.

There was the other problem too. She couldn’t create a post-exposure treatment without Ellie or Leah. Even if inoculating with the castrated fungus was good enough, Ellie’s original colonies were dead already. Sarah could try to preserve the samples, but there was no guarantee it—even the DNA—would survive journey.

Sarah knew Ellie would volunteer to go to SFQZ for this—she’d probably already guessed she would have to—but San Francisco was a long way from Wyoming. It wasn’t fair for either of the girls to be imprisoned so the rest of the world could have a cure. Hell, if Ellie really had come this far to save her girlfriend, if Leah had survived what she had for that chance, they deserved to ride off in the sunset together.

Sarah wasn’t going to be the evil queen that locked one of them up forever. The problem was how the hell she was going to avoid it.

Twelve hours and two nightmares later, Sarah met Ellie in the courtyard of the military base. Ellie had cleaned up well. Sarah straightened a few creases and flicked the tactical vest out of habit, earning a glare. “This is so heavy,” Ellie complained as she climbed up onto one of the horses the QZ provided. Even the horse earned a complaint. “I feel like a moving target up on this white horse. Have anything brown?”

“That’s an Andalusian, and it’s cremello, not white,” David retorted, saying it like Ellie had insulted his entire family. He held the reins while Sarah climbed up on the buckskin he’d chosen for her.
Ellie shifted in the saddle, and the horse seemed to take to her just fine. Sarah was nervous atop the big beast beneath her, sure she was one fluttering leaf away from getting bucked off. She wasn’t so preoccupied with her horse to miss Ellie taking a long look back at where Leah watched them leave.

The Seraphites were already retreating. They didn’t have the supplies to survive getting pushed out of Seattle, but staying here if the military rode in would mean execution. Leah knew their tenuous position. After her struggle to bring peace and have mercy on the QZ citizens, the Seraphites were on the brink of getting screwed over by an outside military force.

Surely Matias regretted not holding out longer against the Seraphites. Sarah knew without a doubt he’d see all these people: men, women, and children, gunned down without a care. Sarah had seen enough exchange of hatred to hope for something better than one side wiping the other out. There had to be a way to tease peace out of this fragile situation.

Sarah’s first thought when they caught sight of the military camp south of Seattle was that there were way too many of them. There were five trucks that served as a physical barrier around their camp. A cluster of tents had been pitched within the perimeter of the trucks.

They rode up the intact I-5 and I-405 interchange bridge and coaxed their horses through the gap in the trucks. The horses were as wary as Sarah felt as they walked into the camp. Instead of the rough handling she was expecting, the soldiers respectfully took their weapons and horses and led them through the perimeter of camp and into a big tent.

There Ben Hare sat behind his desk, more lined but no grayer than Sarah remembered. His smile was tight as he rose, and he reached out to Sarah.

She felt a rush of unconscious trust, and that pissed her off. Sarah saluted him, which paused Ben’s approach. She regretted her old instinct immediately, knowing it set the wrong tone for this meeting. Ben’s gaze flickered to Ellie, and he paused to study her curiously.

Sarah was distracted by the man chained to a chair by Ben’s desk. A plate of food was balanced on his lap. Something about the line of his ear stirred her memory, but she couldn’t concentrate past her need to get this conversation started.

“Nice to see you again, Ben.”

He relaxed slightly. “Sarah, I’m glad to hear you’ve made it through this mess. Talk to me. What the hell happened up here?”

Her eyes went again to the odd sight of Ben’s prisoner, but Sarah made herself focus on Ben’s handsome features. “There was a situation, sir, one that is currently under control.”

“Define ‘control’, ” Ben ordered, his tone going sharp. “Because we’ve seen bodies rotting in the streets, holes in your walls, and infected in your perimeter.”

“Our perimeter has been redefined. Sir, if you march into the QZ right now, it’ll only end in more death. We’ve reached a peaceful resolution with the other group, and we’re working on—”

“We don’t negotiate with terrorists, Sarah. You of all people should know this.”

His tone and assertion made her snap back: “Yet now you take orders from the Fireflies.”

Ben actually turned red in anger. The only time Sarah saw him react so emotionally was after his wife’s disappearance. Sarah had never talked back to him before, but she was too damn tired to put
up with his irritating black-and-white mentality.

“Don’t press me. Death is not an unwelcome result if there are terrorists to be punished.”

She could already see there was nothing to say to him to persuade him otherwise. Benjamin Hare was a literal, unimaginative man, and he led his forces with the same goal in mind without thought to changing situation parameters. She offered him a rueful smile and wondered how to broach her bargain. He softened immediately, sighing as he settled into his chair.

She couldn’t bargain away Ellie or Leah’s future. Sarah was starting to understand why her lab mentor had committed suicide the way he had: for the hope of something better. She was tired of asking other people to sacrifice themselves. Better to be the one with everything on the line, and she’d do that for Ellie.

“Ben.”

Ben’s gaze sharpened at her informality. “Sarah?”

“We need three days.”

“Three days for what?”

“There’s enough history between us that I should be able to ask you for one favor.”

“These situations are extenuating. Even if I could grant your request so easily, I’ve been holding onto a very dangerous prisoner for the last week.” He finally acknowledged the man cuffed to a chair. “The new Firefly manifest says I can’t execute this wanted criminal until I’m in an established QZ and put him on trial.”

Of course he’d hurry the killing in order to kill. Any other commander in the field would have executed the prisoner and been done with it, practicality outweighing orders. “Then give him to us. We have a jail and enough people to guard it.”

“Sarah, you just asked for for three days without telling me why. That doesn’t invite trust.”

“Ben, for once in your goddamned life, help me!” She hated that her voice took a pleading tone, but she let it. “What do you want? Do you want to get married? You want me to have your children? I’ll give you that, but you have to give me three days. Trust me.”

He opened his mouth, his expression surprisingly sympathetic, and then a soldier stepped into the room, bent down, and spoke in his ear. Ben glanced at Sarah and nodded, rising to his feet. “I’ll be right back. If the prisoner tries to escape, you have my permission kill him, QZ or not.”

He swept out of the tent as if on a mission, and Sarah turned to watch him go. The interruption frustrated her to no end. She’d been so focused on making the decision to be noble that she had taken for granted having the opportunity in the first place.

“Joel.”

Sarah turned to Ellie, who had crouched down in front of the bound man. The name and her suddenly unimpeded view of the man’s profile closed Sarah’s throat in shock. All the things that she kept hidden deep, buried under years and miles and information, began to resurface. One of the comforts through her life was that her father was dead, unable to see the shame of her sins. Now her world turned wrongside up.
Sarah tried to keep her breath steady as anxiety tightened its grip on her neck. She turned her face away, praying he wouldn’t look at her.

She shouldn’t have worried. Her father dropped his head to rest it on Ellie’s. “Baby girl,” he said in such a familiar tone. “No more rapids for you.”

“I got pushed, Joel.”

“I saw. Nearly had a heart attack. We got ourselves in a real pickle here, Ellie, but I’m mighty glad to see you.”

“We need to get you out of here.”

“No. Not yet. No way out of this place without getting shot.”

“Sarah, what do you—” Ellie turned to face her, and her entire body moved with her realization. As Sarah opened her mouth to beg Ellie not to betray her, Ellie flinched back from a sudden splash of sunlight as the side of the tent opened wide. Sarah turned and found herself staring down a rifle barrel.

Beyond the line of soldiers, Matias stood next to Ben.

“You son of a bitch,” she swore softly. Matias looked her in the eye with no regrets. He’d sold them out, and for what? The chance to lord it over Sarah? The chance to see the girl that saved his life hang to death? Maybe that was sleazy pride on his face. Sarah remembered slamming him up against the wall and wondered if this was all the product of wounded male pride. Fucking prick.

She set her hands on the back of her head as the soldiers barked at her, and Ellie did the same. They followed orders and walked out into the open. In the midst of the chaos of shouted orders, Ellie was struck in the back of leg and fell to her knees. Sarah settled down onto the broken concrete slowly. She shot Ellie a cautionary look. Ellie looked back at her, her gaze long but steady, and she offered no resistance.

“So, aiding terrorists, are we, Sarah?” Ben asked. He shook his head. “I’m surprised. I’m...disappointed. I’d hoped...”

“Matias has no idea what he’s talking about. Whatever he told you—”

Ben shook his head. “I let my affection for you get in the way of protocol. Let’s start over. Scan them.”

Oh fuck. How had she forgotten that detail? How was she so stupid?! Sarah felt white-cold terror rush through her as she watched them approach Ellie with a scanner. “Ben, please—”

The blow of a rifle hit her in the shoulder, stunning her. Someone snapped, “Refer to your commanding officer by rank!” Sarah lifted herself up, shaking the pain away. She tried to raise herself from the dirt, but someone kicked her in the side. Her scar twinged, and she grunted, dragging a breath to shout—

“Red. Infected.”

“Well, that makes this easy.”

Sarah and Matias shouted together. “Ben, she’s imm—”
“Sir, she’s not—”

Ben already had his pistol out, and he didn’t hesitate. He shot Ellie in the head. She collapsed in a heap, limp with death. An animal scream burst from Sarah as she lurched to her feet, her existence pared down to rage. Then her entire body seized up, and she collapsed back onto the ground, helpless as every muscle in her tightened so hard she knew she’d break herself.

More than one knee pressed into her body, and her hands were cuffed behind her roughly. A scanner beeped against her neck. “Secured. Green! Clear!”

“Put her in with the other prisoner.” Ben strode by Sarah without looking down at her. “And get rid of that infected’s body. Use PPE.”

Matias stared down at Ellie’s body with his mouth open. He turned his wide-eyed shock from Ellie to Ben, and his voice cracked with horror. “You just— She was immune!”

Ben immediately retorted, “Immunity is a myth. Even if she was, she was a terrorist.”

“She was against the Seraphites. Jesus Christ! Why did you do that?”

“Is this the way an officer conducts himself?” Ben snapped.

Sarah missed the rest of the exchange. She struggled to stand and got hit with agonizing exposure. After they released her from it, she lay panting in the dirt. All hope lost. Of course it would end this way. She watched through her tears for Ellie to move, but she was spun around hard enough to make her dizzy.

“She’s too fucking big for a woman,” one of her captors complained, adjusting his too-tight grip on her arm.

The men dragged her underneath a tent flap and secured her to a tent stake. A familiar face leaned over her, and he offered a smile. “I just saved your life, Miller. What, no smile for your old MP buddy?”

Was that...? All the way from her Dallas military prep days, but his voice and name tag stirred her memory. Sarah turned away from his smile. “Fuck you, Hernandez.”

“You know anything about infected animals?”

“What?”

“Miller, focus. Infected animals. You heard anything about that? Does it go to humans?”

“There’s no such thing,” she gritted out.

“I saw one. An infected bear. What the fuck are we going to do about that?”

Hell, why not add this too? Infected animals, Ellie dead, and the QZ about to get destroyed. Sarah leaned down against her legs to strike her forehead to them to slap some sense into her reeling mind. She released a shuddering sigh and made herself move on.

Leah was still alive, and Leah had the same immunity as Ellie, the one silver lining in this clusterfuck. Why had she thought it would go any different than this? She’d forgotten that Ellie would scan positive. She’d just forgotten. Now she was dead because Sarah had forgotten one detail.

Move on. There were more lives at stake.
“I’m working on the cure.”

Hernandez scoffed. Sarah raised her face to look him in the eye. “No. I have the cure, but Ben can’t trash Seattle. We can’t let him kill the cultists; their leader is immune. If he kills her too, we’re fucked.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“I wouldn’t lie about this.”

He leaned close and studied her. She studied him right back. “That girl Ben shot. She was immune. And I know why. There are others like her in the QZ, and they’re part of the cult that overran us. I can manufacture that, spread it. But I won’t if you don’t turn around and get out.”

“I don’t have the men to lead a mutiny. And you know he won’t stop on the chance for a cure.”

“Then figure it out!”

Hernandez chewed on his lip. He glanced at the man beside him. “I’m sorry, Miller. I can only try to keep you alive.”

“Then there won’t be a cure.”

He studied her again. The man beside him scoffed. “She’s bluffing.”

“No, she isn’t. That wouldn’t be a blip on her moral radar.” Hernandez grinded his teeth for a moment before he nodded. “I’ll see what we can do, but if we get you out of this, you better fucking deliver. I want that cure for my family.”

The tent flap opened, and a soldier ducked his head inside. He and Hernandez exchanged looks before the man said, “Hare wanted her in his office. He’s pissed.”

Hernandez studied Sarah again before he nodded. The pity on his face was plain to see. He showed her his Taser CEW, and she knew its prongs were still in her thighs. “Don’t make me use this again. You gonna walk on your own?”

Sarah followed him to the other tent obediently. She let them cuff her to the chair that had been her father’s just minutes before, and she wondered what alternate reality she’d found herself in. She’d forgotten about him in the chaos. Losing Ellie, losing the cure, losing her father all over again, and probably her own life… Fuck. She lowered her head and closed her eyes before she met Hare’s stare.

“I need information, Sarah.”

From behind Hare, Matias fidgeted. “Sir, I already told you everything. Please don’t hurt her.”

Sarah laughed. Of course Matias would be here to witness this. By his tone, he realized he had bitten off more than he could chew. One dead, another to be tortured; Matias hadn’t foreseen the consequences of his betrayal. She met his gaze. “Don’t bother. This is just a test of loyalty, Matias. Punishment for lying to him in the first place.”

“Information, Sarah. Matias says you’ve grown close to them. You know more than he would.”

She remembered Yara’s bravery and sat up to spit in Ben’s face. Ben slowly wiped his cheek. Then he squeezed the trigger of the CEW. Sarah’s body flexed for countless seconds of agony. She
gasped as the stimuli stopped, uncertain if she’d screamed.

“How many enemy forces? What weapons do they carry? Where are they?”

“They’re cooperating peacefully. They want a cure, and I can deliver it.”

She expected another exposure, but Hare surprised her by engaging. “You worked for ten years in Chicago with all the resources FEDRA had to offer and couldn’t deliver a cure. Now I’m expected to believe you have it here after the loss of your QZ?”

“FEDRA never gave me immune subjects. I found one, and she can spread her immunity to others. She already did. It’s the hyperparasite, Hare.”

Ben’s brow gathered, his confusion visible as he tried to place that word. “Anna’s project? That was a fantasy; we all knew it. Even you said it didn’t exist.”

Funny that in that moment all she could do was regret not remembering Walsh’s first name for Ellie. Jesus Christ, Ellie… “I never looked in the right place. You never approved a quarantine. If you had, we would have the cure by now.”

Ben shook his head and picked up the CEW again in clear threat. “I need information about the situation, Sarah, not your fantasy of curing the world.”

“You really are the dumbest man I’ve ever met.”

She was hit with another exposure and laughed when Hare released her from it. For Ellie, she sneered, “No wonder she left you, you stupid dickweed—”

Another pulse. Sarah screamed this time, her existence pared down to the hard flex of her muscles. Distantly, she heard Hernandez interject, “Sir, you can kill her with that.” Someone was yelling to stop; maybe it was her, maybe it was Matias.

The current released and she gasped, her thoughts grayed out. Her head lolled to the side, and she locked eyes with her father where he was bound and gagged beside Hare’s desk. He looked back at her unflinchingly. He knew. He must know. He’d asked for her to be the best she could, and she’d just killed their future with her thoughtless stupidity. She turned away, blinking away her tears.

The tent flap opened. “What?” Hare snapped. He snatched two objects from the soldier, who reported, “This is all we found on the infected girl, sir. They’ve been treated for contamination.”

She watched Ben’s brow tighten in confusion as he stared at the delivered objects. He slowly turned over the switchblade and opened it before closing it again. Then he lifted yellowed paper enclosed in plastic. He reached down for the glasses he kept in his shirt and squinted as he focused on the paper through them. All colored bled from his face. “No. How?”

He turned it over, and he sank down into his seat with a groan. Sarah had never seen him react like this before. Ben touched his forehead and stared at the paper in one hand and the knife in the other.

“Anna…? Where did she…?”

Then Sarah realized the truth: Ellie’s hesitation when she saw Walsh’s research notes, her question about the woman’s full name, and the abrupt memory of being so surprised to see Walsh trim her fingernails with a switchblade after a day in the field.

The irony. Grief and vindictiveness warred within her. As Ben raised his horrified gaze to her,
Sarah couldn’t stifle her hysterical laugh. The thing he’d always wanted most in the world was a child. “You just killed your own daughter, didn’t you, you stupid bastard!”

Ben hunched down to press his head in his hands. He was so predictable when he seized the CEW. What surprised Sarah more was that he threw it down again. His voice broke. “This is your fault! You should have just... God, what have I done?”

Sarah accepted the truth of his words. It was her fault, but Sarah’s mistake had been hoping for human decency. She should have known better. She of all people should have fucking known.
The Lamb of God

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Being fussed at by Sarah was a lot like being fussed at by Joel. Maybe that was why Ellie felt so comfortable with the woman, even through the shame of being schooled on what was right. Maybe one day Ellie would figure out how to make the right decisions herself, but even with her epiphany about how unfairly she’d treated Joel, she still needed Sarah to screw her head on right again about Dina.

Ellie was punishing someone she loved for doing the very thing she wanted her to do: survive. All the things she’d let scare her away were internal; ultimately they had nothing to do with Dina. They were on the clock, and Ellie had wasted enough of the time they had left.

As Sarah strode off in the direction of her lab—likely to tie herself in circles trying to figure out any solution but the only one—Ellie turned back toward the Matriarch’s hall.

Dina was sitting behind a desk in one of the upstairs offices in conference with a few scarred men and women. Yara was among them; she alone offered a smile. Everyone else nodded to Ellie deferentially; Dina shot her a guarded, almost frightened look.

Ellie tossed the heavy FEDRA uniform into an unused chair and tucked herself into the corner to eavesdrop as they discussed where they would move their women and children and how they would protect themselves if the threat of invading soldiers became truth. Their meeting was only interrupted by two scouts that came to report on the enemy forces: five trucks parked south of the QZ, semi-automatic firearms, armor, and an estimated thirty soldiers.

In contrast there were a little over a dozen veteran Seraphite scouts left and less than forty Seraphites altogether, even including a child born two weeks prior. They’d seemed so numerous as Ellie tracked them, but Seattle had decimated the Seraphites as much as the QZers.

Dina seemed unrealistically set on preventing any further deaths. It was so her to be naively hopeful despite her circumstances. She’d always been set on perfection in her own way. Dina massaged the scars beside her eyes as she studied the evacuation plan. “Hannah will you lead out. I need to stay. If I have to, I’ll surrender for your safety.”

“Woah, fuck that!” Ellie jerked to attention as several people in the room protested more calmly. “They’ll kill you. Sarah and I—”

“And what do we do if your trip tomorrow doesn’t work out the way we hope? As much as I wish otherwise, most of the QZ citizens would probably welcome their invasion. I have to think of ways to protect my flock.”

Dina’s dark gaze was unflinching, and her voice was as firm as it had ever been. There it was, the part of Dina—no, Leah—that was so alien. She scared Ellie with her intensity and decisiveness. Ellie felt like she’d be left behind, solitary in her stagnation.

The meeting adjourned with Dina firm on her last resort plan. Ellie could guess by the look Paul and Mark exchanged that they would be making their own plan to save their Second Mother if need be. Ellie wouldn’t let it get that far, but she couldn’t begrudge the backup plans.

There was another long discussion ironing out the details of evacuation routes, protection, and final
meeting points, then Dina dismissed the Seraphites with a quiet prayer.

When the last scout stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him quietly, Dina sat back with a sigh. Then she reached into one of the drawers in her desk and asked, “Care for a drink?”

The dry twist of Dina’s voice was familiar enough to take Ellie back to happier times in Jackson. Dina had teased her with that tone the morning of Ellie’s first hangover. When Ellie told Dina to fuck off, Dina had collapsed in her bed and giggled as she wriggled up against Ellie, Ellie’s nausea and headache be damned.

A smile hovered close as Ellie glanced at the liquor bottle Dina set on the desk. It was nearly empty. She shook her head. Dina looked at the bottle and sighed. “I wish I could.” Then she stowed the bottle back in the drawer before pulling out a soft leather-bound book. Her smile faded as she stroked the cover.

Ellie still hovered on that strange precipice she’d toed when the eviscerating Seraphite Matriarch pulled back her hood to reveal such a familiar face. Funny that despite the horror that Dina hadn’t just survived, she’d by all accounts flourished, in that moment Ellie accepted the reality of her alive and a Seraphite with unbridled joy.

She still wasn’t sure what to do with that joy, but Sarah was right. Dina was alive, and she seemed to want Ellie despite the violence Ellie carried out on her people. Fuck, the concept of Dina’s people being the cult that destroyed Jackson still boggled her. Yet in the last two weeks, Ellie saw a little of what Dina did in the Seraphites. They were just people. Different religion, different morals, but ultimately, they wanted what everyone else did: to survive, to see their children survive.

Maybe that really was what it boiled down to. Past her goodness, her morals, and her faults, Dina’s ability to see the good in everyone around her put her on this path of redemption. She was so damn much now that Ellie didn’t know how she could fit into Dina’s life. Hell, where did this path lead? To a child, apparently, one that Dina had no choice about but was sure to love unconditionally.

Dina’s fingertip hesitantly stroked over the furthest edges of Ellie’s tattoo, but her touch firmed when Ellie didn’t pull away. “So many ways you’ve saved my life, Ellie.”

“I almost killed you.” Ellie pressed her hand over Dina’s, and Dina looked up, her dark eyes soft with hope.

“I understand why.”

“Why you were so willing to have yourself killed? You forgave them even after everything they did to you.”

“The only one I wanted to kill was Emily, but I’m glad I didn’t have the chance. I would have become her. But with Esau, what would it do but weaken us if I retaliated?” Dina shook her head. “The First Mother, Anna, would have butchered them without regret. I have to be better if I want them to be better.”

“Anna.” Ellie tasted the name, a sharp of familiar hope jerking through her even though she knew Dina’s Anna wasn’t hers. Sarah’s Walsh though...

Dina fingered the book. “This is our Book of Names. Written by the woman who founded the Seraphites. You’d think reading someone’s original Bible would firm you in the faith, but this is... Her father raped her repeatedly as he formed a secluded, isolated cult around himself. He falsely
claimed to be immune, but in the end, she was. He was the first reaping.”

Ellie studied the circles under Dina’s eyes and the sadness that radiated off of her. Below that, Ellie sensed a deep, aching worry. Ellie remembered the suicidal rage that cloaked her so recently and wondered how Dina had escaped it. “I guess I wouldn’t blame her for killing him, but why keep going?”

“Because she felt compelled by God,” Dina said wryly. She shifted her grip so they threaded their fingers together. “So much good could have come from it. Instead, she used her holiness to justify murder, infecting children, and then planned genocide.”

“There’s not much worse than FEDRA.”

Dina sighed. “Or the Fireflies.”

Ellie wasn’t sure where the conversation was going. She squeezed Dina’s fingers. “So what’s next? If we get out of this alive, do you want to go back home to Jackson?”

Back home to Jackson. When had it unconsciously become that? The homesickness Ellie felt in that moment shocked her. She missed Dina’s family, Maria, Tommy, Jesse, Wes—but Wes was dead. Her memories of that dark time after the Seraphite attack were foggy at best, but the sudden aching need to go back was undeniable. “I want to go home.”

“You always seemed so antsy to leave.”

The observation surprised her. Ellie leaned back and considered how to explain away the accusation Dina had leveled at her more than once. “I was just waiting for something to tear me away. As soon as I got comfortable somewhere before, I’d have to leave. I was sure it’d happen at Jackson too. Now though… I guess home is more about having a place you want to go back to.”

“I don’t know if I can. After all I’ve done…”

“You survived, Dina. Your family, they’ll be so fucking happy to know you’re alive.”

Dina’s listlessness shifted to anger. “They would hate me. I’m a hypocrite. Don’t try to pretend you don’t see that!”

And there it was: self-loathing rage.

Dina tried to pull away. Ellie gripped her fingers and gently pulled her hand back to study it. She traced the familiar lines of Dina’s palm. The new scar across her thumb was easier to accept than the ones that framed Dina’s stricken face.

“You know that’s not true.”

“I see it in the way you look at me!” Dina’s expression crumpled as tears rose in her eyes.

Ellie laughed incredulously. “I’m scared out of my mind. You’re so different, but how couldn’t you be? You used to be so afraid of voting the wrong way that you didn’t vote at all. You used to ask ten people how to think about something before you’d make a decision. And now look at you…”

“Yes,” Dina said derisively. “I betrayed everything to them to survive. I took their scars, I opened my legs for them, I’m pregnant because they demanded it. I sold my soul—”

“Bullshit! You just turned a murdering religious cult on its head to save the few good people
among them. You saved my life and protected QZ citizens from their wrath. Hell, you’re protecting the Seraphites because it’s right even when you have enough justification to burn them all. Anyone else in your position would have, but you’re willing to give your life for them. How is that anything but good? Dina, you’re fucking incredible. I had no idea you were this…”

“This...?”

Ellie considered the word for a long moment. “This fucking strong.”

“You don’t understand! I was terrified. I am terrified! I was a coward. I was too afraid to die to do anything but submit.”

“Don’t you get it? That’s bravery. You somehow did good, while I just... I didn’t.” Ellie gathered herself, pulling Dina’s hand to her mouth to press a kiss to her knuckles. “That shouldn’t scare me, but it does. It feels like I lost you because you changed, but that’s just my shitty selfish stupidity. I’m scared of that, not of you. I don’t blame you. Fuck, Dina, you did everything right!”

Dina turned away, sobbing into her hands. Ellie wrapped her up tight while Dina wept against her shoulder, and she rocked them together in a beatless dance until Dina’s tears eventually tapered off and she hugged Ellie back just as tightly.

When she pulled away, they needed no words to clarify the question between them. Dina led Ellie by the hand down the quiet hallway. Two big Seraphites standing guard nodded deferentially, murmuring greetings to Second Mother and the Lamb.

As lauded as Dina was within the cult, her room left a lot to be desired. The view was of the brick wall only a few feet away. The only furniture was a rickety chair and an uncomfortable looking bed, far removed from the collection of knick-knacks and view that Dina’s upstairs bedroom boasted in Jackson.

After Ellie locked the door, the air between them was too heavy to joke about the shitty furnishings. Ellie watched Dina remove her coat and fold it. She set aside her gunpowder keg and her canteen. Then, with care, Dina withdrew her two pistols, though the word ‘pistol’ was an understatement for both of those pieces of nineteenth century firepower.

“Let me see you.”

Dina turned around, her brow furrowed in question. Ellie shook her head as she looked Dina up and down. She was Dina even with the braid, the scars, and the slight roundness under her white shirt. Ellie focused on the part of Dina’s image she could make light of instead of all the other parts that made her want to cry. “I’ve always had a thing for women in shoulder holsters. I’d probably die if I ever saw you in a corset with a built-in holster. FEDRA really screwed up my sexual tastes, huh?”

Dina’s dim smile faded after a moment. Ellie wasn’t used to the way her gaze skittered away. “You aren’t...obligated to me, Ellie. I know you came all this way, and we both survived so much, but we’ve both changed. Just because I’m alive and you’re here doesn’t mean you have to...have to… That we...”

As Dina struggled to say ‘love’ without saying it, Ellie rocked to her feet and held out her hand. “You aren’t...obligated to me, Ellie. I know you came all this way, and we both survived so much, but we’ve both changed. Just because I’m alive and you’re here doesn’t mean you have to...have to... That we...”

Ellie pulled Dina close, resting her palms on her hips. Just like that, Dina melted into her again.
They rocked together in an unnamed rhythm. Ellie closed her eyes and listened to the shift of Dina’s breath, soaked up the warmth of her body, and reveled in her familiar scent.

There was so damn much she could say. She could write an essay on her fear, her ambivalence, her self-hatred, the risks of the next day, but that wasn’t what either of them needed. Ellie decided she’d talked enough for the night. Except...

“You remember that night when I asked you what we were to each other?”

Dina nodded against her neck.

“And you told me you love me and that your bracelet’s mine. Just like you’re mine and I’m yours. Right?”

Dina nodded again. Ellie felt her tears on her neck, heard her sigh, and pulled Dina closer still. “There are no takebacks. For me that’s the way this works, and I think that’s the way it works for you too.”

Dina kissed her. Ellie wrapped her arms around her waist and kissed her right back. They stumbled to the bed. Ellie pressed her cheek to Dina’s belly, to the tiny swell there and the fragile reality of a life that might come into this world. What had her own mother felt? Had she been in a situation like Dina, willing to brave the consequence of a union she hadn’t wanted?

She needed...

But in the end, she was paralyzed by her fear. There was so much Dina had survived; Ellie could see that in the new scars and the loss of fat and gain of muscle, the infrequency of her smiles and the tightness around her eyes. Ellie couldn’t find it in her to go further.

“Ellie?” Dina murmured, stroking her hand through Ellie’s hair.

“I don’t know how to do this.”

Ellie was startled when Dina pushed her onto her back. She stared up at Dina as she climbed on top of her, naked and beautiful. That was Dina’s body, even with the changes their time apart had wrought. And that was Dina’s old wickedness in her slow smile. Dina drew Ellie’s fingers into her mouth, sucking as she rocked on Ellie’s belly. She murmured her approval as she stroked Ellie’s hand against her breasts. Her heat made Ellie groan, then they both gasped as Dina pressed Ellie’s fingers inside her.

“You can’t fix people, Ellie,” Dina whispered.

Just like that? Surely it wouldn’t always be this easy, but this was what they needed tonight, the uncertain future be damned. Ellie lurched up to meet her lover with a hard kiss. They strained together, panting and hurried, and Ellie stopped worrying about anything but loving Dina.

“It should have been me.” Ellie spoke the words aloud that she’d mentally recited for months. Dina stirred, stroking her fingertips through Ellie’s hair again. She shook her head and pressed a kiss to her temple. Her other hand rested on Ellie’s bracelet over the swell of her own belly.

“You would have chosen the rope. You’d be dead, the cure would be dead, we’d all be dead. Abigail was right. I have my part to play in this, but it wasn’t switching with you.”

Ellie shook her head, but Dina firmed her touch to still her. “You said the Fireflies would have
killed you for the cure, right? Maybe we just weren’t ready for it until now. Ellie, that woman laid the path for Dr. Miller figuring out your immunity. What’s the chance of you and Dr. Miller being thrown together to figure this out?"

“You have no idea how impossible.” She thought of the familiar cramped handwriting in Walsh’s journals but wouldn’t let herself accept that possibility as reality. Could she really be…?

Dina snuggled closer. Ellie let her mind wander until she found herself speaking out loud. “I guess I always had this stupid conceited idea that I was immune because of me. That all the people that died for me, all the stuff I did, it all boiled down to being for a something. I thought I gave up on that when Joel took me from the Fireflies, but… It’s so fucking seductive. To be the chosen one, to be important.”

“Ellie, you were always important. You’re not you because you’re immune.”

“What makes me me then?”

Dina reached down to stroke Ellie’s side, making her flinch in ticklishness. Her voice was warm with affection. “Your awful jokes, your filthy mouth, your stubbornness.”

Ellie giggled as Dina’s fingers passed over her side again. She shifted, careful of Dina’s belly, and rested on her elbows to study her in the dim light of the lantern. Dina’s eyelashes fanned on her cheeks as she looked at Ellie’s lips. Ellie couldn’t resist that signal. When she pulled back from the kiss, Dina touched her face.

“You’re you because of your strength, your generosity, your tenderheartedness. I knew from the moment I saw you walk into Jackson that you’d be mine.”

Ellie didn’t believe it. “Love at first sight? Come on, Dina.”

“I did,” she said softly, stroking the back of Ellie’s neck with the blunt edge of her nails. “Mine. My friend, then my lover. I knew.”

_I see so much strength in you. I know you’ll turn out to be the woman you’re meant to be._

Faith. As much as she scoffed at the thought, Ellie felt the echo of it in herself. That she’d finally found her mother. She rubbed her thumbs together as she considered the possibility and then all the reasons why it couldn’t be true despite how much she wanted it to be.

“What is it?”

“Will you do something for me?”

“Anything,” Dina murmured.

Ellie got out of bed to grab her backpack. She pulled out her mother’s letter, still encased in its protective plastic, and a piece of paper from a medical log she’d snitched from Sarah’s desk. “This is the letter my mother wrote me right before she died.”

Dina’s gaze sharpened first on Ellie, then on the letter in her hands. Her gaze roved over the yellowed paper; she remained silent and read it slowly. Her breath shook in her chest as she finished reading the second side. Reverently, Dina slipped it back into the plastic. Her eyes shone with tears when she looked up. “Thank you. This is all you have of her, isn’t it?”

Of course Dina would thank her. Ellie shook her head, offering a tight smile. She’d cried the first
time she read the letter too—for knowing some part of her mother and learning she’d killed her all in one. “My knife too.”

“Really?”

Ellie nodded. “Marlene was the leader of the Fireflies. She gave me that letter and the knife in Boston. Look at this though.” Ellie set the filched research note next to the letter. “This is Walsh’s research notes.” She imagined Joel’s dry question and quietly admitted, “...that I stole from Sarah.”

Dina picked it up less carefully. Her fingertips brushed over similar words, and she cocked her head. Her brow furrowed, and she lifted Anna’s letter too. Then she leaned closer to the lamp with both.

When her silence stretched too long, Ellie prompted, “It’s the same, isn’t it?”

Dina sighed as she set both papers down. “It’s funny. The woman who founded the Seraphites was named Anna. But this… Ellie, it’s the same handwriting.”

“So those odds are really fucking impossible, huh?”

Dina shook her head before she leaned against Ellie’s shoulder. “That’s not impossible, Ellie. That’s providence.”

They slept eventually, tucked close together under a thin sheet. For the first time since she’d lost Joel, Ellie slept hard. Dina woke her up with a gentle caress when the darkness outside softened to gray. They shared a cold breakfast in bed, but the uncertainty of the coming day stripped their words.

When the light of dawn filtered through the curtains, Ellie dressed. She pulled on the fatigues, careful with the buttons and cuffs. The weight of the clothing was exacerbated by the thick-soled boots. Dina helped her smooth her uniform down. She stood beside Ellie, resting a hand on the nape of her neck as Ellie laced her boots.

“You like my holsters? Well, I like yours.” Dina leaned over to finger the holster attached to Ellie’s pants. She used the opportunity to kiss the back of Ellie’s neck. Then she rested there, her exhale raising the hair on Ellie’s neck. “Be careful.”

If only Dina knew. Then Ellie decided she’d had enough of protecting Dina by withholding information. She needed Dina to understand why she would ever make this choice, and that meant saying goodbye.

“Sarah wants to negotiate the cure for Seattle.”

Dina stilled. “But she said she can’t isolate it here.”

“She can’t.”

Dina shook her head sharply as she stepped back. She turned Ellie to face her. Her dark eyes shone with passion, and her mouth and brow pulled into an expression Ellie was just starting to recognize. “No. You are not going with them.”

“That may be the only option. I’m not sending you. They’ll kill you, Dina.”

“And what about me? Don’t I deserve a chance to be with you? This child, Ellie… This...” She
gestured between them. “Don’t tell me this was just a goodbye.”

Ellie pulled Dina against her and pressed her ear to Dina’s belly. The scent of her body grounded her. “I don’t know how it’ll play out. Maybe we won’t need it. Maybe we all die today because they’re fucking stupid and don’t care about the cure.”

Dina wasn’t distracted, and Ellie owed her more than that sorry statement. She leaned back, raised her face to offer an apologetic smile, and considered her words.

“Don’t lie to me.”

She looked up in question. Dina pointed at Ellie’s hands. Ellie stopped tugging at her fingers and wondered if she was really that easy to read. “So the way I see it is… This may be my chance to do the world good. Finally. To make a difference. I’m not much good at anything but killing, but if I can do this for you, the rest of the world, then I’ll be...I’ll finally be more than just me. I’ll be the woman my mother knew I could be.”

“You already are!”

Ellie shook her head. Dina couldn’t understand, but how could she?

“I have to do this, Dina.”

Dina blinked back tears, nodding quietly. She raised her head again with fire in her eyes and said, “Promise me you’ll come back to me.”

“No takebacks,” Ellie confirmed. She kissed Dina’s knuckles. “Don’t give yourself up, Dina. Forgive yourself, go back to Jackson, and kiss your mother for me. Okay?”

Dina nodded, but Ellie knew her well enough even now to see it was a lie. Just like her promise had been. Like Dina, Ellie had no choice but to accept it.

Ellie stroked the bracelet on her wrist and decided she’d keep it. Selfish, maybe, but Dina had given it to her for a reason. Handing it back now was just...too final. She opened her bag and removed her pistol, switchblade, and the letter from her mother. She tucked the knife and letter into her uniform and snapped the pistol into her holster. The rest she left here.

Dina grunted as she lifted the vest Sarah had foisted on Ellie. It was a temptation to leave it, but something in the steel in Sarah’s voice told Ellie that Sarah was half a second from leaving her behind, and any excuse to do it would be a good one. She grunted as Dina slung it over her chest, snapping the straps and bindings.

All of the many pockets should be filled, but there was nothing to go in them. Protection purposes only, and bad protection at that given how big the damn thing was. “I never understood these.”

“Why’s that?” Dina asked.

“I’m just as likely to die from a bullet to the head or leg as one to the chest.”

Dina wrapped her hand across Ellie’s forehead and sighed as she pressed a kiss to her hair. Ellie turned to meet Dina’s gaze. She cupped Dina’s face, and Dina wrapped a hand over her wrist. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”
After she took the moment to drink Dina in, Ellie nodded to herself. “Okay then. Time to go.” She paused and cocked her head. “I was hoping to tell you a religious joke.”


She could see Dina pondering the pun. When she smiled, that was enough. It was time to go.

Though Ellie felt like a kid playing dress up, Sarah looked the damn part. She wore boots, fatigues, and a tacvest over her uniform jacket. Unlike Ellie, her clothes fit her. Hell, she’d even pulled her hair back in a standard bun. Sarah’s long look made Ellie uncomfortable until she softened her expression with a grimacing smile. She looked nervous as hell.

Maybe Ellie could get her talking on the way out. Seemed to be the best way to calm the woman down: get her to talk her way out of her own fears. But Ellie was preoccupied too. She and Dina had said their goodbyes, but Ellie turned to get one last look in case…in case it was the last time.

Dina stood so alone and so strong. She raised one hand and had no smile to offer. Ellie would never forget her in this moment.

For a woman so put together, Sarah was damn awkward on a horse. Ellie hated the contrast of her dark uniform to her horse’s white flanks, but she understood why she got this horse as soon as they set off. Sarah’s buckskin was a follower, and it stuck to Ellie’s horse like glue. Better for Ellie to direct both flighty animals.

Ellie contemplated the hard line of Sarah’s face. She was paradoxically pretty, big and muscled but with a face that was strangely sweet at rest. Baby blue eyes and blonde hair would do that, Ellie supposed. But the draw of her brows—and they always seemed to be drawn—and the wary looks she sent around firmed her features. She was kind of…

A lot like Joel.

Sarah. Huh.

Surely it wasn’t possible. Ellie tried to remember the face of the little girl frozen in time. She had light hair, but Ellie couldn’t remember anything but her tiny stature. This Sarah had a drawl like Joel’s when she was mad. How old was she? Maybe early thirties? Hell, even if Ellie did know her age, she wasn’t entirely sure how long it had been since Outbreak.

She wanted to ask, but it wasn’t the time, not when they approached the military camp and were searched and stripped. Ellie’s knife was tucked safely in a deep pocket of the tacvest, but her pistol and its one round were whisked away. She tried to feign military stride and stance but was sure she blew it when they entered a tent and General Asshole took a few extra looks at her as he and Sarah sparred verbally.

Ellie really tried to pay attention, but almost as soon as she stood within that tent, she saw Joel. All the worry she’d buried about his fate roared back at her in a single shot of horror. He was swollen up, his hands ziptied tight to his chair well out of reach of the plate of food in his lap. Was this some kind of Tantalus torture?

Fuck.

How the hell had he gotten himself tangled up with these asswipes?

Ellie knew Sarah could negotiate Seattle for the cure, but Joel… Destined for execution by Rear
Admiral Pencildick’s declaration, whether they took over the QZ by force or came in peacefully. She had some time, but not much. Maybe a stealth mission back after nightfall...

Joel managed to hide his shock when he saw her, but the shuddering sigh he released betrayed his relief. Ellie only half-listened to Sarah’s conversation with General Dickhead in her overwhelming shock to see Joel, but her attention jerked back to Sarah when she heard, “Do you want to get married? You want me to have your children? I’ll give you that, but you have to give me three days. Trust me!”

What the fuck had this negotiation devolved to? Ellie had never heard Sarah sound so weak. She always seemed to know what to do, and for her to be begging at this man’s feet put the entire QZ in a precarious position.

The slavery/marriage proposal seemed to do the trick. The man softened. Thankfully he was interrupted before he could bind Sarah to an agreement she’d be too damn noble to back out of. As soon as Corporal Dickface left the tent, Ellie lurched down to study Joel’s restraints. She needed to get him out of here, but she also needed to apologize, to ask what the hell happened to him, and find out how bad he was hurt. In her rush of relief, all she could choke out was, “Joel.”

He smiled a swollen smile at her, his gaze soft. In just the weeks they’d been apart, his hair and beard had gotten even grayer and shaggy as hell. Even with Joel tied down and beaten to hell, so fucking old looking, she felt the overwhelming relief of his support. He would figure a way out of this one way or another.

“Baby girl... No more rapids for you.”

Dick. “I got pushed, Joel.”

“I saw. Nearly had a heart attack.” His voice took that particular catch when she was in danger. He sighed and leaned close to rest his forehead against hers. “We got ourselves in a real pickle here, Ellie, but I’m mighty glad to see you.”

“We need to get you out of here.”

“No. Not yet. No way out of this place without getting shot.”

Ellie turned to Sarah, sure Sarah would have a plan, but the stricken expression on Sarah’s face startled her. Ellie had seen that expression of fear a few times...on Joel’s face. Holy shit. Certainty obliterated her doubt; she knew exactly who Sarah was. How the hell had she not seen it before?

The crashing epiphany was heralded by the abrupt splash of blinding sunlight and the entry of a half a dozen armed soldiers into the tent. For a crazy moment, Ellie thought they must have realized Sarah’s relationship to Joel just like she had, but then she heard Sarah’s gritted, “You son of a bitch.” Following Sarah’s line of sight, Ellie spotted Matias standing next to Captain Asswipe.

They really deserved each other.

Ellie’s only weapon was her switchblade, Joel was tied up, and Sarah followed the barked instructions to the letter instead of fighting back. Then again, they were surrounded by...eight? Nine soldiers with military rifles. There had to be some way out of this, but Ellie had a hard time seeing it as she settled on her knees and watched Admiral Dickweed—his nametag read HARE—look at Sarah as if she’d betrayed him.

“So, aiding terrorists, are we, Sarah? I’m surprised. I’m...disappointed. I’d hoped…”
Hoped to put his cock in Sarah apparently, but Sarah’s pussy wasn’t good enough if she wasn’t the obedient little wifey he wanted. At Sarah’s quelling look, Ellie bit back her retort. She had her knife. She had her immunity. Sarah just needed to get to the point. Instead, she said, “Matias has no idea what he’s talking about. Whatever he told you—”

“I let my affection for you get in the way of protocol. Let’s start over. Scan them.”

Well shit, Ellie had forgotten about that, but maybe she could use that moment of hesitation to her advantage. She was distracted when Sarah got hit with a rifle butt. Ellie got taken down too; two soldiers knocked her prostrate. Several people started shouting, but the cold press of the scanner and a soldier proclaiming her red drowned everything else out.

Ellie lurched up as she heard, “Well, that makes this easy.”

Captain Hare didn’t even hesitate to cock his pistol. His trigger squeeze was hard, blanching his knuckle, and there was a crack of lightning that heralded a blinding flush of heat across her head. She flinched instinctively, straight into—

 Darkness was complete and absolute, and she existed within the mass of it, only defined by the absence of anything. There was no form, not even to her: her body or her mind. She was formless, thoughtless, and forever and never all in one.

Then there was change. The faintest trickle of sound tainted the darkness. Dull and thick, the noise was warped like an old wind-up stereo on its last leg, running backward the moment before it slingshotted and focused to something familiar.

The sounds snapped through the darkness like the crack of metal underwater, echoing and re-echoing the same synthesizer notes over and over again. Then the singing started in a familiar whine.

_I hear the drums echoing tonight..._

Then the first sense of self came with a rush of annoyance. If god existed, he hated her because being all-knowing, he’d be aware of how much she hated this fucking song. She hated it so much, hated how catchy it was and how it got stuck in her head all the time. Dina liked to sing it, and even Joel would sometimes get a wild hair and hum it just enough to make her go nuts because just one bar of the damn thing would get it stuck in a loop for hours.

The stupid synthesizer played out in her head in time with the dull pulses of pain that colored her world blue.

This was hell. She was in hell.

_Quiet conversations..._

_It’s gonna take a lot to take me away from you..._

She groaned, and that human external noise snapped her back to reality all at once. The darkness clung to her like sludge, and she drew out of it with a pop of suction. She rediscovered her body one part at a time, starting with her moving fingertips. Her body seemed to unfreeze all at once. She sneezed and coughed abruptly at the taste and smell of dirt, the darkness pulsing closer and then receding again. She moved a foot, then a leg, then an arm out of the warm earth that had settled around her.
Hurry, boy, she’s waiting there for you…

“Fuuu…”

Ellie’s voice trailed off with the heavy pulse that seemed to split her head apart. She gagged on the dirt and blood in her mouth and crawled in a futile attempt to get away from the pain and that fucking piece of shit song.

There’s nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do…

“Shhh…”

The world spun on its axis as she crawled to a tree trunk and rested her back on it. Her entire world was her pain, that dirt, and this tree. She hesitantly touched where the pain was centered, gasping when scorching violet heat tore through her scalp. Gentle probing made her gag, but she didn’t feel bone shift beneath swollen flesh. Her entire head was covered in blood, and then she realized the other side of her face was swollen and painful too.

What the fuck…

There were other trees, there was sunlight, and beyond the lip of what surely had been her grave, there was the cracked outline of concrete. As her world expanded, the hulking husks of multiple concrete bridges and roads obliterated much of her view of the skyline, but in the far distance, she saw the swell of an old dome.

Gonna take some time to do the things we never have…

She tried to remember what had happened, how the hell she’d gotten here in a shallow trench of freshly turned earth. No one in Jackson would try to kill her. But this couldn’t be Jackson. She knew that but didn’t know why. It was a city, but she wasn’t in the QZ, was she? Where was Joel?

Her hand found her bracelet and squeezed; relief focused her. She fumbled for her knife but gave up after her hand encountered dozens of pockets. Her bag was gone. “Fuck,” she managed to slur. Joel had given that bag to her, and she’d lost it.

Wherever the fuck she was wasn’t safe; fear churned on the back of her neck, dragging her heels under her in an unsuccessful attempt to stand under the heavy weight of her torso. She had to get out of this place, wherever the fuck it was.

Ellie spat dirt from her mouth and hesitantly tested her balance as she used the trunk to get to her feet. Her body ached, bruised and sore, but only her head screamed at her. The pulsing pain of it made her wobble against the tree trunk—that or the world wobbled around her—but she managed to straighten beneath the weight of the fire in her scalp.

She looked around, trying to place herself more specifically than somewhere-not-safe. Then the fear dug its claws into her neck and made her move. The sound of the camp nearby didn’t overwhelm the fucking song stuck in her head, but it placed her. The sun was overhead, its painful light mostly muted by gray clouds. Midday then. She started walking up the road one shuffling step at a time.

When Ellie reached a faded green sign overhead, she studied it and focused with effort, but she couldn’t read it.

...frightened of this thing that I’ve become!
“Please, fucking shut up,” she groaned.

She knew this overpass, the significance of its location, but the information was just out of reach, hidden behind a synthesizer and cloaked in the darkness of her immediate memories. She felt like an unhappy, tortured drunk. It was physically painful to drag out the memory of riding this way with... She couldn’t. She needed to get away from some great danger here.

At first she thought the horses were a hallucination. Two horses were tethered within walking distance just up a concrete rise. They were still saddled, had bits in, and had no source of grass. That was wrong, and she didn’t need her head to know that. Her irritation about that overwhelmed her anger at even being hurt. Why did everyone forget to care about their animals?

*Hurry, boy, she’s waiting there for you!*

Focus. Horses. The horses were here.

Human voices were almost alien. Ellie ducked behind cover and pressed herself close to the concrete barrier that shielded her from them. She scented cigarette smoke; it smelled green, acrid and dry on her sore throat.

“I almost feel bad for them.”

“Why the fuck would you? They were gutting people left and right.”

“Hare got two groups of kids. Hardly any adults. Hell, he’ll hang the baby too knowing him. The leader is just a kid herself. Apparently she cried when she realized he had the kids. She said she’s pregnant too.”

“How do you know all this shit? Nobody tells me nothing!”

“Hernandez needed his balls scratched. So I was around. What I can’t believe is all the men would just leave their kids and women to get captured while they escaped.”

“You sure they did?”

“No way a bunch of girls destroyed a QZ. Had to be men, and if my girl was in danger, you’d be sure as fuck I wouldn’t leave her to an enemy while I ran.”

“She’s really pregnant? The leader, I mean. Hare gonna kill her?”

“Probably. I mean Hare’s probably gonna hang her. Get this though, her second is another little girl. She has one arm.”

Laughter rose among the two men. “Jesus Lord, she’s probably some inbred albino kid with a short arm and three fingers.” His whined out the tune from Dixie. “Hell, my old buddy from Atlanta said he saw a family that was all—”

The radio crackled, and they both quieted, listening to the garbled message. Then one clicked his speaker and replied an affirmative into it. Ellie tracked their steps by sound until they were out of listening distance. She turned, dizzy from the movement, to look over the divide. The men were gone, but the horses weren’t.

Ellie went to them because there wasn’t another option. Her fear meant she couldn’t stay, but she wasn’t getting anywhere fast on her feet. The horses needed to move too because they’d starve like that. She’d take care of them because clearly no one else was going to do it.
She tried to crouch but had to stand again because the angle her head took shot fire across her head. By the time she got to the horses, she had to rest on the flank of one, gathering comfort from its warmth and steadiness. The horse turned and nuzzled her neck, and Ellie stared at the smear of red that streaked across its white face. She reached out and shifted again because she missed. Then the reins were in hand, and all she had to do was get in the saddle.

If Joel could climb on a horse with a wound through his belly, she could do it with a concussion.

Joel... Where the fuck was he?

Ellie thought she’d kicked herself to outer space as she swung her leg up, but then she crashed back into the saddle and blinked herself back into focus. She grabbed at the horse’s mane to steady herself, but she didn’t have time to wait for the world to turn the right way again. A shout of alarm rose from the camp behind her, and she squeezed the horse’s flanks, trusting him to get her out of danger quickly.

She realized at the next mile marker sign that she’d left the other horse. She couldn’t go back now; she knew it in her bones. The horse she rode jogged her memory, even if the steady cadence of the horse’s hooves striking cement didn’t help her focus. A goddamn white horse from...

Thoughts flowed easier, as if a stopper had been popped.

Seattle.

Sarah.

_I seek to cure what’s deep inside..._

That piece of shit song wasn’t helping.

Sarah had been with her. Ellie couldn’t remember if the two kids that stuck to Sarah like glue—Levi? No that was Dina’s dad. She couldn’t remember if they were here. Yara, Yara had one arm, and fuck, those soldiers had said something about her that Ellie couldn’t place. Sarah would be with her. They were outside the QZ, but she didn’t...

The memory of that uniformed officer didn’t so much as come back as it was just there. She closed her eyes, and the crystallized image of looking down the barrel of that man’s gun, his finger wrapped hard around the trigger, was in such sharp relief she could picture his gray eyes, his blond hair, his name tag. His name was Hare. Had he shot her?

Her choked laughter stuck in her throat and made her entire head pulse. How bad of a shot did that make him to miss from five feet away?

The reason why he’d shoot her trembled just out of reach.

Where was Sarah? Ellie hoped to god she hadn’t been killed too.

Where the fuck was Joel?

The answer was foggy and she wondered if she’d invented it, but he’d been busted up and cuffed to a chair.

In this time, Ellie let the horse direct itself, and it chose to go north. Either her surroundings became more familiar or her brain was playing tricks on her. She passed a couple of infected trying
to climb a barricade, and the horse nearly took her head off as it passed below a broken edge of pipe under an old garage to skirt them.

At least her head would stop hurting if she lost it.

The soft whistle that cut through the air was unmistakable. It raised her hackles and flushed her gut with ice in instinctual fear. But the enemy that stepped out of cover waved to her, and her fear faded. His name came unbidden: Lev. Lev, not Levi. There were others she didn’t recognize, bigger scarred men and women that moved enough to let her focus on them. If Lev was here, then Sarah had to be too.

She needed Sarah.

The other Seraphites…

Allies. Dina made them allies. Christ, Dina! Her brains couldn’t have been scrambled enough to invent the memory of Dina’s scarred face. She knew with a kick in the gut that Dina was in danger.

Ellie let a Seraphite take her horse’s reins. He stared up at her in shock.

“That bad, huh?” she asked. Her voice sounded strange, echoing in her head as if her ears were plugged. The Seraphite didn’t laugh at her joke. Her words slurred when she spoke. “What the fuck is going on? Where are they?” The blackness had been infinite. Ellie felt like she’d aged five years since before the long dark.

Lev’s voice shook with barely concealed panic. “The wolves, the military, came through with vehicles and guns. Leah and Yara surrendered, but they have the children! They have everyone. They have Sarah.”

Leah? Dina. Dina, Dina, Dina. Dina and Sarah were prisoners.


“Our base!”

“Which way?”

Lev’s eyes widened as if he was shocked by her. He pointed out of the garage and down the overgrown street. “It’s barricaded. One sniper on the north side of the road on three floor buildings halfway down the block. There are two guards at the barrier. Our attack party is closing in.”

Ellie blinked to focus, turning her gaze down the street, but she couldn’t see them moving. Good enough if there was a sniper. Ellie yanked her horse from Lev. “I need weapons.”

Lev shifted his bow aside to draw a machete. He passed it to Ellie with a long look. Then another man held up a handgun. Ellie studied the revolver, squinting to focus. Not a cartridge model, not with the weird nipples on the back of the cylinder. She shoved the gun in her holster and kept the blade out. Through the pulsing pain and confusion came a strong emotion: rage.

*Hurry, boy, she’s waiting there for you!*

Fuck that song. Ellie rasped, “I’m going to fucking kill them.” She cast her gaze around, seeing more Seraphites shift out of position within the garage to give her their attention. “Are you with me?”
“Where you go, we follow,” a big man said behind Lev.

“Then fucking follow. Cover me!”

With that, Ellie tightened the grip of her calves into the horse’s flanks hard, adding a cruel kick at the end in her impatience, and the horse skittered sideways in annoyance before it obeyed. She crouched low on the horse as it stretched in a full gallop, taking them right down the middle of the street. The horse outran even the bullets that cracked by them, its momentum too great for it to realize the danger it outran.

Ahead, the wide barracks’ entrance approached at alarming speed. A makeshift barrier had been erected across the empty gates, and two uniformed guards watched Ellie’s approach for precious seconds as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Just as they reached for their weapons, they collapsed soundlessly to arrows.

Then the whistles picked up on all sides, and Ellie imagined brown-coated Seraphites swarming up behind her, flanking her and sweeping around her like a river as she rode at their front, her entire self burning with wrath.

The horse thundered toward the compound without hesitation, his breath steady huffs from his nostrils. Ellie was already up in the saddle and released contact with the bit as the barrier came at them. The horse did what he was supposed to do: he jumped over the four-foot barricade and landed at a gallop on the other side.

Ellie took the horse right through the line of men in uniform that rushed her in alarm. The horse tramped those that didn’t scatter. She brought a wave of chaos with her heralded by screams, shouts, whistles, arrows, and the sharp edge of her sword.

In that moment of chaos, Ellie found Hare’s blond head and jerked the horse around to charge him.

Hare dodged her machete with a shout of alarm, and she shot past him. It took a few precious seconds to get the horse around again. This horse wasn’t her mare back in Jackson, not by a long shot. If she were riding Rainbow, Hare would be dead. Maybe the horse was thinking the same thing because he bucked twice before she regained control.

In the time it took to bring the horse around again, Hare had his pistol out and cocked. He squared up as Ellie put her heels in the horse’s flanks again; Hare stood his ground and fired a quick succession of controlled shots. Ellie ducked away, but the horse went down. Her forward momentum sent her tumbling over the horse’s head. Ellie hit the ground hard enough to rattle her teeth and brain, but she shook her consciousness back into her skull with a rush of hot blood. She rolled over and scrambled to the horse, pressing a hand to his cheek, taking in his stillness of death.

Hare had killed her horse too, that goddamn piece of shit.

Ellie jerked her head around so hard her world spun, but Hare centered her vision. She snarled as she got to one knee, her machete firm in her hand. Then movement over her shoulder dropped her head, and the whistle of a weapon whipped overhead. She spun on one knee to put her blade into the gut of her attacker. He gaped and then gagged as an arrow erupted through his neck.

She ducked instinctively as a soldier across the yard raised his gun, but someone seized him around the neck and threw him to the ground. The gray of her rescuer’s beard was familiar, and Ellie knew she was okay. Joel was here, and he’d cover her ass. Ellie lurched to her feet, searching again for her target, and there he was, ducking behind cover.
Ellie snarled as she sprinted at Hare. Hare shouted, lifting himself over the cover with his pistol up, and the barrel wavered. Ellie gathered speed, approached within several paces, and raised her machete over her head in preparation of dropping through the top of Hare’s skull.

The burning punches of his bullets in her chest knocked the wind from her and dropped her to her knees. A scream echoed, but Ellie didn’t know who cried. All around them was the chaos of shouts, gunfire, and whistles, but Ellie heard her own gagging gasp as air came once again. Ellie raised her gaze again, the barrel of Hare’s weapon jerked from her face to above her head as he fired again.

Ellie flinched as a body collapsed on the back of her legs, taking her to the ground again. She rolled to wiggle out from the dead weight and kicked the FEDRA soldier off of her ankles. Her machete was still in the dirt, and she snatched it up as she got her knee under her again.

Hare gaped at her as Ellie slowly got to her feet.

“How are you alive?”

“Fuck you,” she rasped.

Hare ducked an arrow with a gasp. He gazed around him at the chaos before turning his attention back to Ellie. Ellie tightened her grip on her machete and imagined putting it through his neck to separate tendons, ligaments, vessels, and bone.

That was fear on his face as she took a staggering step toward him. He abruptly spun behind cover and retreated at a crouch. He climbed over the barricade to escape the military compound with as much grace as Joel, disappearing over the other side.

The fucker wasn’t escaping. He had to die for what he’d done, and goddamn would Ellie enjoy killing him.

A Seraphite clambered up onto the barricade with a military rifle in hand, ducked Hare’s flying pistol, and aimed. Ellie vaulted in front of him, snarling, “He’s mine!”

Hare cut a path back south through the street, but he wasn’t a fast runner. Ellie followed him at a stumbling run, the fastest her body would give her. She snatched up a bottle that she threw off her left foot. It shattered on the wall next to Hare, making him yelp and stagger. It slowed him down but didn’t stop him.

He skidded half a block ahead, but an arrow sent him ducking for cover down an alley. Ellie stumbled against the corner of the building, striking her shoulder as she made the sharp turn. She watched him disappear over another jury-rigged barricade. When she reached the top of the barricade, there was no movement beyond it, but a door stood ajar down the alley.

She climbed down quietly, crouching as she approached the door. Ellie rounded the back corner of the building and leapt up into a high window. She landed behind a set of sinks and muted her cry of pain as her head pulsed in agony. The pain eased in the darkness and stillness, and when she could focus again, Ellie listened with her breath held.

Past the song still blaring in her head, she heard shuffling in the darkness. She tried to track the movement. When Hare spoke from a room away, his voice startled her.

“Eleanor. Please, I don’t want to hurt you.”

What the fuck was he drinking? Ellie’s hand closed down on an old glass jar beside her. She settled it into her palm and pressed her left hand to the metal frame of the sink that shielded her from Hare.
Beyond him, Ellie imagined she heard movement.

She heard him move away and followed quietly down a long hallway to a wide doorframe that opened into an even bigger room. In the dim light, Ellie could make out cracked wooden booths all in neat rows. Something inside her tightened up in terror. Even though the machete was in her hand this time, she feared it.

Then she heard the rustle of infected beyond the swinging double doors at the end of the hall.

Hare spoke again, startling Ellie by how close he was. He’d moved more quietly than she expected. “Eleanor, please, I’m trying to—”

Ellie tossed the glass in her hand; it shattered on the wall just over Hare’s head. She backpedaled as something shrieked within the dining hall. She heard Hare gasp in horror even over her own heavy breath. She ducked behind a column on one wall as Hare and the infected staggered into the hallway. A rolling metal table went spinning and crashed into a wall. Ellie dodged back as Hare’s flashlight beam suddenly spun around the hallway.

Something gurgled. Then Hare whispered, “Shit.”

Deeper in the building came the sound of more infected. Hare retreated back to the kitchen to escape; better human enemies than infected apparently. A door within the kitchen slammed shut with a bang. His fear set into Ellie when she heard the infected that followed his path click. It kept up its croaking chatters as it paced around the kitchen in search of prey.

She’d brought it on herself. Ellie crept carefully out of the clicker’s range and listened for more infected. She heard stirring above, and something was striking a wall or doorway deeper in the building. She’d have to be quick however it went down. She didn’t trust the ancient gun in her holster. Instead, Ellie felt for something to throw and came up fucking empty.

The clicker stumbled through the kitchen, the quickest path to safety. Ellie tightened her grip on her machete and waited for it to pass by. She slipped behind it, rose to her full height, and put the machete straight down into the top of the clicker’s head. She yanked her blade out of its soft flesh. Nothing quite matched the porous grind of a clicker’s skull, especially not when it was put to the soundtrack of a fucking flute synthesizer.

*I know I must do what’s right...*

The fear of more infected—shit, surely they could hear the song blaring out of her skull—made her careless about noise. She boosted herself onto the sink and rolled out of the high window. She was less than graceful falling out of it—her hands weak and her balance off—and the blow with the ground made black rise up in her vision. The world tilted on its axis again. Her pain tasted sour and green. Ellie grunted and found her feet after a few moments of blackness. The machete in her hand was her anchor to this world, and she was going to find a home for it in Hare’s skull soon.

She rounded the corner. Ahead, Hare staggered away in a gimpy limp, but she couldn’t overtake him. Either he’d been bitten in the leg or had twisted his ankle. He turned back to give Ellie a wide-eyed look of fear and continued about as fast as she could chase him. Her breath rattled in her throat as she followed him back over the barrier to the secured QZ road.

Hare shouted in pain as he landed. Ellie had to muffle her own grunt, and she fell before she found her feet again. As Hare stumbled out into the main road, his head jerked back and forth. He flinched and turned back toward the compound. Ellie saw why when she followed him; several armed Seraphites blocked his path. Hare was being herded like cattle back to the compound.
He stopped dead at the end of the roadway. Because, fuck, there was Joel. Joel looked down his nose at the man, his hand firm on the revolver settled into his palm, but he didn’t kill Hare. Joel turned his gaze toward the military compound. Hare retreated two steps, turned, saw Ellie, and scrambled through the torn down barrier into the compound.

Joel’s sharp gaze fell on Ellie, but she stumbled by him to follow Hare. Joel’s presence was a firm comfort at her back.

Where the fuck Hare was going, Ellie was beyond guessing. He didn’t stop until Sarah stepped into his path grimly. Then he wheeled around to watch Joel walk several paces to Ellie’s left before staggering back a half-step when he focused on Ellie. “God…”

He raised his hands in supplication before slowly closing them in front of him like he was praying to Ellie. “Eleanor, please don’t do this.”

Ellie raised her blade and took an unsteady step forward. Then a familiar voice called, “Ellie!”

She paused because there was no other option. Her gaze cut past Hare; Dina hastened forward. She moved like she wasn’t hurt. She was beautiful and welcome and safe. The relief that flooded Ellie made her sway.

“Don’t kill him. Please.”

The words didn’t make sense, not at first. Ellie realized that damn song was still in a heavy loop in her head.

_God bless the rains down in Africa…_

She shook her head to dislodge that song. “Dina?”

Dina walked right by Hare, who stared at her with his mouth open. Ellie immediately put her own body between Hare and Dina, but Dina moved with her without resistance. Her hands were busy probing at Ellie’s chest, feeling over the heavy tactical vest that Ellie realized was suffocating her. Dina opened it, looking for something, and Ellie hissed as she became aware of deep pain where Dina touched her. Then she shook the heavy, hot thing off of her with a pound of dirt, and it hit the ground with a thump.

“Are you alright?” Ellie asked, catching Dina’s hand. She had trouble focusing on her face, but she didn’t see blood or bruises on her neck.

“I should ask you that.” Dina disentangled her fingers from Ellie’s to reach down and squeeze Ellie’s hand where it gripped the machete. “Let it go.”

“He was…”

Dina was earnest and quiet, drawing close, her dark eyes managing to bring everything into focus. “Ellie, you just earned the worship of every Seraphite. If you kill Hare, they’ll slaughter all of the men and women we captured, including the QZ citizens that let them in. Children will die if that happens—theirs and ours. We have to be better than that. If you show him mercy, this can end in peace. Look.”

Ellie looked around, focusing with effort on a half a dozen soldiers and just as many QZ citizens bound at the edges of the courtyard. More lay dead, but there were survivors. Seraphites—men and women—stood over them with liberated semi-automatic rifles in hand. Under the eaves, children peeked from under the arms of Seraphite women and elders, some of whom had blood on their
hands. Ellie’s gaze tracked back to Hare. The fact he was looking back at her with such a hopeful expression made her tighten her grip on her blade.

Dina cupped her cheek and pulled her gaze back. “Please, help me stop the violence. I can’t stand any more blood.”

Ellie hesitated, turning her gaze from Hare’s smarmy face to his dirty boots and the blood on his pant leg. She could kill him. She wouldn’t regret it, and it wouldn’t be wrong. But for the first time, she recognized her own exhaustion. Joel had been right: there was comfort in the power of killing, but she didn’t like it. Ellie opened her hand, and Dina took the machete from her. It wasn’t hard.

Hare shifted, drawing both their attention. “Eleanor. Please, I need…”

How did a man who’d just tried to kill her twice sound so beseeching? Hare held out his hand, taking the effort to make eye contact with Ellie, something he hadn’t afforded her before he shot her. He held out his hands to the enemies that surrounded him. “I’m taking out a knife. I won’t use it. Please don’t shoot me.”

Hare slowly reached into his vest, and Ellie watched more out of curiosity than anything. When he withdrew the object he had tucked into his pocket, her anger raged back.

“That’s mine, you fucker.”

“This knife… I gave it to your mother, Eleanor. It was an anniversary gift.”

She couldn’t process his words or his implication. She didn’t care. There was no point to this, not even when he held out her letter. If Dina hadn’t taken her machete, she would have killed him for that alone. Hare shook the letter, tears shining bright in his eyes. What a pissant.

“This was my wife’s handwriting. My wife wrote this, Eleanor.” Hare’s mouth shifted with a tight grimace. “We were going to name you Ethan if you were a boy, after my father. We agreed that she should name a girl after her mother, Eleanor. Eleanor, I’m your—”

She knew what he was going to say, and she couldn’t believe it.

“—father.”

Rage rose up to choke her, and her voice felt like gravel as she faced him. “I have a father, you piece of shit!”

Through the sheen of her tears, she saw Hare’s face collapse into a tight smile. He looked at the knife in his hand and said, “You really are her daughter.” Then his expression hardened even as his voice wobbled. He turned back to address Sarah. “Kill me if you want, but you won’t survive our reinforcements.”

“What reinforcements, Ben?” Sarah asked, her voice a grinding, dark version of what Ellie knew. Her brows were drawn, and her mouth was a hard line.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Sarah nodded, reached into her tacvest, and lifted a radio receiver to her mouth. “Hernandez?” She turned the speaker out and fiddled with the unit to raise the volume. It crackled as a male voice came through the other side. “—er. What can I do you for?”
“Our bargain still stand? The cure for walking away?”

“It stands, Miller.”

“I want to add another condition. I keep Hare, and I keep your prisoner. In return, I’ll release the soldiers we’ve taken alive.”

“Fuck, Miller, now you’re just being generous. Accepted. We’ll keep our asses parked out here for now. Stay in touch; we need to iron out a few details.”

“Got it. Thanks, Hernandez.” Sarah muted the radio, and the tiny curve of her smile was triumphant and dangerous. “Hear that, Ben? Go fuck yourself.”

“I want the cure,” he said in a rush. “I’ll be your test subject—”

Sarah’s jaw clenched. “Take him away.”

“You owe me!”

Sarah turned on him with barely controlled fury. “I owe you? Fuck you. I asked you for three things in our relationship: to get rid of control groups, to establish a quarantine, and for three days. You remember your answers? Every study needs a control. And the quarantine plans I spent years researching, developing, the funds I begged and pleaded and scraped together, the facility and personnel that pledged to help me? And what did you do? Answer me!”

“I denied your request,” he said firmly.

“You didn’t just deny it. You threw it in the trash without even reading it.”

“We couldn’t. Budrys wouldn’t approve it.”

“Because you didn’t ask! And my last request? You tortured me, Ben. So go to hell.”

“Sarah—”

When Sarah turned away from him definitively, Hare turned back to Ellie. “Eleanor, please—”

A Seraphite struck him on the back of the head hard enough to stun him. “You aren’t worthy!”

Hare stopped protesting and allowed them to tie his hands behind him. Ellie watched him take a seat next to a man Ellie only recognized by his name tag. Matias’s face was a swollen mess of bruises. Where the fuck were they going to put all these dickheads? There was only so much douchebaggery that could go into one space without it imploding into a douchecanoe gravity pit.

Dina cupped Ellie’s cheek to draw her face back. She searched Ellie’s eyes.

The wild dogs cry out a night…

“If you ever sing Africa to me again, I’m breaking up with you.”

“What?” Dina’s smile was tainted by worry. A big shadow came over Ellie’s shoulder, and a heavy hand landed on her shoulder. Ellie knew without looking that it was Joel. She shifted into his grip, and he pulled her close in a gentle hug. His smile was tight and gentle and full of emotion she felt twisted tight up in her chest.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, knowing she needed to say it but not knowing why.
“I told you there ain’t nothing to be sorry for. Come here. Come on. Sit down.”

She accepted the comfort he’d always offered. There was stability in Joel, even if not in the world he offered her. Then she sat when he pushed her down onto her ass on an uncomfortable slab of concrete. She sighed, turning to look at Sarah, who held out Ellie’s knife and letter.

“We need to get to the clinic so I can look at you, kiddo.”

“You just wanna poke me full of more holes, Doc.”

“Based on your anisocoria and nystagmus, you have a concussion.” Sarah crouched down to delicately cup Ellie’s jaw, her gaze sharp as it roved over Ellie’s head. Then she shifted her fingers, and Ellie knew it was going to hurt when she pressed—

“Son of a bitch!”

Sarah’s shoulders shifted, her brows going up as she considered Ellie’s pain dispassionately. Her jaw worked, and she dropped her heavy grip to Ellie’s shoulders. “I thought you died. The angle I saw, he put a bullet in the center of your forehead.”

“Isn’t it?” Ellie asked dryly.

“It looks like it’s right across the scalp, but…”

The statement trailed off, probably because Sarah was afraid of jinxing her diagnosis. Sarah’s smile was a wince, and Ellie abruptly saw how worried she really was. Ellie had to rescue Sarah from her own doubt and quickly said, “You’re finally going to do it.”

“What?” Sarah asked, her pale eyes brilliant with her sudden unwavering eye contact.

“You’re going to shoot me off into outer space with that scanner.”

She laughed. “Exactly. You found me out, Ellie. Come on. Can you walk?”

“Fuck you. What do you think I’ve been doing? I need to be here—”

“No,” Dina said sharply. All three of them hovered over her like she was a baby. “Go. I have to organize my people. Listen to Dr. Miller.”

Joel watched Dina walk away in her new strong stride. “I want to see where this clinic of yours is, but I should stay here to help get these fools squared away. I’ll watch over Dina. Will that do, Ellie?”

“I can show you past the barricade. It’s only half a block down,” Sarah replied.

“Or don’t wait for my response, assholes,” Ellie muttered.

Joel and Sarah walked abreast toward the compound entrance. Ellie stared at the odd parallel line of strength of their shoulders. They turned back to her, serious question on both of their faces. So damn alike, even separated by the difference in their facial structures. The truth snapped in place just like that.

“Holy shit. You’re his Sarah.”

Joel’s brow gathered, but Sarah turned her face away from Joel before hesitantly facing him. Her smile was wry. “Hey, Daddy.”
Joel reached out to Sarah, rested his hand on her shoulder, and nodded. He looked her up and down and offered a tight smile. “I knew.”

Sarah looked at his grip on her shoulder, and Ellie knew her well enough now to see she was half a second from bolting. Then she took a long breath and stepped into Joel’s arms, and Ellie wanted to cry for seeing them embrace. Sarah’s fingers tightened on Joel’s shirt, and then she stepped away, turning to fix Ellie with a commanding stare.

“Okay. Time to go, kiddo.”

Within the hour, Ellie was cleaned up, scanned every whichaway, stabbed more than once, stitched up, and nursing more than a few aches and pains. The injection Sarah gave her after the CT scan softened the world and made her a very happy drunk. She looked in the mirror after Sarah was done with her, amused to see her wound framed by several inches of missing hair. Hare’s bullet had separated skin in a trench as it passed across the left side of her head. It was a beautiful mirror to the swelling discolored lump on right side of her head.

“Not to seem...ungrateful…”

“What?”

Ellie giggled. “I mean, it’ll be easy to, uh, part my hair…”

Sarah waited impatiently for her to finish. Ellie sighed sleepily. “But did you have to shave so much?”

“You accused me of groping you, bitched and moved during the CT scan, refused a bandage, and are still critical on meds. You are hands down the worst patient I’ve ever had.” Sarah tossed her needle drivers onto her tray with a clatter and snapped her gloves off with a pop, stalking away in clear annoyance to take care of another patient across the room.

As soon as Ellie was relieved of Sarah’s overbearing attentions, she dozed only to be woken up by Joel a few minutes later. Sarah was even more annoyed when she informed Joel under no uncertain terms that keeping Ellie awake for her safety was an old wives’ tale. Ellie was too tired to remark on him being schooled by his own daughter.

God, what was she going to do about that? After all this time, it wasn’t fucking fair for Joel to find Sarah only for her to be called away again…

“She’s okay?” Ellie dimly heard Dina ask sometime later.

“Luckiest person I’ve ever met. Everything that could go wrong hasn’t—yet at least.”

“What does that mean?”

“Penetration, for one.”

Ellie snorted and opened her eyes. Sarah leaned over her bed and took one of those long doctor-looks across her face. She asked, “Are you a ten year old boy?”

“Sometimes I think so,” Dina responded from Ellie’s right.

“I’m high on pain meds here, assholes. Fucking Christ, the song is still stuck in my head! Ever heard of that sequela, Doctor Doom?”
I’m more worried about skull fracture or intracranial hematoma causing increased ICP. You were probably more in danger from hypovolemic shock though. I assume you do have a cerebral contusion or two, either from the bullet or hitting your head on the ground, but I can’t interpret your CT scan given your abnormal fungal growth. If you don’t have further neurologic sequelae, then I can’t help but think it’s from your infection. That’s not even going into your tacvest catching two bullets.”

“What the hell did that mean?” Joel asked.

“Her fungal infection was protective in the face of brain trauma,” Sarah said with a long sigh.

“She’s just paying me back for all the times I scared her,” Joel muttered. He squeezed Ellie’s ankle over the sheets. It was so fucking weird to see Sarah standing over his shoulder, like they couldn’t occupy the same space without physics imploding. “Christ, kiddo.”

“My name’s Ellie, but apparently I am Jesus reincarnated or something,” Ellie muttered. She could focus with effort. She hadn’t been asleep long by the afternoon sunlight shining through the high clinic windows, but her head felt a little better, at least on a pillow.

“Ellie…” Dina took her hand. “Scripture describes the Lamb of God riding out of heaven on a white horse, crowned in the blood of his enemies with his sword raised high to reap sin from the earth.”

“I got shot in the head. It was my own blood. And it was a machete.”

“You’re immune, and you can spread your immunity. You rode into an impossible situation to save all of us.”

“The horse wasn’t white; it was cremello.”

Dina sighed heavily, rested her head on her hand next to Ellie’s hip, and smiled with such affection that Ellie stilled. “You’re such a dick.”

“I love you.” The words were there without thought or plan. Dina tightened her grip on Ellie’s hand and turned her face to kiss her palm. Tears slipped from the corner of her eyes, and she said, “I want to go home with you, Ellie.”

Ellie squeezed her hand before she tugged gently. Just like that, Dina climbed up to sit on the bed by her hip.

“Okay then. Let’s go home.”

Dina kissed her, and Ellie sighed at the rightness of it. They studied each other. Dina brushed some of Ellie’s hair behind her ear, and with clumsy fingers, Ellie traced one of the scars on Dina’s cheeks. Then she faded again.

Sometime later, Ellie awoke. Joel sat beside her bed, his brow gathered as he read some medical notebook. Ellie could focus just enough to see that it was penned in Sarah’s neat handwriting. Letters were starting to make sense again. The sunlight had turned orange in the high window of the clinic.

“How the hell did she get so smart? That didn’t come from you.”

He looked up in surprise, and the smile he offered was wry. “Smartass. How’s the head?”
Quiet for the first time in forever. Toto was some kind of mental water torture. Ellie sat up slowly, trying to hide her wince as her chest, scalp, and brain protested at varying degrees. “Still hard as ever but better. Sarah thinks my infection helps me heal faster.”

“Is that what all this mumbo jumbo means?” Joel set the book aside and crossed the room, returning with bowl. Ellie raised her middle finger at him when he said, “Say ‘ah’.”

A few minutes later, they were situated more comfortably. Ellie fed herself broth as she glanced around the lab. There were plenty of people here nursing a variety of wounds, but she didn’t see Dina or Sarah. “Where is everyone?”

“Sorting out the soldiers that’re captive. Sarah plans to hand them over tomorrow when Hernandez comes to negotiate.” He explained Hernandez’s past relationship with Sarah from MP. Ellie was pretty damn sure none of the kids she’d known in Boston would go to bat for her, but maybe she was wrong. There was something uniting about growing up in hell together.

“And Hare?”

“He’s asking to talk to you.”

“Fuck him.”

“Ellie…” Joel sighed. “He got bit today. So… He’s also asking for the cure.”

“Fuck no.”

“You have plenty of reason to hate him, but all those things you wanted to know from Marlene...about your mother? He could give them to you.”

She wanted to claim Sarah could too, but Sarah only remembered Anna’s research. She spun her spoon in her fingertips, considered all the things that brought her here, and made a rude noise. This wasn’t about goodness or mercy or her own selfish curiosity; this was about what was right. The only answer she’d regret was the one she wouldn’t give.

“No.”

Joel’s mouth shifted. “Dina is going to if you don’t.”

“Fucking…” Ellie sighed. It was such a Dina thing to do: save her enemy contrary to her own self-interests. Her understanding of the present situation seeped back in like it had been in her brain all along. What kind of horror did Dina feel for the killing she’d had to do under the name of Seraphite?

“I’m not giving him the cure, Joel.”

“My daddy was a drunk and a bastard, but he was still my daddy.”

“I meant what I told him, Joel. Even if it’s true, I already have a father.”

Joel’s chest shook with his inhale. He blinked back tears and swallowed audibly.

Ellie studied her knuckles. Her chest ached from more than Hare’s bullets. Maybe it was too late to say that. Joel had Sarah again after all. He deserved to be with his daughter, but given his bounty, he’d never be safe in a QZ even if he wanted to go with her. But there was another way.

“So there’s no way to isolate the cure without someone who’s immune. I’m going with FEDRA so
they can figure out how to give it to other people. But I want Sarah to go home with you.”

“You told Dina you’d go home with her.”

“I was shit-faced. She knows I can’t.”

Joel studied her, his expression softening with an unhappy smile. “How do you reckon Sarah’s gonna abandon the cure like that?”

“She will if you ask her. And she doesn’t have a choice about me going anyway. I’m not sending Dina, and Joel, Sarah should get her time with you. You both deserve that. All they really need is me and my little parasites.”

“I’m not so sure, baby girl. She really seems to like you.”

“You said we’d be good friends, didn’t you?”

For only the second time, Ellie saw Joel cry. It was just the shimmer of tears in his eyes and the catch of his breath in his chest, but it was real. He laughed tightly, and in rare display of physical affection, he reached out to tuck her hand into his. “Yeah. I knew.”

Ellie squeezed his fingers, guilt and love twisting her throat up in their grasps. “You said there was nothing to be sorry for, but... There is. How I treated you since Salt Lake City... It wasn’t fair. I’m sorry, Joel. I wish I could do it over again.”

He looked at her, his eyes gray and readable today. He smiled his gentle smile; there was no regret on his face. “I don’t. Ellie, this may insult you, but I didn’t expect any different from a moody teenager. I never took any of it personally.”

“Yes, you did. I know I hurt you. I did it on purpose.”

“None of that matters, girl. We all fight, but the fighting don’t matter, not when we know what lies below it. What matters to me is that you’re happy. That’s what I struggled with in Jackson, not how you talked back or yelled at me sometimes. And...if this is what you need to be happy, then I guess I’ll just have to live with it.”

“You have to promise me you’ll get Dina home again.”

There was no hint of a lie on his face when he looked her in the eye and said, “I swear.” He touched his watch and sighed. “And if it don’t work out any other way, I sure will miss you, baby girl. You find your way back to me, okay? That girl of yours is gonna miss you something fierce ’til you get home.”


The snap of a bullet dropped her head, but her momentum carried her forward. Her blade came down in a strong arc. As the blade sank into the Matriarch’s shoulder with a wet squelch, Ellie recognized the face of the woman she’d just killed.

The icy grip of fucking up swept Ellie’s scalp. She let go of the machete and raised a shaking hand to touch Dina’s cheek. Dina gazed up at her with a gentle smile as color drained from her face. She sank down onto her knees.

There was no taking this back, no apology, nothing to do but watch the love of her life die around
the blade in her chest.

This wasn’t real. This fear, this horror, it wasn’t real, and she just had to...

Ellie’s yell yanked her from the horror of her dream, catapulting her to sit up in bed. She sobbed into her hands. Someone moved into the bed with her; Ellie jumped when arms rounded her shoulders.

“Ellie…”

“Fuck.” Ellie wrapped her grip around Dina’s arm and seized her hand, shaking as the horror from her nightmare faded. Her head pulsed in protest. “I killed you. I fucking killed you.”

“You didn’t kill me. You didn’t hurt me. I’m here, Ellie.”

“What would I have done if I had…?”

“You didn’t. Oh, baby, you didn’t. Lie down. Lie down. I’m here. Sleep.”

Ellie expected another nightmare, but she fell asleep anyway. Her rest was fitful, disturbed by her head, her bed, when Dina left her in the early morning, and the few occupants in the infirmary. She snatched a couple of uninterrupted hours just after dawn and woke to see Sarah bent over the bed next to hers.

When Sarah straightened, the little girl in the bed made eye contact with Ellie. She offered a wan smile that was direct contrast to the ugly pain on Sarah’s face. That was the girl who was dying, the one Sarah was going to eventually kill herself killing. Sarah saw her watching and schooled her expression before she walked over to sit on the edge of Ellie’s bed.

“Are bad dreams part of this?”

“Probably,” Sarah said quietly. She didn’t offer more information about the mechanism for Ellie’s nightmares springing from her head trauma, only sat in pensive silence. Ellie waited for a moment before she asked, “Did you have your meeting with Hernandez?”

“Yes.”

Monosyllable Sarah. She was pissed or sad. Before she could turn away, Ellie grabbed her wrist.

“Did he get the cure?”

“What?”

“Hare?”

When Sarah fixed her with a sharp stare, it was like being gazed at by Joel, that moment right before he said, “I swear” and she knew he was lying. But Sarah didn’t say anything.

“Sarah?” Ellie waited until Sarah raised her gaze defensively. “You know someone else can do this, right?”

When Sarah’s brow furrowed in question, Ellie elaborated, “You can’t be the only person that can distribute the cure. So all they really need is the cure in someone. What I’m saying is… You should take your chance to be with Joel and let me go with them alone.”

“Thanks, Ellie.” Sarah said quietly. That wasn’t the ringing endorsement Ellie expected, not that
she expected much emotionally from Sarah in her clinic. Sarah patted her calf under the sheets and affected a casual tone when she said, “You’re still on bed rest, but I’m going to need your help in the lab in an hour. Can you come find me then?”

“Any spinal taps?”

Sarah’s smile was faint. “I promise on my life, Ellie. No more spinal taps.”

Ellie dozed fitfully until the clock hand rotated to the next hour. Despite Sarah’s promise, Ellie was a little nervous Sarah was going stick her again, but she walked slowly into the lab down the hall like Sarah asked. The lab was quiet and the lights were dim. It would be the perfect scene for a horror movie antagonist to burst out with a chainsaw except for Sarah doing handstand pushups against the wall. When Sarah collapsed back to her haunches, she was breathing harder than seemed warranted.

“What’s wrong?”

“There were some studies before Outbreak that exercise decreases the perception of nervousness. Running up a flight up steps before going into an interview actually made study participants less nervous because they attributed their symptoms to exercise, not anxiety.”

“Okay?”

Sarah nodded at the table in front of Ellie. She walked over, still breathing hard, and handed Ellie a cheek swab. Then Sarah picked up a weird faded plastic baton that was about the length of her hand. Ellie cocked her head. “It kinda looks like a dildo.”

Sarah burst into hysterical laughter. “It kinda does. I never noticed. I think you just changed my life for the better, Ellie.”

“Okay…?”

Sarah set the end of the dildo marked in bright red to the inside of her left wrist and pressed a button while pushing on the plunger at the end. The machine made blipping noise before it hissed. Sarah flinched, her teeth bared. “Son of a bitch! I didn’t realize it hurt.”

She set the object down on the desk, stared at the circle of oozing red pricks on her skin, and then puked on the floor.

“Fucking Christ!” Ellie gasped. Had Sarah gone nuts?

“Swab. Please. I need it.”

Ellie reached out and slowly turned over the plastic dildo. On one side, faded ink proclaimed: CBI INOC PEN right next to a red biohazard sign. It was the universal symbol for CBI.

“Holy shit.” Clearly Sarah had never had any intention of letting Ellie go alone with FEDRA. Of course she hadn’t said a word, hadn’t discussed this at all with Ellie. Noble bitch. Ellie was surrounded on all sides by the good, the bearded, and the noble. Dammit.

“The swab, Ellie.”

Ellie opened the cotton swab container and rubbed it in her suddenly dry mouth. She handed it over, and Sarah wiped it inside her cheek. Ellie stared at her. Then she crossed the room and snatched up Sarah’s canteen, striding back quickly to shove it in Sarah’s face.
“Drink this.”

“What?” Sarah was ashen. She pushed it away, but Ellie persisted. Sarah stared at the canteen as if she just realized what it was.

“You just puked. Rinse your goddamn mouth out.”

Sarah took it from her and swished twice. She looked up at Ellie, who looked back at her. Then Ellie leaned over, rested on the arms of Sarah’s chair, and she kissed Sarah.

She’d never actively thought about how it would be different to kiss someone besides Dina so it was a surprise how different Sarah was. Not just her taste, the feel of her teeth, or the shape of her mouth, but the rhythm between them. Ellie knew it wasn’t going to be a peck; it couldn’t be. But she was still startled when Sarah cupped the back of her head and pulled her closer.

It should have been awkward—she was kind of kissing her much older sister—but it wasn’t. She liked Sarah, and Sarah was attractive, and if there was any room in her heart for someone besides Dina, maybe… Ellie sighed and rested her forehead against Sarah’s at an angle that didn’t cause pain, her chest twisted up with affection she hadn’t realized she felt for this woman.

“Sorry,” Sarah murmured, as shy as Ellie had ever heard her.

“Why?” Ellie asked, smiling at her familiar answer. Sarah took a long breath, cupped the back of Ellie’s head, and kissed her forehead chastely. Abruptly, Ellie ached to hug her.

“Hopefully I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“Are you sure…?”

“No. I’m not. But you’re going home with Leah and Daddy if this works. If it doesn’t… Well, you’ll have the opportunity to sacrifice your future for the cure.”

“Holy shit, I can’t…” Ellie teared up.

“No one has ever offered me something so selfless. Ellie, thank you.” Sarah’s smile was gentle. She squeezed her shoulders before accepting Ellie into her arms. Ellie mumbled against her shoulder, “I should have known who you were just by how I feel with you.”

“How’s that?” Sarah asked softly.

“Safe.”

Sarah blinked back tears and offered a pained smile before she cleaned up her mess fastidiously and locked the CBI inoculation pen into a safe. She picked up a couple of books, journals, and a pen, and briskly said, “Walk me to quarantine?”

Ellie took her offered elbow and affected an old-timey accent. “Why it would be my pleasure, darlin’.”

“Ellie, I do have one request. If I turn, will you kill me?”

“I do declare, that’s the strangest request anyone ever made of me.”

Sarah’s smile was slow. She still looked pale but seemed a lot happier than she’d been that morning. “It’s important.”
Ellie dropped the act. “Yeah, I will. But I don’t want to kill you so you better fucking make it. You copy?”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am.”

The quarantine hall was tiny. It had two sealed up cells facing each other across the hallway. They had a cot and toilet apiece, secured with two doors with one-way locks. After Sarah explained the locks, Ellie closed the inner and outer doors behind her. She studied the cell and watched Sarah set her things by the cot unhurriedly. Then she glanced at the clock to find the time. Forty-eight hours to go.

“Eleanor?”

“Shit!”

There was Hare standing across the hall at the plexiglass divide, his hand raised in supplication. All Ellie could think of in that moment was Silence of the Lambs. If Hare chattered his teeth and crooned about fava beans and a nice Chianti, she would give herself another concussion laughing.

Instead, Hare wiped his nose and eyes with a handkerchief that was stained with bloody mucus. He sniffed and scratched his neck, wincing at the soft light of the hallway. Looking at him now, Ellie realized she wasn’t going to have much time to ask the questions she’d been holding onto her entire life. His clear gaze moved over her slowly, drinking her in. There was something David-like in his expression, but his desire wasn’t sexual.

“I don’t know how I didn’t see her in you.”

“You were too busy shooting me in the head. How the fuck did you miss, by the way? You were a few feet away.”

“God must have stayed my hand.”

“God?” Ellie echoed incredulously. She scoffed. “Sure. Fine. God. Of course you’d be religious.”

As Hare opened his mouth to interject, Ellie cut him off. “How about this for god? You keep your pistol decocked, but you don’t practice shooting it in double action. When you fired, you had your second joint over the trigger anticipating the long, hard pull, and you didn’t keep your motion smooth. Your own grip pulled your aim off.”

Hare smiled tightly. “You’re smart like your mother. What a shame. She could explain anything with science, but who pulled my aim, made me not cock my pistol? I always do, but I didn’t with you. How do you explain even coming here, finding Sarah, and finding me?”

“Luck. And it’s going to run out one day.”

“So much like her,” Hare said with a choked laugh.

Ellie considered her hands, tugging at her knuckles as she pondered whether or not to broach the question she yearned and feared asking all in one. Then Hare spoke into her silence. “I loved her. I loved her with everything I had, but she never… Never loved me the same way. She was too involved in her own head, with her science. I never met a smarter person in my life. Even Sarah isn’t as smart as Anna was. I used to wish she was a little more normal; she would have been content.”
“How did she meet Marlene?”

Hare’s jaw clenched. He sneezed and pressed his handkerchief to his nose as if to ward off a wave of pain. “How do you…? They were college roommates. I enlisted because my scores were too low, but Anna was smart enough to go to school on full scholarship. They paid her to learn. Marlene… She was smart too. Political science.” Hare’s lip curled like he looked down on whatever that was. “Anna went into nursing school, but she double-majored in epidemiology.”

Useless information. “Why did she leave you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well was she unhappy?” she asked impatiently.

He shook his head with a dry smile. “We all were. We all are. There is no happiness after Outbreak. You kids just don’t know the difference between happiness and being a little less miserable.”

“Come on!” Ellie snapped.

“I don’t know,” Hare repeated firmly. “She was sick before she left. Tired and quieter than usual, but she got like that sometimes.”

“Did you ever think you drove her away?”

“No. She loved me.”

Sure she did. “Did you know she was pregnant?”

“I would have found a way to find her, to find you, if I knew. I would have given everything to keep you safe.” He wiped bloody mucus from one eye, and his lips moved as if in grief. “You…you might hate this, but the biggest blessing in my life was finding you, Eleanor. I hope to find a future with you in some way.”

“My name is Ellie, dickweed.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he nodded. “I’m sorry for hurting you.”

“You should be sorry for hurting Sarah and Dina and Joel.”

“Joel,” Hare murmured, as if tasting the name. “A wanted criminal, a murderer, thief, rapist—” Then Hare abruptly slammed the divide with his hands before reeling back like his blow hurt. He pressed his hand to his head as if dazed.

“He never raped anyone.”

Hare scoffed. “It’s on his bounty.”

“I know Joel, and I know that isn’t true.”

“You don’t deny murdering, thieving—”

“Shut the fuck up about Joel!”

“I spent my entire life serving my country and my God—”
“Oh, go to hell!”

“How can he deserve your faith?!”

“Because he loves me. And I love him too. And you…” Ellie walked up to the clear divide to stand face to face with Hare. She met his gaze with all the loathing inside her. “You’re just a piece of shit that tried to take away everything I love.”

He slammed his fist against the divide, his teeth bared and red oozing from his eyes. He was infected, even if he didn’t realize it. Hare had enough of himself left to step back. He stared at his hand and then at his bloody handkerchief. “You didn’t give me the cure, did you, Sarah?”

Ellie turned. Sarah was stretched out on the cot on her back, her eyes closed. She took a big breath and released it in a sigh. “No. Switched the swabs. Like you told me once: every experiment needs a control.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I know. That made it so much worse. You trusted your ignorant male boss over me, and you ridiculed me for it.”

“Fucking bitch! I protected you!” Hare slammed his hands into the glass again and rested there with his head down. Sarah didn’t respond, as if engaging with him was beneath her.

“You don’t regret this at all, do you?”

It took Ellie a moment to realize Hare addressed her with his last question. She considered her answer and nodded as she confirmed, “Not one bit.”

Slowly, Hare sank down onto his cot and gazed at the floor. When he raised his head, his stare was bright and unnerving, his gray irises brilliant against the pink of his sclera. “If I see your mother beyond, Eleanor, I’ll tell her you grew up to be just like her.”

She was sitting at a long dinner table covered in a spotless white tablecloth like in the movies. Before her was a silver platter, covered by a silver dome. The smell wafting under the serving tray was delicious and tantalizing. Ellie knew without a doubt that this would be a feast.

David stood by her chair, smiling kindly down at Ellie. He pulled the dome off of her tray and drew his machete to thin-slice a giant roast. It oozed blood, the outside charred beautifully and the inside medium rare tenderness. He gave her a huge portion.

“Eat up, Ellie.”

She looked from him to her plate and couldn’t push away the terror that this wasn’t right. She couldn’t eat, but it looked so good. David’s kind smile turned oily, and he motioned to Ellie with his machete.

“Go on. It’s just deer meat. I swear.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

“Go on,” David repeated, stroking Ellie’s fingers with his own as he leaned over her shoulder. “I don’t bite. Have your dinner. You need your strength.”

Her body betrayed her, and she took a large mouthful of roast. It was wonderful, succulent and
tender and bloody, but Ellie had to choke it down. With blood dripping from her fingertips, she
gasped out, “This is a person!”

David’s grin widened, and his eyes moved over her face. He nodded. “Why, Ellie, it’s you.”

Then she realized she couldn’t feel her legs under the tablecloth. With one hand holding her next
bite, Ellie pushed away the tablecloth. Her legs ended at the top of her thighs. As she looked at the
meat in her hand, relief crashed over her abruptly.

Ellie gasped as she woke up, her hand going to her legs over the sheets. Still there. She didn’t
recognizing the room she was in. For moment of confusion, she thought she was back in the
infirmary at the Boston military prep. A soft touch brushed over her shoulder.

When Ellie turned her head, Dina was awake beside her. When had they both gotten in bed? In the
infirmary no less. She coaxed Ellie to rest in the curve of her body and reached out to tuck some of
Ellie’s hair behind her ear. “Bad dream?”

“No idea what I ate last night to bring that on.”

Dina’s smile was slow to come, tinged with sadness. “Your bizarre self-cannibalization dream?”

“Yep.”

“There’s something that I’ve wondered for a long time. Who’s the man?”

Ellie sat up to take a pull of water from the glass beside her bed. Her understanding of the present
came back gradually. “Joel got hurt bad in Colorado so I was pretty much on my own. Killed a big
group of hostiles in a mall trying to get him to a safe place. Later, I met up with David, who led this
group of cannibals, and he was…”

Words failed her as she remembered the stroke of his fingertips against hers. “There were these
officers and teachers in military prep that all the students warned each other about. Don’t get stuck
alone with them, never let them shut their office door, that kind of thing. No one in Jackson was
like that, right?”

Dina shook her head. Ellie continued, “Well, David was like that, and there wasn’t a way to stop
that door from shutting.”

“Did he…”

“No. But he sure enjoyed almost killing me. Climbed on me and started choking me. Missed the
machete beside us, and I killed him with it. I’ve seen so much shit, you know? But David is my
boogieman. Pisses me off he put enough of himself in me to make me have that fucking
nightmare.”

“Laugh at him next time.”

Ellie turned her head. “What?”

“Tell yourself it’s a dream and laugh at him. Try it next time.”

“You’re so goddamn weird. Who the hell knows they’re dreaming? You read one book about
lucent dreaming—”

“*Lucid* dreaming—”
“—and suddenly you’re an expert on dreams.”

“Jerk.” Dina snuggled closer and stroked a finger against Ellie’s side in retaliation. Ellie wiggled away with a laugh. Then her head and chest reminded her she didn’t feel great, and Dina softened immediately. “Sorry.”

“I’m okay. Just no wrestling for a few weeks.” She got out of bed, offering Dina’s hand a squeeze. “I have to go check on Sarah. Her quarantine’s at...” She glanced at the clock. Jesus, was it midday? This head injury had really destroyed her sleep cycle. “Forty-seven hours now.”

“They would have gotten you if she turned.”

“Still.”

Dina nodded, sliding out of bed to pull on her coat. “Let’s go.”

Sometime during the first night, Joel had disposed of Hare. Ellie wondered if some fucked up masochistic part of Sarah had wanted to suffer through her quarantine with his infected screams across the hall. Or maybe she’d wanted to punish Hare: keeping his prey out of reach through two clear divides. Now the only evidence of his existence was his mucoid secretions and the bits of him left behind when Joel burst his head open to kill him.

Technically, Sarah had killed him. Or let him die. Stage One was considered brain-dead. That fact had been drilled into her in military prep. Joel had just killed the machine the fungus was driving.

Another thing Ellie owed Sarah.

She’d had taken the decision to kill Hare right out of Ellie’s hands before she’d had to ponder it. It was big, bigger than it seemed because someone had to be the bad guy. Sarah had been smart, even smarter now that Ellie reflected on it. Dina still showed mercy, but Hare not taking the cure would fit with the Seraphite’s views of righteousness. There was no Hare to fuck them over in the future, and there was also no suggestion of murder and all the violent things it could imply.

Ellie had half a mind to clean the room, but her head still wasn’t happy about changes in elevation even in a couple feet, and she was exhausted just walking down to the quarantine hall.

There Yara and Mark, Dina’s younger ever-present bodyguard, sat together quietly. Yara looked over with a smile, and Mark rose to his full height. He’d grown a fuzz of light hair on his head, making him a little less imposing and a lot younger than when he’d been bald. Ellie shot him a glare before he could do something weird like call her Lamb of God, and oddly, he smiled.

As expected, Sarah was asleep on her cot. She’d slept nearly nonstop since entering quarantine, only waking to do a cursory exam on herself or read a couple of medical texts. She’d scanned herself once the day before, going a little pale when the machine flashed red.

Yara and Mark stayed, though Mark gave his chair up for Dina. Then Joel came by with Lev. Last, Ines and David poked their heads in, asking after Sarah. They all waited quietly, watching the clock slowly turn through the next hour.

“Whose funeral?” a groggy voice asked finally.

“Not yours, apparently,” Ellie quipped.

Sarah sat up and rubbed the back of her neck, stretching. She stood, yawned, and gazed at the clock through the clear barrier. She was bleary-eyed and completely normal. “Think I’ll turn in the next
three minutes?

“Don’t even pretend you’d let me open that door early.”

“You know me too well.”

Ellie hummed, glancing across the crowd of faces. What a mixture of military, Seraphite, QZer, and Jackson-folk, young, old, righteous, and sinner—all here on the hope of the cure. Dina had been right: it was a unifying cause. And it was too damn serious.

“So I’m a super lazy person.”

Confusion flickered across everyone’s faces, but Joel and Dina both winced with emotion somewhere between annoyance and affection.

“And I went to my doctor about it. He said if I kept it up, I could expect a-trophy.”

Sarah’s face shifted into a grimace. Then her smile overtook her feigned pain. It was such a big grin that she showed her teeth in a surprisingly goofy expression. Then she laughed. “That was terrible.”

“Says the only person who laughed. I should have told you this one after Yara’s surgery. We could have chosen a few suture puns.”

Sarah’s brow knitted.

“And had each other in stitches.” She cocked her head when Sarah only raised one eyebrow. “Okay, tough crowd. Um... A guy once got this whole left side amputated. He’s all right now.”

“Please stop.”

Dina giggled, a beautiful sound to Ellie’s ears. “Wait, I remember one. Dr. Miller doesn’t find medical puns very funny now that she suffers from irony-deficiency.”

“Thank you! I can’t believe you remembered that one,” Ellie exclaimed in delight. Dina lightly slapped her palm to Ellie’s in a high five even as she quipped, “I’ve only heard it ten times, you dork.”

Sarah tapped the plexiglass to get their attention again. “What a bizarre way to celebrate my survival through quarantine. Ellie, would you do the honors?”

It was like déjà vu when Ellie opened up the quarantine room. Sarah rolled up her sleeves as she walked out, displaying the rippling circular scar on her wrist. She offered an uncharacteristic happy grin and declared, “Time to get to work. If you have any more puns, spare us. Oh, and Ellie?”

“Yeah? What’s up, Doc?”

To that, Sarah laughed. Ellie had no idea why that would earn amusement when her jokes didn’t. “You get your chance at revenge. I’m going to need some samples. But you get to collect them from me this time.”

Hours later, Ellie had poked and prodded Sarah as much as she felt comfortable. Sarah had probably slept so damn much in preparation for all the work she’d have now. Even without a single test result, Ellie knew Sarah would carry her cure, and she’d take it to SFQZ so that Ellie wouldn’t have to.
After Sarah shooed her away long after nightfall, Ellie went in search of Dina. Instead of her solitary room, Dina was asleep in a dorm room with a dozen other young Seraphite women. She accepted Ellie into her cramped bed blearily and fell back asleep almost immediately.

Ellie stroked Dina’s soft skin and considered everything in this life that brought her here. So much death. So much pain. And yet… Ellie touched the curve of Dina’s abdomen.

Death and pain made their marks, but there was plenty of living left to do.

Ellie put some real thought into the future, pushing away her instinct to assume the worst. For the first damn time, she recognized the enormity of gift Sarah had given her. It wasn’t about Jackson or San Francisco but the certainty of her cure making its mark on this world, a cure that required no sacrifice from Ellie at all past a few pricks of the needle.

For the first time since she’d been bitten, maybe the first time in her entire life, Ellie was free to be happy.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all again for the feedback. Though I generally write based on what I want to read, your reviews do bring me motivation. And Lee, I have to dedicate this one to you. Thanks for the nudge during a previous story to better educate myself about firearms! I hope it worked.
The Prodigal Child

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What are you doing, kiddo?”

Joel stood in front of Sarah’s quarantine cell and stared beyond the clear glass divide. Sarah didn’t acknowledge him, but he’d spoken to himself. She knew he was here; she’d dismissed those two cultist kids just a minute before. Yet Sarah didn’t give him any regard.

Hadn’t been much time to dwell on the unease between them. From chaos to more chaos: being carted into what was left of the QZ, to Hare putting on a big show to hang them all, to Ellie leading the cultists in to sweep defeat FEDRA, to the aftermath of patching everyone up and to discussion about how to hold the peace... They just kept going at a breakneck speed.

Joel had hovered over Ellie’s bedside while Sarah doctored her, and then he’d lurked behind Sarah during the few meetings she had with her old Military Preparatory classmate. He’d seen Sarah in many situations: the QZ doctor, a CBI expert, and even a trained soldier. She seemed to slide back and forth between those roles without flinching, firm but gentle with her patients, sharp with her knowledge, and pragmatically violent. In all that, Joel had no idea who Sarah was.

Once upon a time, he’d thought he lost his daughter, but finding her now was like losing her all over again. Who was this stranger lying on the cot?

There was an uncertainty in death that he’d taken for granted more than once. Certainly had when he cradled Sarah’s unmoving form in his arms, believing her gone from this world. Hearing her name over the radio in Hare’s tent shook him enough to lift him from his stupor after his last beating, but Joel had told himself there were a lot of Sarah Millers in the world.

Then he’d seen her. Heard her. And knew her.

The hard part, Joel supposed, would be unlearning her. There was more than a gap between his sweet, emotional little twelve-year-old to the massive, hard woman that laughed at the thought of Hare killing his own daughter.

Christ, dealing with that and with Ellie’s reemergence all at once…

The memory of his panic made parts of him tighten up in fear. He’d been relieved when Ellie came into that tent…and equally terrified for her. He knew firsthand how she handled herself in combat, but that was without the pressure of saving him on her shoulders. He’d become a liability, and Ellie would be blind to the danger that put her in.

Hare had all the power in that tent. He’d exercised it, putting a bullet through Ellie’s head.

How the mighty had fallen.

Joel turned and studied the man shaking and mumbling in the cell across the hall. In the days of hell that he’d been with the FEDRA convey, Joel had shared every waking moment with Hare. Hare had been impeccable: clean and neat and orderly, even in his occasional violence. The man in that cell was unrecognizable. His hair had been torn out in a clump on one side of his head, and he had mucus and blood soaking into his collar. His uniform was torn, and one boot was unlaced. One of his eyes bulged in its socket, red and painful enough to cause him to paw at it occasionally, like
a cat washing its face.

Hare was gone even though he’d taken the cure from Dina.

Which begged the question of why the hell Sarah was asleep on the cot in the other quarantine cell.

“What do you need?”

He jumped, part of him stunned by the familiar-unfamiliar cadence of Sarah’s voice. He glanced at the chair behind him, set up by the two cultist kids that followed Sarah around like obedient puppies. Joel settled his ass in the still-warm chair with a sigh. He was so damn tired.

“So… A doctor, huh?”

As soon as he said it, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. Sarah’s sharp, painful, “Don’t,” made him wince. It was a stupid segue, a piss poor attempt to make light of the distance between them. Sarah hadn’t spoken any words to him so far that didn’t have a thing to do with Ellie or the cure; why he’d assume she’d want small talk escaped even himself.

What the hell did it matter if he could bridge the distance between them if he didn’t know what time they had left?

“What do you need?”

Sarah raised her left arm, displaying a ring of red, swollen tissue on the inside of her wrist. “Infected myself.”

He waited for the punchline, but she didn’t even open her eyes. “What?”

“And I gave myself Ellie’s cure.”

His heart jerked when she tacked on: “Hopefully.”

“Why would you take that risk when you’re lying across the hall from him?”

Sarah turned her head and looked past Joel at Hare, her expression unreadable. Her face was so startling familiar, but the look in her eyes was all stranger. “I knew he would turn.”

This couldn’t be suicide. Then again, Joel was way past being able to read her. He leaned closer and heard iron enter his voice. “Sarah, will you sit up and look at me?”

Rarely had Sarah disobeyed him as a child, but Joel learned quickly with Ellie that his authority only counted for so much. It put him in an awkward place of wondering how hard he should push and what the consequence of disobedience would really be. He didn’t hold the cards anymore with either of his girls. Against his expectations, Sarah slowly dropped her heels onto the floor and sat up, resting her elbows on her knees. The way she raised her gaze reminded him of Ellie’s worst snits, and there was a flip-flop in his head.

Some time ago, he and Ellie had shared a conversation about a weird brain disorder she’d described enthusiastically. What the hell had she called it? Propo-nosia or something. Face blindness. She’d tried to explain it to him, and even now, Joel could picture her sitting at her desk with a splash of bright sunlight across it. He could picture the bed, posters, and guitar leaned up on the wall. He could picture her face as it lit up with her enthusiasm. She was so damn bright in every way the word could mean.
“Sometimes there’s a disconnect between the part of the brain that recognizes faces, the fusiform gyrus, and the one in charge of emotions, the amygdala.”

It boggled him to this day that there were different spots in the brain in charge of each tiny thing they did, though he’d seen some injuries through the years that could only be explained by that concept. Ellie had gone on in her description, looking so youthfully fascinated. “And when that happens, the person can recognize faces still, but they think it’s like… What’s that movie, Invasion of the Body Snatchers?”

“How do you know about that movie?”

“Anyway,” she hurried on. “The reason they think everyone’s a stranger is because they recognize their face but don’t feel that emotional attachment. So they get paranoid because they see someone they love but don’t immediately love them by seeing them. Make sense?”

It hadn’t, not until now.

He’d asked where she found the information, and suddenly Joel remembered her answer: “Wikipedia, Daddy.”

Joel leaned over and pressed his fingers to his eyes.

When the hell had it turned around in his head? He looked up at the stranger that wore his daughter’s face and wondered if the journey to this place and time had stripped them both of their ability to feel that inherent love.

He opened his mouth to ask about the cure, about Hare, and the question that dropped out was, “Do you blame me?”

Something in Sarah softened in surprise. She lowered her gaze and eventually shook her head. “You didn’t know, did you? That I was alive?”

“No, I didn’t. I would never have gone if I’d…” He clenched his teeth on his plaintive words.

“I didn’t know you were alive either.” Sarah’s hesitant words came as if she was filling his silence. “The military took me in. They told me you were dead, my home was gone, that I was a waste of resources, and that they owned me. I guess they still do.”

It hurt more than he expected. “You died in my arms. I swear it.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell, isn’t it?” Sarah stood up and lifted her shirt to show Joel the pink line that swept along her last rib on her left side. He reached out and pressed his hand to the dirty plexiglass that separated them. “Christ.”

“I tried to find the surgeon for a long time, but I never could figure out who patched me up.”

“Sarah, why are you in there, especially when he looks like that?” Joel jerked her chin towards Hare, who seemed to wake at their attention.

Sarah sat back down, and the fight seemed to seep out of her as she watched Hare strike the divide and scream. “You saw me switch the swabs, didn’t you?”

Joel searched his memory. He’d seen Sarah swab Dina’s mouth. He’d also seen her flick the swab into the trash and remove another from her sleeve that she’d swiped in Hare’s mouth, but… Well, hell. Joel had assumed it couldn’t be possible for Sarah to deny Hare Dina’s cure. She was good;
she followed the rules. But she wasn’t his kid anymore, was she? He’d assumed she was constant instead of the obvious answer. He glanced back at the infected now making a racket and spreading its mess all over that quarantine room.

“I reckon you had some history with him.” There was only one thing that worried him, ultimately. “You gonna regret it?”

“No. I still think he’s a good man, in his particular way. Too good for the world we live in. Dumb as a doornail. Part of me will miss him for his consistency. He would have chased Ellie like a dog on a bone though. Would have decried the Seraphites in SFQZ.”

Joel considered the way Hare had cried in agony at the thought of killing Ellie, how he was so cool when he tortured Sarah, and then the flat affect he’d taken when he stared at Dina as she begged for mercy for her people. After all that agony over shooting his own daughter, he’d pulled the trigger on Ellie several more times during the QZ battle, then shot his own man for doing the same. Maybe he’d felt something, but Joel couldn’t figure out what the hell it was. Hard to believe Ellie—all hot temper and sass and love—could be related to the man.

“I already have a father.”

From tearing his heart out to stitching it back up… Ellie sure could twist him in knots.

“What do I call you?”

Joel turned his attention back to Sarah, who looked at him with open perplexity. Joel tried on a smile, and she reflected it in a grimace. Maybe some of the sadness within him showed because Sarah’s eyes went wet.

“Whatever the hell you want to. You don’t owe me nothing, Sarah. But I’d like to know what happened to you.”

Something in her slammed shut. She looked away. “How did you meet Ellie?”

Tit for tat? He’d play for her. “Marlene hired me to smuggle her out of Boston. Out of other options. Circumstances meant we just kept going.”

“Firefly Marlene?”

“Yep. Queen Firefly. Things fell apart, like they tend to do. But we did get to where we were going.”

“Salt Lake City?”

“How did you know?” Had Ellie told her?

“Did you know what they’d do to her?”

“No. I figured they’d take some blood or something.”

“You’d think,” Sarah said with a particularly alien scoff.

“How do you know all this about the Fireflies? Were you part of them?”

“No way in hell. FEDRA’s dogshit, but the Fireflies are worse. No, we’re a FEDRA/Firefly compromise here on the west coast. California hella hippy way, no yeah?” She’d put on a strange, obviously sarcastic non-accent for the last part of her statement. Her voice returned to her barely
perceptible Texan twang when she asked, “How did you bring them down?”

She knew. Her knowledge was salt in a still fresh wound after carrying that lie around for so many years. He had no choice but the truth. “I couldn’t lose…” Joel paused when he realized the incongruity of his statement. “I couldn’t do it again: losing her after losing you.”

Instead of the damnation he expected, Sarah softened. “She’s a real good kid.”

Joel released his breath in a relieved sigh. “Yeah. Don’t imagine I had much to do with that. She was about grown up when we met. Only a couple years older than you.”

Then he realized the incongruity of that statement too and winced internally. They lapsed into silence as Joel tried not to be obvious about studying Sarah.

“What?” Sarah asked him eventually.

“Why infect yourself at all? You got samples from Ellie, right?”

“They won’t last. There’s no cure without an immune person. And there’s no way to isolate, manufacture, and distribute the cure without better equipment and resources, the kind you’ll only find in the biggest QZs in the country. SFQZ is the closest one, probably our best bet.”

“So if it takes…?”

“She’s free.”

“Free.” His chest twisted up, and he cleared his throat. Free of the debt to humanity. Free to live her life without the what-if Joel had put in it. Free of the guilt she carried by virtue of being alive. How had Ellie put it? Waiting for her turn.

Sarah was bargaining for the cure for the entire human race, the answer to the unanswerable since Outbreak. And she was bargaining beyond her need for Ellie, risking her life so Ellie didn’t have to sacrifice her future.

Joel’s throat tightened as he finally got confirmation that the woman behind that glass was his daughter.

“Sarah, you just…” Presented the goddamn solution that Joel could never provide Ellie. Sarah had known Ellie maybe a week or two and had already put her world to right. Sarah was smart, knowledgeable, and strong. More than anything though, her motivation for sitting on that cot was evidence that Joel had done something right with her in the few years they’d had together.

“It’s efficient. My specialty was always CBI research so the pieces fell into place, or they will if I make it out of quarantine alive.”

“Sarah.” He waited for her to pay him mind before he continued, “You did good.”

She turned her gaze away and dropped an arm over her eyes. “That’s the last thing I am.”

“I’m not talking about you or even what you’ve done in the past. Hell, good don’t mean nothing in this world. We didn’t know that then, and I sure as hell don’t care about that now. You look after those you love, and you did that, Sarah. You keep going because you have to. Hell, if you weren’t good in the past, I’m glad for it because it meant you survived to be here now.”

“You can’t say that. Not without knowing what I’ve done.”
“I reckon I’ve done plenty you’d hate me for. Now point in rehashing it.”

“The stuff Hare accused you of? Uninspired evil, Joel.” Her dismissive tone startled him. Seemed odd she’d still be able to hurt him this way.

“As opposed to what?”

“Impress me then, old man. What did you do that was so bad?”

He wanted to ask what they were fighting about but didn’t have the courage. It was cathartic in a way to get the truth out. “I killed as many of those Fireflies as I could. For her. For me too, I guess. I killed Marlene. She spewed some bullshit about Ellie getting raped, killed by clickers. I killed everyone I thought would be a threat to Ellie.”

“Were you really a terrorist?” Still Sarah didn’t look at him, but her voice was steady. She wasn’t quite so unimpressed with his sins anymore.

“No. Never part of the Fireflies. But I was a hunter. Went from killing soldiers to killing civilians, all for the shirt on their back. Didn’t kill no kids, never raped anyone, but those were the only lines I drew.”

“Didn’t kill no kids,” Sarah echoed quietly. She shook her head. “What do you want from me, Joel?”

“I don’t know, Sarah. Why don’t you want anything from me?”

“My father is dead,” she said. There was an awful pause as Joel took that punch to his gut. Then almost kindly, she continued, “And your daughter is dead. What could we possibly want from each other?”

He would never wish she’d remained dead to him, but this sure felt worse. “Maybe you’re right, but Sarah, I’d sure like to get to know the person you are now. Can you blame me for that?”

She smiled, only her mouth visible under her arm. As he waited for her to respond, Joel gradually recognized Hare’s racket. The infected was screaming bloody murder now. Joel’s anger bubbled up on the only target in the room. He got up without a word, entered Hare’s cell—locked with two deadbolts in the least secure way possible—and brained him with a metal pole he’d liberated from a rolling stand down the hallway.

Joel had been in this position just a day or two before and hesitated out of respect for the knowledge Hare might carry about Ellie’s mother. He sure as hell wanted to mutilate the son of a bitch until he drew his last breath. Turned out Ellie spurned Hare as much as Sarah spurned Joel.

Funny now that Joel thought of it… Like a Greek irony play, putting two unwilling father-daughter pairs all together in this way.

“Go put on gloves.”

Sarah’s voice startled him. Joel glanced over at her, and something in the iron in her expression reminded him of Sarah’s mother. He offered a tight smile and lazy salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

His dry deference coaxed a flicker of a smile to cross Sarah’s face. He disposed of Hare’s corpse by Sarah’s instruction, studying the tiny greenhouse set up on the roof of the building. Probably killed spores in the sunlight as the body decomposed. Pretty nifty idea. Had Sarah designed it?
When he came back down the hallway, Sarah was eating an MRE and reading, sitting cross-legged on her cot. Joel filed away the sight of her wearing black-framed glasses.

“How did you come to be here? In Washington, I mean?”

She studied him over the rim of her glasses. “Transferred out of Chicago and got sent to SFQZ, but I requested a transfer out of their CBI lab. Guess it pissed them off enough to banish me up here. I’d never been a physician before, and that was a hell of a learning curve. My first patient was a little girl with the croup.” Her smile at the memory faded after a moment, and Sarah’s gaze fell to the floor. “She’s ten now, dying of leukemia. I expect as soon as I get out, her parents will ask me to euthanize her.”

“Christ, Sarah.”

“Yeah. I bet all doctors have this grand idea of thwarting death and pain in school. Then we realize how powerless we are. Sometimes my only power is making the death a little easier. Better than what I did in Chicago, but not much more.”

“No one should have to shoulder that burden alone.”

“No. Her parents will shoulder most of it. I just have to deal with my fucking ineptitude.”

“You can’t walk on water, Sarah. Back in the day, we had all the resources in the world, and people still died. It’s part of life.”

“Of fucking course it is,” Sarah snapped, incensed by his platitude.

“Sarah, you have the cure.”

“Maybe.” She touched the swollen tissue on her wrist and sighed. “Maybe.”

Joel watched her, feeling awkward pity, an emotion he was sure she’d be as enraged to see. He was as helpless as she felt, unable to ease her suffering in any way. Just like Ellie, with her self-imposed moody anger that she carried around inside her like she was a martyr for the world. Joel supposed he’d acted like that once upon a time too.

“So tell me.”

Sarah glanced up at him cautiously.

“About the cure, I mean. Explain it to your old man.”

At least he’d judged her right in this: doctor-speak was Sarah’s comfort zone. She looked him in the eye after a moment and spoke in a language he didn’t understand. Eventually, she stood to pace, by all evidence talking to herself, working through the mental gymnastics on how this could fail, how she could be wrong, and how she’d figure out if she wasn’t. Joel leaned back and drank her in.

His daughter was a stranger, but maybe he could come to like her with time. It might take more time than they had, but he’d sure as hell try.

The dog darted out in front of the truck too fast for him to put on brakes, much less swerve. It thumped under the truck and made Sarah scream in shock or fear, and it sure as hell put Joel’s heart in this throat. He pulled over, thankful at least the road wasn’t heavily trafficked. What a fucking stupid animal to run out in front of the only car on the road.
Sarah was crying in the passenger seat, and Joel waved her off as he opened the door and swung his legs out of the car. His heart sank as soon as he saw the dog lying on the road. That it was still alive was a miracle for no one. Joel yanked off his button down and tried to wrap the dog up in it. It screamed great yelping shrieks as he carried it back to the car.

“Oh, god, Daddy?” Sarah peered around the door at him.

“Get back in your seat! Sarah— Ah!” Sharp pain and pressure raced up his arm, and he looked down to see the dog had put its teeth in him.

“Shit!” he shouted, dropping the dog on the floor of his truck’s back seat. He had to grab its ear and twist hard, then hit it in the eye before it let go of his arm. He didn’t see how the day could get any worse, especially with his daughter sobbing hysterically in the passenger seat.

“Don’t touch it,” he yelled, and she shrank back from him.

At least he knew where the vet office was, and at least it was open. His free afternoon was eaten up by the time everything was said and done: first aid for his own wound, the vet’s assessment of the dog, the delivery of the estimate—because he didn’t need his play money that month, apparently—and the hysterical crying fit Sarah had when the vet told her gently the dog couldn’t be saved.

He wanted to scream at his little girl by the end of it all, his entire body quivering with rage as he paid the two-hundred dollar bill to have the dog euthanized and its head sent in for rabies testing—because he hadn’t needed that to worry about either.

At least Tommy was able to come by the house to be with Sarah while Joel drove to Urgent Care, which punted him to the ER. Just another bill he couldn’t afford.

That was the best way to start the next few months. His little eight-year-old, precocious and so innocently happy, continued to cry for that damn mutt. For a solid month, everything was about the damn dog. It hadn’t felt good to run over the thing in the first place, nor spend all that money on the dog and himself—not enough left over to fix the bumper for another year—but Sarah’s grief really killed him. It ate into his happiness, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to ease it.

She could make him feel like a super hero some days. Not that day. Not when she looked at him like he’d broken her heart.

“Hey.”

Joel jerked awake and lifted his head from his chest. A bolt of pain shot through his neck, and he winced and rolled it out, turning to look up. Ellie stood over his shoulder, her brow raised in curiosity. That put him back in the present, out of the confusion of waking from that dream.

“Don’t know how you two sleep with the noises coming out of your noses. Come on, old man. You need to find a bed before you collapse.”

Joel looked at Sarah, who snored in her cot. As if Ellie’s words invited him to feel it, he suddenly was as exhausted as she implied. The last beating had bruised him bad, and sleeping in that posture hadn’t helped. But he didn’t want to leave Sarah.

“Ever seen an infected snore like that?” Ellie asked him, ever able to read his mind.

“’m fine,” Joel muttered, his jaw stretching with an uncontrollable yawn.
“Shit, now I’m going to…” Ellie yawned wide, winced, and touched her temple. She looked at Joel like he’d given her the plague. That yawn probably had hurt, given all the ways she’d injured her noggin.

“You should be in bed.”

“Fuck you,” she sneered. “I’m the one telling you that. Seriously, Joel, you look like shit.” When Joel didn’t move, Ellie huffed in her way and muttered, “ Fucking old man,” under her breath. She watched him a moment longer to make her point before she turned around the chair next to Joel and settled in it, resting her chin on her tattooed forearm. As she studied Sarah, Joel suddenly saw Ellie as an adult, all grown up.

“Kinda crazy how I didn’t recognize her.”

Joel turned away, unsettled by what he’d just seen in Ellie’s face. “You never knew her by anything but the picture.”

“And you.” When he looked at her in question, Ellie shrugged. “She’s a lot like you.”

Not a damn good thing to be, but it warmed him all the same. He focused on Ellie and asked, “What’ve you been up to since those rapids?”

Ellie’s gaze darkened. He listened to her carefully, knowing her well enough to judge the words she didn’t say as much as the ones she did. She choked up when she talked about recognizing Dina, then fidgeted in fear when she talked about the kiss they’d shared. The last bit she shared in disbelief: “There were already QZers working with the Seraphites to keep the QZ up and running. Dina offered them peace, and the crazy thing is it all worked out. Or it seemed to. I guess we should’ve realized they didn’t feel all that grateful for not being gutted. Did they really just let Hare in?”

“Some did,” Joel replied, thinking of the rapid sequence of events that set them all up in that courtyard. He still wasn’t sure if it was a setup one way or another. Did the QZers plan an ambush with the Seraphites, or had some of them really wanted the Seraphites dead? Not that it mattered. All he knew was that, “Not all of ‘em seemed too happy about it. The QZ Director seemed to regret his decision pretty quick. His own people beat him to shit.”

“Really? I thought Sarah must have gotten to Matias.”

“He’d be dead if I did,” Sarah said, startling them both. She raised her head and said, “If you want to talk, go somewhere else and let me sleep. Ellie, you need to rest.”

“Alright, dickhead,” Ellie muttered. “We’ve been banished, Joel. Come on.”

Standing hurt. Sarah and Ellie were right. He was feeling his age more. Joel knocked on the window to Sarah’s quarantine cell. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she replied without opening her eyes.

Ellie nodded to the Seraphite kid that slipped into the quarantine hall as they left. She glanced back behind her and quietly said, “I don’t think the QZ will let the Seraphites stay.”

“Don’t imagine they will. How is Dina? She okay?”

“Are any of us?” Ellie’s rhetorical question was answer enough. Joel supposed it was a stupid question. Ellie stood over him, worry clear on her face as he settled on the infirmary bed. He was
sapped, almost too tired to sleep. Joel ignored her worry as he made himself as comfortable as he could.

“How long were you with them, Joel?”

“Maybe a week. It wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been.”

“I know what that means,” Ellie muttered. “You were looking for me, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

She blew a breath out hard between her lips and fiddled with her fingernails, her heels swinging under her bed. “I’m sorry. For everything. But mostly for what I said on the road, the way I was toward you. I was angry with myself, and I took it out on you.”

“I know what you were doing, baby girl. I told you I never took it to heart.”

“I wasn’t done.”

He smiled, not bothering to open his eyes as he focused on the shifts and stutters in Ellie’s voice.

“I’m sorry I got you caught up with them. It didn’t make sense to backtrack, but I should’ve tried. I kept thinking to myself you deserved it if you didn’t turn back for home, but that wasn’t fair.”

“Ellie, no point in rehashing it all. We did what we did, and we’re here now. I don’t blame you for anything but damn near killing yourself. Even then… You did it for that girl on the cross. Seems noble enough to me.”

“Still, I was a bitch. I shouldn’t have said that about not being your daughter.”

That made him open his eyes to study her as he said, “We already talked about this, Ellie. No reason to go over it again.”

That put fear in her eyes. “We did? Shit. I keep forgetting things.”

Ellie was probably imagining all sorts of scenarios about what her memory lapses meant. She’d never been hurt quite like this before; even after the Seraphite attack she’d been up and running the next day. David had banged her up too, but that was more psychological than physical. Joel remembered how sobering it was the first time he’d realized he wasn’t invincible. “The last thing you need to do is what-if, Ellie. You have a concussion. Rest up. You’ll be fine by next week.”

“You need to rest too. You want one of my pillows?”

From adult to child in a rapid swing of herself. Joel smiled and declined. “I’m not the one with the concussion. Rest up and stop worrying.”

Her question came minutes later, as his mind settled into the dark quietness of sleep. “You think Jackson made it?”

Joel stirred and muttered, “I’m sure they did.”

“Never wanted to go back to a place so bad before.”

“Not Boston?”

“Fuck no. That place was a shithole. After I stopped getting in my own way, Jackson was…” It was
good, I guess.”

“I liked being there too.”

He thought of their little house, the years of peace they had, and hoped they could salvage something similar when they went back. He imagined his little household, imagined Ellie and Dina and their baby in it, and pictured Sarah as a girl too. Sleep came a moment later.

There wasn’t much to do in the QZ, which ended up working out fine. Instead of his rest reenergizing him, Joel only felt more tired. He supposed he was. Maybe finding Sarah again had sapped his last reserves. He needed to get himself together for the journey they were sure to take in a week, if not sooner.

So Joel laid himself up in the infirmary more often than anything else. He awoke only a few hours after Sarah walked out of quarantine—hailed by Ellie’s shitty jokes—to find himself surrounded by a crowd of the Seraphite’s strongest members. That sight was enough to startle him fully awake, but seeing Sarah and Ellie in the next row of beds drained his instinctual fear.

Joel grunted as he climbed to his feet. He motioned to Ellie, who acknowledged him with a long look. “Scoot. What’s going on?”

“Find your own fucking seat.” Ellie scooted anyway, rocking against his side slightly as his weight depressed the mattress. They both turned to watch Dina calmly walk along the line of Seraphites, probably murmuring some kind of prayer or blessing to each individually. “The Seraphites are going to try to take the cure.”

“Don’t they have to get infected first?”

“I guess you missed that loud argument. Sarah’s pissed. She’s got to infect them, and she’s scared the swab won’t work.”

Sarah strode alongside Dina, bent down to deliver her words near Dina’s ear. Their voices were hushed in a heated argument. “I said six.”

“We don’t have enough time. Twelve today. Twelve tomorrow.”

“I don’t have the place to quarantine them!”

“The jail will work for our purposes, and there are enough of us immune right now to clean up any infected remains safely.”

“None of this is safe!” Sarah snapped, a direct contrast to Dina’s composure. “We don’t have confirmation there is a hyperparasite, what it may be if there is, or how much has to be transferred to induce immunity. That’s only the tip of the iceberg! How can you ask them to risk their lives on a chance?!”

“The swab was enough, wasn’t it?” Dina replied just as evenly. “Between you and Ellie.”

Both Ellie and Sarah turned red at the same time as they exchanged awkward, obvious looks. Joel was swamped with mortification as he realized what that was about. Then he laughed despite himself; the fact both battle-hardened women were so embarrassed at being caught out like this was hilarious. At least it ended the argument right there.

“It was for the cure,” Ellie blurted right as Sarah said, “I asked her to.”
Dina looked between them, raised an eyebrow haughtily, and rolled her eyes. She looked more like her old self than Joel had seen since Jackson, especially with the humor in her voice when she said, “I never have to worry about you actually cheating on me if this is how you react to a kiss.” Then there was iron in her voice. “I assume that was all it was.”

“I swear.” Ellie’s blush didn’t fade, but she looked slightly less terrified. Sarah’s expression settled into something melancholy, and she turned her gaze to the line of Seraphites waiting to be infected and receive the cure. Her voice trembled faintly. “Do they really know what they’re signing up for?”

“Yes.”

“I want to talk to them.”

“Go ahead.”

Sarah didn’t move. “No kids.”

“No kids,” Dina promised.

Sarah worked her jaw. Then she nodded. “Okay, let’s get started. Oh, and Leah?”

Dina gave Sarah her whole attention. Sarah looked her in the eye and said, “Fuck you.”

“Sarah,” Ellie gasped, rising, but Dina pressed a hand to her shoulder. “No, I understand why she’s angry. But there’s no choice.”

Sarah began to work her way down the line of Seraphites in a juxtaposition to Dina’s blessing. Each Seraphite nodded to her questions, and no one turned away from the truth of the risk. Whatever Dina had said was more powerful to them than Sarah’s warning.

In the end, Sarah had them draw straws to be chosen for separate groups: Ellie, Sarah, and Dina. Sarah set out swabs for each of them, and with a pale face and sweat beading on her forehead, she used a special pen to infect the Seraphites with CBI shortly before they received a swab with saliva from the individual they were assigned to. Through it all, Sarah recorded details about each individual.

It put Joel in mind of the rare Christmas Eve services his mother had managed to take them to, standing in front of that preacher than murmured about the bread and grape juice they accepted as the body of Christ and the blood of Christ. This procession seemed no more grounded in reality. What a fucked up communion.

Back in Jackson, Maria kept up a collection of children’s books in her little library. There were some old classics, books Joel hadn’t thought about until he’d gone into the library with Ellie early in their life in Jackson. It had been winter, hadn’t it?

Joel remembered that Dina was there with her grandmother, as always looking like a younger, more open version of her enigmatic granny. Anywhere Dina was, Ellie tended to want to stay, so Joel settled in for the long wait. He listened to Ellie joke disrespectfully with Dina but immediately shape up when she spoke to Miriam. He smothered his smile at the quiet respect she gave the woman.

The spine under his finger drew his attention, and he tilted it to check the cover. Lo and behold, there was one he remembered from Sarah. He pulled the green book out and studied the
Joel, you okay?

He cleared his throat, feeling odd at how well she could read him, and lifted the book to show Ellie. “I read this to Sarah when she was barely walking. She cried.”

Ellie’s expression shifted into whatever it was she felt when he brought up Sarah. It wasn’t affection or love, more a look of self-caution, as if he’d momentarily turned into a cat on a hot tin roof.

“Who’s Sarah?” Dina wanted to know, but her granny hushed her impatiently. Miriam offered a knowing smile. “Good afternoon, Joel.”

“Afternoon, ma’am,” Joel replied. “You need help with anything?”

“No, thank you. I’ll see you both at worship.”

It should have been a question, but anything the woman said Joel had trouble taking as anything but a command. He and Ellie shared a helpless look as they realized they now had plans Sunday morning. Before Dina turned to follow her grandmother out of the room, she offered a cheeky grin and wink. “Come by tonight, Ellie. I have something for you!”

Joel halfway expected Ellie to leave with Dina—especially with the longing way she watched the door frame where Dina and her grandmother disappeared—but she settled onto the old couch adjacent to the musty bookshelves. Maria had put it by a window which let in bright sunlight and the cold from outside all in one. He had to remember to ask her if she wanted him to patch up the window before heavier snow started falling.

“So, let’s hear it.”

Joel grunted, considered, and nearly put the book back. He wasn’t sure he trusted Ellie with this memory. Instead, he settled onto the couch and opened the first page, and he read the story that his mother had read to him in his childhood.

“Once, there was a tree, and she loved a little boy…”

Sarah had been so tiny that first time he read it to her, but she cried in his lap out of pure soft-hearted emotion. The only person in his family she could have gotten that from was his momma.

The story was haunting, sad, and illustrated the burden and joy of parenthood. His mother had told him it was about Christ, but Joel had always taken his mother’s narration as the tree’s voice. He’d sworn he’d never hurt his mother like the man did in the book.

When he closed the back cover of the book, he looked at Ellie. He nearly did a double take at the disgusted twist of her mouth and nose, but she schooled her expression quickly. Rather than irritated or disappointed by her reaction, he felt a bolt of amusement.

“Go ahead.”

She cleared her throat. “It was…uh, sweet.”

“No, Ellie. Tell me what you really think.”

“It’s better than that Love You Forever book?” she offered.
“Christ, Ellie, that’s a classic too!”

“She fucking crawled into his window as an adult and rocked him to sleep. That’s creepy!”

“It’s more an allegory, you know? That you’re always a parent.” He sighed and gave up on his defense. “Okay, I thought that one was weird when my momma read it to me.”

“See!”

“So, the verdict on this one? Go on; don’t spare no criticism.”

Her eyes lit up, and she gesticulated as her speech burst out of her. “What kind of misogynistic asshole wrote this? I thought stories from the Bibles were the worst, but that is fucking awful. What kind of lesson were they trying to teach people: to be a user or to be a fucking pushover?”

“It’s about being a parent.”

“He fucking sat on her at the end!”

“Kinda went back to where they started, you know? She was happy to have him.”

“He was a fucking leech!”

Joel surprised himself when he guffawed. Maybe it was the age difference. Joel couldn’t remember if he’d read it to Sarah later in life. Even more than being a teenager, Ellie was pragmatic to a fault, wasn’t she?

“One day, you’re gonna have a kid, and you’ll understand.”

Ellie’s smile faded after a moment. “You think I can? Even with…” She pressed a hand over her right sleeve.

Oh hell...

Joel swallowed as he considered the implication. She did her own laundry, and she’d never asked him about menstruation, but he’d assumed it was because she already knew. He studied her and awkwardly asked, “You, uh, cycle regular, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked him innocently, her brow furrowed.

Joel gaped because how the hell was he going to explain that to Ellie? “Uh…”

Then her serious expression melted into an evil grin. She cackled, slapping her knee in merriment as she gasped, “Shit, Joel! The look on your face!”

Relief was too strong to get too mad. “Alright, alright. You’re a regular comedian. Jesus Christ…”

“Everything works down there as far as I know. Just...forget I said anything.”

“We can talk about it, Ellie,” Joel offered hesitantly.

“Well, I don’t want to.”

“You just asked—”

“Nope!”
He chuckled as she got up to pull on her coat. Ellie turned back impatiently, and he realized she was waiting on him. He hastened to follow.

It sat odd with Joel how Dina had changed since Jackson. He wondered how a girl so silly and indecisive in Jackson could possibly have the guts to direct this group of murderous people into an uncertain experiment. How had she gained their faith? If he hadn’t seen Dina weep for the fate of her people in front of Hare, there would be no doubt in Joel’s mind that Dina was leading her people into certain death. Revenge was easier to understand than what was driving her now.

That afternoon, Joel sat in one Dina’s services out of curiosity. Dina stood at the makeshift pulpit, her voice raised with her message: godliness by hope and forgiveness.

It was more reminiscent of Graham’s protestant sermons than her grandmother’s more measured lessons about Jewish faith and god. It fit the Seraphites crowded into the small worship hall.

Dina had changed because she had to. Even if her faith was the same, she twisted the Seraphite’s faith to fit her own. She’d done it out of necessity certainly, though he could only guess the kind of doubt it might fill her with.

Even Dina’s new walk perplexed Joel. She’d always had a long stride in Jackson, but she had never been so upright before. Now she moved like she had a place to be and couldn’t suffer taking too long to get there. Hell, maybe it was just the firmness of her face that had changed.

Little flashes of her old self came through—like he still saw some bits of his daughter in Sarah now—but for the most part, Dina was… Hell, she was like a young, fierce version of her grandma, especially standing in front of her congregation. That said, Joel didn’t think the woman Dina was now would have taken the shit Maria’s father dumped on Miriam after Outbreak.

Dina had never really liked Joel, not the way she’d liked everyone in Jackson. She’d tolerated him at best. Joel didn’t begrudge that though, not when the emotion sprang from how much she cared about Ellie. Hell, it was good Ellie had someone entirely on her side, even if he knew there would never be a conflict between them bad enough to require someone picking sides.

He’d wondered for months between knowing Ellie liked Dina and the girls getting together how the hell that was going to work out. It would’ve helped Ellie’s case if she’d just come clean to Dina, but he understood her fears. Love and sex were hard enough as a kid without adding the element of fear about sexuality in the mix.

Town gossip clued him in pretty quickly about Ellie and Dina kissing at the weekly dance, but he’d been dubious until he’d caught them making out behind the house the next week. Gossip wasn’t kind—it never was—but Joel wasn’t sure if he could discount all the things that were said about the situation. Like, say, that Dina had been with Jesse only the week before she’d turned to Ellie. Like the ugly whisper about how public they were—not that anyone had given a damn when Dina was like that with the two boys she’d dated in the past.

Ellie sure seemed giddy—didn’t tell him, the cuss—and Joel alternated between relief and concern. Was Dina using Ellie? It was a quick turn around from breaking up with someone else to going hot and heavy with Ellie. Was it an experiment? Joel thought he knew Dina well enough to answer those questions with a hard ‘no’, but he’d worried for Ellie’s sake.

The more pertinent question to Joel personally was if he should say anything and what the hell he would say. He didn’t want to burst Ellie’s bubble, and part of him thought she would need to figure this one out herself. On the other hand, Joel didn’t want her hurt, not when she’d been harboring
this crush for years.

Turned out his concerns were silly. He’d been worried about a broken heart, but the girls’ hearts were about the only parts of them intact.

After the service, Joel followed the Seraphites to the mess hall and accepted a tray of food. Across the cafeteria, his gaze kept returning to Dina. Her people bent over her ear as she ate, coaxing a rare smile or a stern response to their questions, sometimes after she conferred with the big woman next to her.

She’d entrenched herself in them—or them in her. He would’ve never thought she could be strong enough. In all this, Joel still couldn’t understand why she seemed to care so much about the people that kidnapped her, impregnated her, and mutilated her face.

The second time Dina caught him looking at her, she got to her feet to dispose of her dishes. Then her new, strong upright stride brought her to his table. She smiled without the expression reaching her eyes and asked, “May I?”

Still so polite. “Suit yourself.”

Dina took the empty seat next to him. He continued to eat, hardly tasting his food now. Dina was content to sit by him silently until he was done. Joel ventured, “You okay?”

She nodded as if really putting thought into the answer. Then she said, “Ellie told me about David. Finally. I used to think it was you. That you were the reason she’d flinch.”

“No,” Joel replied, not in the least bit surprised. “Don’t have that kind of evil in me.” No point in rehashing the charges Hare had leveled at him. FEDRA had slapped rape on his bounty because of the crew he ran with, but it wasn’t worth making the distinction.

“I understand that now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. You were just looking out for her.” He hesitated. Ellie had spoke of Dina’s pregnancy with enough firmness to realize it hadn’t been a bluff for Hare. Though Dina had been with a couple boys in Jackson, the timing of this circumstance worried him. “And that child of yours… Was its begetting by your choice?”

“Oh, Dina. I’m sorry.”

“Of course not.” Dina pressed her hand to her abdomen, still steady despite her certain answer. “If this baby survives, it will be because Ellie gave it her immunity. As far as I’m concerned, the baby is hers.”

“Oh, Dina. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said with a dark twist of her mouth. “We all had our parts to play. I have to believe it was for a reason. While I did the wrong thing for the right reason, Ellie did the right thing for the wrong reason.”

“What wrong did you do?”

Dina met his gaze unflinchingly. “I became them. Murder. Torture.”

“Versus what? Death? That ain’t anything but the right choice.”

Dina shook her head. “I would have thought I’d take death, but I wasn’t brave enough. Maybe that’s why I have to believe there was a guiding hand behind all of this. Ellie would just call it
dumb luck. Not to strip my own hand in this. I chose to sin.”

“You still believe in god?” Now that surprised him. Seemed that twisting her faith—or the Seraphites—would teach her the truth about the great beyond: that it was bullshit.

“I do.”

He was caught in the awkward need to reassure her. “Well…If he’s the god your grandma described, he’ll forgive you.”

“He can’t.” Dina looked up at Joel with a tight smile. “I can only be forgiven by those I’ve wronged, and they’re dead. There is no forgiveness for that. It’s something I’ll have to live with.”

He’d been thinking of Christ, hadn’t he? Funny how the few services he attended—and never bought into—as a kid could still shape his concept of religion. “Your religion didn’t account for this world.”

“My religion has been around for far worse than this world,” she said, anger finally putting a flush on her cheeks. Just as quickly, Dina gathered herself, her face settling into an oddly placid expression. “Thank you, though, Joel. I appreciate what you’re trying to tell me.”

He continued to watch her, studying the mask she’d slammed down. Was that how she’d survived all this? He couldn’t imagine what was going on behind those dark eyes. His prolonged attention made her look away.

“Is my family alive? Ellie said they were, but—”

“Yes. Your parents and your brother.”

“How many died?”

“About half.”

There was no way to soften that blow, and Dina choked out an incredulous laugh before she got herself under control again. She rested her hands on the table, focusing on them. “I’m glad so many survived. After Emily told me Jackson was gone, I didn’t let myself believe there was anything to go back to. I would have made different decisions had I known, but then I’d probably be dead.”

“Dina, Ellie fought like hell for you, one way or another. Revenge don’t push people to fight as hard as she did.” He hesitated as he considered his words. “What I’m saying is… Don’t waste this chance. You’ve been punished enough already for more than one lifetime. So go back to Jackson, start over, and put it behind you.”

“If we go back, how will I face them? What I’ve done is written on my face.”

“Who? Your family? They’ll want you home, Dina.”

“Even like this?”

Joel studied her: the familiar face, marked by more than her scars. He thought of Sarah and wondered if he’d said this plainly enough for his own daughter. “Honey, they’ll take you whatever way they can get you.”

“They’re not like you, Joel. My parents are…” She trailed off awkwardly.

“Good people?” Joel filled in her silence, smiling when she shot him a pained look. He was well
past taking offense to that. “You know, Sarah’s my daughter.”

Dina’s gaze sharpened abruptly. Joel accepted her attention as he worked his way through what he’d say next.

“I guess she’s caught up on doing wrong in the past. Thing is, the only thing I see is what I see now. Even if I can’t forgive what she did, I don’t give a damn because there ain’t nothing like seeing your child again when you were sure she was dead. So you go back home to your momma and daddy, and you let them love you. You hear me?”

Tears filled her eyes while Joel spoke, and Dina wiped them away, her fingers tracing the grooves of the scars next to her eyes. With her hands shielding her face from his gaze, her expression twisted into a grimace, either the approximation of a choked laugh or a sob. When Dina dropped her hands, there was resolve in her again. She nodded and replied, “I hear.”

Not a week after she’d been shot, Ellie was in the barn of all places, instructing one of the Seraphites on how to trim a cow’s foot. She looked up, spotted Joel, and pulled a face. Her bullet wound was scabbed up ugly, and the right side of her face was green and brown but slightly less swollen. It was still too damn early for her to be wrangling cattle.

She continued her lesson until the cow’s bad foot was trimmed up. She followed Joel into the heat of the morning, her farrier apron shifting her walk in a familiar way. She looked weirdly grown up in the thing. Ellie winced at the brightness of the sun but didn’t complain, probably only because he’d caught her being stupid.

“Still hurting?” he asked casually.

“Headache is pretty constant.”

“Sleeping any better?”

She gave a one-shouldered shrug. That was a ‘no’. He wished he could give her some of what had him so laid up the last week. The long look she turned on him communicated she thought he looked like shit too.

“Coming down here don’t help you none.”

“If I sit any longer, my ass is going to fall off.” She shoved her hands into her pockets in a defensive move he knew like the back of his hand.

“All it takes is a kick to the head, falling down.”

“These cows are docile as hell. I’m not messing with the bulls.”

A few years ago, he would have laid into her. Now, Joel just sighed in defeat. “Christ, baby girl. We all thought you were dead. Just…take it easy for a little while longer.”

She folded her arms and heaved a sigh too. Her small smile belied her irritation before worry wiped that expression off her face. “Joel, are you okay? Maybe Sarah should take a look at you. They really must have beat you bad.”

“It’s been a hard winter,” he admitted. “I’ll be fine, but I’d appreciate not having to worry so much about you.”
“Okay,” Ellie replied. She untied her farrier apron in a clear signal that filled him with relief. “Did you need something?”

“Wondering if you’ve seen Sarah.” He’d wanted to talk to her again all day after waking up to the realization that he hadn’t told her about Tommy. While Sarah might not have a it in her to be happy about Joel’s survival, maybe she’d be happy to hear about her uncle.

“I guess she’s not in the clinic.”

“No. Just came from there.”

“The soldiers?” Ellie’s brow furrowed, and she shook her head and turned back toward the barn. “Wait here.”

Joel considered Ellie’s concern. FEDRA’s little force remained in their camp outside the QZ, waiting for Sarah to finish ironing out what she needed to travel to San Francisco. There was plenty to iron out too, what with the willing healthy Seraphites taking CBI and the cure in one big group at a time.

The Seraphites were preparing to leave. Seattle’s QZ citizens seemed desperate to claw their settlement back together too. He’d walked in on a meeting between the QZ citizens, Dina, and Sarah the day before, but they hadn’t resumed their talk until he was well out of hearing.

When Ellie walked out of the barn, she kicked off her muck-covered boots onto the row of dirty barn shoes by the door. She shoved her hands into her pockets again and blew out a hard breath. “Sarah euthanized Rose this morning.”

“That’s the little girl with leukemia?”

“The one with cancer, yeah.”

Explained the disappearing act, at least. Joel met Ellie’s gaze. “Where do you reckon she went?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

They went together into the clinic once more. Joel looked around the clinic while Ellie ventured into quarantine. She returned looking agitated. Joel rocked to his feet in alarm.

“Yara and Lev entered the trial. Sarah’s kids. The Seraphites.”

“The girl with one arm?” Joel remembered her standing up to Hare with Dina. The girl had his respect for that, even if it had been a stupid decision. Pregnant and crippled, standing up to a grown man, daring him to martyr them. Now taking the cure, huh?

“Guess Sarah wouldn’t take too kindly to that.”

“You guess fucking right. I guess I’ll go find Dina and see if she knows.”

“Alright.” Joel watched Ellie leave and turned in the direction of quarantine. The kids were talking quietly to each other, their voices too soft for him to make out words. They went silent as he came into their line of sight. He settled on the chair in the hallway, considering the kids and their unnerving attention.

“Did Sarah say where she was going?”

“No,” the boy replied. The girl shot her brother a sharp glance, and he went silent, refusing to meet
Joel’s gaze again. He waited them out for a few minutes, but then one of Dina’s big guards stepped into the quarantine hallway, his hand on the pommel of his gun.

Then Ellie came in behind the man, seeming to have no issue with the Seraphite. Joel relaxed, surprised at how his heart rate had kicked up. Seemed the Seraphites had imprinted their terrifying reputation in him too.

“She’s on the roof.”

“You coming?” he asked Ellie when she remained at the infirmary doorway. She shook her head and scuffed her shoe on the floor. Her advice was, “Get her talking. Once she starts, she’ll talk herself out of the problem she’s built up in her head. When she starts pacing, you’re good.” Ellie met his gaze again. “She’s your kid, Joel. She needs you.”

He wasn’t so sure about that. Or about what the hell he could possibly say to help Sarah with what had probably been a succession of blows today.

When Joel stepped around the quarantine greenhouse, his attention jerked from Hare’s rapidly drying body to the broad line of Sarah’s back. She was sitting on the edge of the roof in a way that put his heart in his throat.

“You realize there are chairs, right?” Joel asked after he was sure he’d made enough noise to alert her.

Sarah turned and watched him. He saw no evidence of tears but plenty of unhappiness. He motioned to a rickety folding chair next to him. “Please. I’d appreciate it.”

It was a relief to see her unwind from her position. She moved gracefully for a woman so big. Sarah’s mother had been a formidable woman—even as young as they’d been—but Sarah was even bigger than her mother in height and probably weight. She settled herself onto the folding chair slowly; it shrieked as it accepted the last of her weight. She rested her forearms on the back, a perfect imitation of Ellie a few days prior. Sarah glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and remained silent. So, time to get her talking, huh?

“Can I see it? The scar?”

Without hesitation, Sarah extended her left arm across her body, and Joel carefully took her arm in his hand to study the inside of her wrist. It didn’t escape him that this was the first time he’d touched her skin in over twenty years. That thought was more surreal than remembering her walking out of quarantine just days before.

“Four days now?”

“One hundred two hours and counting.”

“And you have this parasite thing?”

“Yes. I suspect at least. The first group of Seraphites cleared quarantine too. The second is halfway through.”

“ Including those kids of yours?”

Her swallow was thick. “No. They have another forty hours.” Her hand shook as she pulled it back from him.
“Guess that pissed you off.” Joel hesitated. “Who gave them the cure?”

“Leah was complicit.”

The venom in Sarah’s voice startled him. He glanced at her. “You sure those kids didn’t just infect themselves and left her with no choice? Dina ain’t the type to coerce someone else against their will.”

Sarah pressed her face in her hands and exhaled a long, shaky breath. She offered no rebuttal, confirmation that Joel was right.

“Not so much fun on this side, is it?” Joel reflected.

“Fuck you.”

The callous statement startled him. More reminiscent of Ellie than Sarah, even if she said it more seriously than Ellie ever had. Joel took a breath that stretched his chest and leaned back in his seat. “Guess I deserved that, huh? How did you end up with those kids following you around?”

“They saved me from the hanging rope. Saved me a little more. Seemed like the least I could do was fix Yara enough to get the hell out of Seattle. Things went another way though.” She shook her head. “Yara survived all that, amputation surgery, and she could die to the fucking infection. Lev was healthy at least, but why go through with it at all?”

“You made the choice.”

“I did it so they wouldn’t have to. They’re just kids. It isn’t right. Probably all because they want to come with me to San Francisco. How the hell can I protect them there?”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know. I have some authority, or I hope I do, given my expertise. But I don’t know if I can protect them too. The kids strip my bargaining power. My threat would be suicide, taking the cure with me. Now those two kids could serve as guinea pigs even if I make good on that threat.”

“Didn’t you say you were at San Francisco before?”

“Yeah, eight years ago. I don’t know what the landscape is like now. Hernandez tells me it’s peaceful now. Civilized. As close to the old world as we can get now.” Sarah shook her head. “Maybe I won’t have to worry. If those kids killed themselves with this stunt—”

“Everyone’s made it out so far—”

“No. Someone in the second group turned today.” Sarah’s jaw clenched. “I can’t stand the wait.”

It took a moment for Joel to reassure himself his memory of Ellie saying the same thing was real. “I heard about the little girl too.”

It took her a minute to answer. She stared across the rooftops and heaved a shuddering sigh. “Twenty years ago, we could have fixed her, but all I could offer her was an overdose of fucking barbiturate.

“Her name was Rose. And I killed her.” Her breath shook as she exhaled, and she wiped her cheeks as if impatient with her own tears. This time, Joel had no words for her, no comfort, nothing but standing by her. It occurred to Joel that the patient she’d just killed was her first patient here in the
After she collected herself, she gruffly said, “Hell, this was a decision I agreed with.”

“That don’t make it easy.”

“You’d think actually doing it is the hard part. I was so happy I got a catheter in on the first stick, no redirecting either. She didn’t have any agonal breathing either, which was good. But, hell, why am I glad about those things? As I push the injection, I’m thinking about a thousand things like that so I’m dissociated. That’s the easy part.

“It’s their grief that kills me. Before and after. I’ve done enough of these to know… Sometimes they’re still, the loved ones. They just sort of wait until I listen for the heart to stop. Then when I say it has, they just break. I don’t know what the hell people wait for with their grief. They can’t hope their loved one will wake up. But…”

She’d stopped talking and didn’t seem like she would start again. His girl, after all these years. He’d been stupid to miss it. “You grieve for them too, don’t you?”

Joel thought she’d deny it out of the need to downplay her own emotions, but Sarah nodded. She wiped away a few more tears. “More than once. For the dying and the killing, for the failure too.”

“No one should have to carry that burden.”

“My entire career as a doctor seems defined by killing people, one way or another.”

“Ellie told me about you two doing surgery on that girl of yours. That’s not killing.”

Sarah heaved a shuddering sigh. They sat in silence for a long few minutes. Joel tried to catch her gaze, but Sarah was firmly in her own world. He finally said, “Look, now might not be the time, but I gotta thank you. For getting Ellie out of this alive. For what you did for her too—infecting yourself and all that.”

“I did it for her.”

“All the same. It means something to me too.”

Sarah’s gaze seemed oddly bright as she looked him up and down. “Sometimes I see my dad when I look at you.”

“Yeah?” He smiled and cupped his watch. “Sometimes I see my daughter when I look at you. Sarah… Do you want to tell me whatever it is that’s eating at you?”

Sarah chewed on her lip and the silence stretched. Then she shook her head with a sad smile. The chair creaked as she slouched onto it. She looked damn worn out, more tired that even Joel felt. “You said you didn’t kill any kids. I can’t say the same.”

She wasn’t talking about the little girl today. “For your research?” he asked quietly.

“No. Long time before that. At a scanning station. I’ve spent my entire life regretting that moment.”

Fucking FEDRA. Joel reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I get the feeling you’ll be disappointed in me no matter what I say, but I really don’t give a shit.”

She released a shuddering sigh and swallowed, wiping away a few tears discreetly. Her smile was
sad. “I would have thought that would matter to me. Guess not.”

She glanced at Joel’s wrist as he withdrew his hand from her shoulder. “You need a new watch.” Then her expression shifted as she leaned closer. Recognition raised her eyebrows in pure shock, and he was sure it was instinct that made her say, “Daddy, you kept it?”

It was a small thing, but he’d damn well take it. “Works just fine.”

“It’s broken.”

“That’s how I got it.” He wondered if she’d remember, and she did, offering a slight grin and a dry, “Ha-ha.”

“Sarah, Tommy’s alive. I thought you’d like to know. He lives where Ellie and I came from, and I’m sure he’d like to see you again.”

“I was sure he died that night.” Sarah’s smile blossomed for a moment, pure happiness and a kick to the gut for Joel. “Ellie said y’all live in Jackson?”

“Yeah. Little place in west Wyoming. Not a hard place to get to by foot.” He described the only path that could get a car to Jackson’s gates and tried not to read anything into the fact that she listened intently to the directions.

Sarah turned her gaze back to the QZ that surrounded them. Joel would give quite a bit to read her thoughts because she seemed beyond giving him words.

---

Hernandez was happy about the results of the trial. Only two Seraphites had died to CBI, and that included Sarah’s two kids making it through quarantine the hour before the meeting with FEDRA’s forces and the QZ citizens. The soldier offered a wide grin and leaned back in his chair with feigned nonchalance. “And they’re all immune now?”

“Stably infected, if you will,” Sarah responded, looking awkwardly formal in contrast to Hernandez’s sloppiness.

“You think they can spread the cure too, like you three?”

Well, goddamn, Joel had been blind to the reason Dina put her people through that trial. This wasn’t about religion, hope, or validation. This was about offering more than able bodies to a community. The Seraphites that took the cure couldn’t be infected, could possibly offer a cure, and could be used to fight off any threats of infection in a community without the need for a gas mask.

Joel studied Dina again, respect filling him for her ingenuity. With her big leather coat off, he could imagine her waist had thickened even as her face had leaned up. She looked exhausted but steady, probably feeling the effects of her people surviving that trial. What the hell was going on in that brain of hers?

Hernandez shoveled stew into his mouth as he spoke. “I didn’t want to fucking wait, but that was good enough news to keep me happy. How many more groups going through?”

“None. We’re done.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow then. Pack your shit up. Plenty of time to sleep in the truck. We need to get home ASAP. Fuck me, this is good.” He drank another gulp of milk and scooped up two big bites of beef stew. He said something with his mouth so full they couldn’t understand him. Joel
elbowed Ellie to wipe the disgusted expression off her face.

“When you leave, the Seraphites need to leave,” the QZ Director declared. He was still wearing his uniform with the his name patch: MATIAS. The formality of his uniform seemed out of place.

“Yes,” another QZ citizen said calmly. “And so do you, Matias. And your seconds.” The man listed four names steadily.

Matías’s shock was easy to read despite the swelling and discoloration that distorted his face. The QZ man raised his eyebrows. “I trust I don’t have to list all the reasons why.”

“I protected you, Nyugen. I—”

“Shut up, Matias,” Sarah said sharply, and strangely, he did.

Nyugen, who apparently was the spokesperson for the QZ, continued, “Leah, we’ll give your people eight horses and supplies for a week of travel. But you need to take every Seraphite with you when FEDRA leaves. And you’ll never return here.”

Dina nodded calmly. “Of course. Thank you for your generosity.”

“Hernandez, you’ll give one of your trucks to the Seraphites.”

The exchange seemed rather rehearsed to Joel, though Hernandez was obviously not in the loop on it. He blinked at Sarah and the QZ man as if taken aback by the demand. Nyugen said, “We’ll be willing to part with some supplies for your journey back as well, Hernandez, including some ammunition and fuel—only if you comply to our request.”

“I guess the truck aids the cult leaving you in peace quickly, doesn’t it?” Hernandez’s smile spread. “Driving a double-bargain. Fuck you, Miller. Take the goddamn truck. No skin off my balls.” He ate another large bite and spoke around the food in his mouth. “You think this cure’ll stand up to infected animals?”

Sarah seemed adept at keeping up with Hernandez’s odd jumps in topic. She replied readily, “Are you sure it was infected?”

“I am,” Joel responded. “Bears don’t click.” He remembered that encounter with an uncomfortable jolt. The wrongness of that beast still raised the hairs on his neck. A bigger worry about the possibilities of that new threat put a few extra pounds on his shoulders.

Sarah gave him a long look he couldn’t interpret. “I wouldn’t know if we’re immune to it, not without studying the strain of infection in that particular animal. It might not be viable in humans anyway. I can say I’m more likely to survive than before taking the cure.”

“Good point. Anything is better than dead. And I guess getting mauled by an infected bear isn’t much different than getting mauled by a regular bear. You remember that bear guy that got eaten back when we were kids? They found, like, two parts of him intact. Nev—”

“Hernandez.” When he went quiet, Sarah continued, “I need to start packing.”

Alright then. Leaving tomorrow at sunrise. Have your shit in boxes so we can load up quick.” Hernandez rose without ceremony and reached across the table. Joel hesitated before he took Hernandez’s hand. “Nothing personal about your time with us, sir. You have my respect for making it through all that.”
“Take care of her.”

Hernandez glanced at Sarah, his lips flickering with a ghost of a smile. It was the only true emotion Joel had seen cross his face. “She’s never needed that, sir.”

Joel followed their small group of allies to the infirmary. He helped pack up the many papers, books, and supplies within the lab. Sarah busied herself working on her samples, labeling each cooler to be packed closer to leaving time.

Eventually, Dina came by with food. They paused in their tasks to eat quickly.

“So…” Ellie finally ventured. “Where are we going?”

Dina met her gaze over her cup. “The only thing I know is we can’t stay. Rightfully so.”

“We… So the Seraphites are coming with us.”

“Yes.”

“We’re all going to Jackson, then.”

“Where else would we go?”

“Not a QZ, that’s for damn sure,” Joel muttered.

“Will Jackson let them stay too?”

“Yes.” Dina didn’t sound certain, and Ellie challenged her immediately with, “And if they don’t?”

“Then…” Dina sighed and shook her head as she lost all pretense of certainty. “I guess I’ll have to find us a new home.”

An ultimatum to match the sacrifice she’d asked of her people. Somehow Joel didn’t expect any different. It filled him with worry more palpable than he cared to feel. Ellie didn’t seem surprised. She shrugged and shoved her hands into her pockets. “Probably a moot point anyway, given the military breathing down our necks. Why do you trust that guy, Sarah?”

“He’s an asshole, but that’s the way he lives with himself. He’s not a bad guy.”


Sarah’s expression had opened in discomfort, but she relaxed as Ellie’s dry tone betrayed her levity. “At least it isn’t by shitty jokes.”

“My jokes are awesome, dick.” Ellie turned to Dina, who shook herself to offer a smile and said, “You have the best jokes, Ellie.”

“She has to say that. She loves you.” Sarah slowly set down the files in her hands, her sigh long and tired. Then she squared her shoulders and offered a smile. “Take care of yourselves. You too, Joel.”

It was enough that she said it. He offered Sarah a smile. “I reckon I can try.”

They were as packed up and ready to go as they could be by the end of that long night. They’d
leave in two groups: bound for San Francisco and Jackson. The Seattle QZers seemed as anxious to get everyone out as the others were to leave. Seattle wasn’t quite crippled, but the Seraphites had gutted it all the same.

Hell, maybe it wasn’t fair that Hare’s justice hadn’t been meted out, but the Seraphites that had survived were all victims to their own organization in one way or another. That said, Joel didn’t have much sympathy for the old guard: Hannah and Esau and the like. But the younguns…they hadn’t deserved it any more than Seattle did.

As for Sarah, if she was leading research, surely she wouldn’t be a human guinea pig. Hopefully San Francisco was as good, safe a place as Hernandez claimed. Joel spied Sarah in conversation with Hernandez. She’d cut her hair short overnight, a startling change after finally getting the picture of her right in his head. Hernandez muttered something that made Sarah frown and reply.

Then Ellie tapped her arm, and Sarah’s smile was immediate as she exchanged a few words with her.

How the hell was he going to say goodbye to her? Joel had never had the chance to say goodbye before their world ended. He’d thought of it abstractly as she grew: goodbye on the first day of college, goodbye when she walked down the wedding aisle, goodbye when he was on his deathbed. He’d never banked on getting this chance again. Joel was on a weird emotional edge, tongue-tied and strangely fearful.

When Sarah released Ellie from their embrace, Joel and Sarah studied each other for a moment. Then Sarah opened her arms.

Unlike the too-short, unfamiliar hug they’d shared after the QZ battle, this one was firm and full. Joel pulled her flush as his fear eased, and she softened into his grip. Even thirty years couldn’t span the gap between the child he remembered and the woman who stood his height, but there was something about her smell that was still familiar. He wished he had had the opportunity for her to walk all over him as she grew.

“Take care of yourself, Sarah.”


“I love you, Sarah. That’ll never change. And I’m proud of you. Don’t ever doubt that.”

She shifted, and he took her cue to let go. She raised her gaze, her bright blue eyes familiar in the moment. “For what it’s worth, I’m not sorry I met you again.”

Joel cleared his throat and nodded, accepting her statement for what it was. Sarah’s gaze went to Ellie and Dina, and her expression softened. “Look after them.”

“I reckon they can look after themselves, but I will.”

He didn’t reach for her when she stepped away. Instead, Joel followed her suddenly wary gaze to the group of armed QZers that watched the preparations for departure. Unwelcoming was a kind word for the way they were now. It made Joel worry for what they’d find in Jackson. If he knew anything it was that there were all kinds of hate in the world.

Then he followed Sarah’s attention to where the two kids of hers were hugging their scarred friends and family. He wondered at the emotion they showed each other and then about what would draw them from the only people they’d ever known. Yara and Lev were following a stranger into a strange land.
All sorts of love in the world too, maybe.

Half an hour later, Joel shifted in his saddle to look over his shoulder at the line of military trucks driving south from Seattle. He took a deep breath, turned his horse around, and spotted Ellie’s red hair shining bright under the sun. With a snick and clench, he urged his horse into a trot to catch up with his future.

Chapter End Notes

Note: The description Sarah uses of prosopagnosia and lack of emotional recognition of loved ones (Capgras Syndrome) is an outdated theory. Forgive me.

I struggled with how to end this story, and then I struggled with the tone and meaning. There is a great deal more to write, but in the interest of completing the story instead of keeping it in limbo, I had to end it.

As always, thank you for the feedback, and sorry for the delay. Epilogue to follow (hopefully within a few days).
The scent of horse could always put Ellie at ease. She studied the field from where she leaned up against her mare’s side, feeling as relaxed as she ever did. Wind swept across the high grass, shaking it in squeaks and flutters. Ellie let Rainbow graze, listening to the heavy grind of her teeth. She was pleased her horse was eating readily, then pleased when Rainbow dropped horse shit onto the ground.

They’d had a bit of a scare that week, the two of them. Ellie rubbed Rainbow’s strong neck, and Rainbow paused in her grazing to nibble at Ellie’s sleeve.

Ellie lived for these moments of solitude. Jackson was smaller than Boston, but sometimes being so close-knit meant there was no peace. Boston allowed anonymity, but everyone knew her here. Even her day-to-day job working with Jackson’s animals gave her little peace. She coordinated workers and followed Jerry’s commands when they rarely came. He’d given her more and more autonomy as the months passed.

Sundays, though… Sunday mornings were recharge time. They recharged Dina too, in a different way. Dina thrived off of other people, loving the opportunity to lead Jackson’s religious service every other week. It couldn’t be any other way, not with the ex-Seraphites still following her religiously.

Ellie paused to congratulate herself for that unintentional pun.

As much as Ellie wished she could spend the whole day here, she knew it would soon be time to head back home. After-church Sunday dinner was a family tradition, one that included Dina’s family, Joel, and Tommy’s family. They also usually hosted a few guests. After lunch, everyone would disperse, but Dina would have her own private worship. Ellie would sit with their little family because she was expected to, but Ellie tended to read through her mother’s medical texts while Dina read from her bible.

Same difference, but she knew better than to say it aloud.

At nightfall, they’d eat a simple meal and turn in early except on nights that Jackson hosted a dance in the church. Ellie used to dread those stupid functions, but she looked forward to Dina so unreservedly enjoying herself. She liked them too much for Ellie to begrudge the energy-sucking socialness of them.

And the baby...

Well, the baby was a complication, an enormous one. It helped to have the support of their families. Thank god for Joel. Ellie paused to rub her mare’s nose and figured that was the only way to put it: thank god for Joel. Even with the shit, piss, vomit, screams, tears, tantrums, messes, and time-sucking burdens of a baby, Ellie came out of it without regrets. There were still a shit-ton of things about motherhood that boggled her, but a lot of other things made complete sense now.

At this point in her life, Anna wasn’t quite so awe-inspiring all the time. That’s what happened when the concept of a human gradually became a human. And all the shit, piss, vomit, etc. Then again, her laughter and smiles trumped it all. It was telling when the feat of rolling over seemed
like a friggin’ miracle. And walking, and talking…

“Now you, Rainbow, you managed to walk in a couple hours, and nobody was there to tell you how awesome that was. Why is my kid walking so amazing, huh?”

Rainbow snorted and sneezed.

The horse seemed pleased when Ellie climbed up on her back. She practically pranced until Ellie directed Rainbow to south edge of the field using only a halter and lead. From there, Ellie watched the church for signs of the end of the service. A few people wandered down the streets of Jackson, and the lookout towers were all occupied, but the town was quiet with most of its population in one building.

After a few minutes soaking up the quiet, Ellie saw the doors of the church open to release a stream of Jackson’s citizens back into the real world.

It was time to go home.

Ellie spooned another bite of potato into Anna’s mouth, and Anna pulled a face as she ate half of it. She’d been such a good eater just a few months ago, but now almost half of what she’d enjoyed before was rejected with a pouty frown.

Even engine noises and a flying spoon were useless; Anna looked at Ellie like she was an idiot. It didn’t help that Ellie felt that way. She had a better chance of making a colicy horse eat than her own kid.

Now Anna just stared at Ellie in that weird flat way babies did. Ellie blew a raspberry at her, which prompted an abrupt grin that showed off her five teeth. Her eyes were hazel, but everyone was sure they’d darken to brown just like Dina’s. So far her hair remained a stubborn bright red. Poor thing.

“Yours got darker,” Joel pointed out a few weeks ago. As if that had anything to do with anything.

“Mine didn’t,” Levi said, scratching his red beard. He turned to his granddaughter. “Sorry, baby.”

Anna giggled and declared, “Shit!”

Both men had burst into laughter while Ellie contemplated her likelihood of sleeping on the couch.

Now Anna turned away from Ellie’s offered spoon of roast beef with her mouth screwed up like Ellie was insulting her. With a sigh, Ellie set the spoon on her plate. “Fine. Have it your way. You’re going to get food in your hair, but you better tell your mom it’s your fault.”

Content to eat now, Anna set her hand on the spoon handle, and Ellie helped her balance it until it went half in her mouth, half in her bib. Stubborn, independent little cuss. Anna refused another bite.

Time to pull out the big guns. “You want a piece of cheese? Eat this bite first.”

That did it. Like training a dog. Anna ate a bite or two for tiny wedges of cheese until she signaled she was all done. Not a bad meal for her. Dina walked by and dropped a kiss to her neck, provoking a giggle of delight and a happy, “Momma!”

Looking at her now, those stupid creepy picture books were all starting to make sense.

It hadn’t been all sunshine and daisies. The opposite, really. That went with the fragile peace
within their community. Ellie didn’t know why she assumed everything would magically fix itself when Jackson accepted the Seraphites into their community. She should have realized there was no going back, not even within Dina.

Dina had been so happy before her kidnapping, but she carried a pervasive darkness now: guilt or sorrow or deep-rooted anxiety from all the shit she’d been through. Hell, maybe it was all of the above.

Ellie did her best to help even as she battled her own demons, but in the end, sometimes all they could do was just be there for each other. Talking helped, even if it was just to say, ‘Hey, I had a nightmare’ or ‘I feel everything’s going to end right now’ or ‘I just need to be alone for a couple hours’. They were muddling through as best they could.

Sometimes happiness was only a small thing: a strum on the guitar, a hand of cards with friends, a short hike with Joel, or just sitting with family on the porch to watch the sun set. Sometimes it was hard to find even those tastes of happiness, but Ellie realized just a few months ago she’d never expected even this. Just like with Anna, Ellie would take the bad for all the good that came too.

Ellie left Anna downstairs after dinner so her grandmother could read to her before her nap. Anna’s room was clean, though messy, and Ellie yelped when she stepped on a wooden block toy right in the middle of the old rug. She bent down to pick up the scattered toys for her own safety.

With that done, Ellie inspected the screen on Anna’s window for holes before she opened it. She studied the bars beyond the screen, gave the entire structure a good shake, and was confident an animal couldn’t get through. Ellie pulled the screen frame down and paused to study the new scar that transected her ferns. Gabby had mentioned a plan to touch her tattoo up, but Ellie hadn’t pursued it further.

“Hey.”

A hand slid over her shoulder, and she jumped. Dina raised an eyebrow, her smile mischievous. She leaned up against Ellie’s shoulder and brushed her hair aside to kiss her neck.

“Lost in thought?”

Ellie nodded when Dina smoothed a hand over her tattoo. Her dark eyes searched Ellie’s. “Okay?”

“Yeah.”

Dina pulled Ellie around to press more kisses to her neck. Ellie’s body woke up even as her brain told her not to judge intent on those...well, intentional kisses. They’d been working through their scars a little at a time, but it was best not to expect anything from Dina, who struggled sometimes to engage emotionally even when she had Ellie coming apart under her touch.

Dina had shut the door and locked it from the inside. Ellie had been meaning to flip the lock around so Anna couldn’t accidentally lock them out, but apparently Dina wanted one last hurrah before that happened.

“Everyone’s downstairs,” Ellie protested as Dina pushed her shirt off her shoulders.

“Down stairs,” she breathed into Ellie’s ear.

“It’s Sabbath.”
“There’s nothing impure about making love with my wife on Sabbath.” Dina unbuckled Ellie’s belt and opened the fly on her jeans.

“That can’t be right.”

Dina kissed her hard and looked impishly amused when she asked, “Do you really want to argue Rabbinic law with me right now?”

It had to be sacrilegious to discuss whatever Rabbinic law was while Dina massaged Ellie’s crotch. Had Dina’s grandmother talked to her about this? Ellie pushed the thought away quickly.

“Uh… No, not really.”

“Mmmhm.” Despite her levity, Dina looked at Ellie in a way that took Ellie back to before, like Dina’s love was written plain on her face. Ellie lost all will to protest. She dropped to the floor, partly distracted by the fact she’d done it so hard that someone downstairs could hear it, and Dina covered her up a moment later.

It was fast, but the connection that sometimes was missing between them was there, burning bright in Dina’s delight and happiness with Ellie’s pleasure. And, best of all, she accepted Ellie’s touch eagerly and responded just as passionately.

They dressed quickly after they came to a gasping finish. Instead of going downstairs, they sat together against Anna’s crib. Dina rested her head on Ellie’s shoulder, turning to press a kiss to her neck. Ellie rounded Dina’s back with her arm, stroking her side absently.

“That was spontaneous.”

“I couldn’t wait.”

That could mean anything from Dina really wanting Ellie to being worried that the darkness of nightfall would turn her mood contemplative. Sometimes it was best not to linger on the possibilities, though Ellie said, “You feeling okay?”

“Mmmhm.”

“You’ll tell me if something comes up?”

“Yes, Ellie.” Dina pulled Ellie’s hand around to play with the gold band on her ring finger. “Speaking of, you seem to be feeling better.”

“Yeah. Rainbow pooped last night and grazed this morning. I hate how fragile horses are. How the hell do they live in the wild?”

“Not very long, probably.”

“Probably. I’m just not ready to turn her into dog food, I guess.”

“Oh, Ellie… You’re too sweet for your own good.”

“Fuck you too.” She accepted Dina’s light kiss.

They listened as heavy footsteps came up the stairs and walked down the hall. A firm knock sounded on the door. Before the man spoke, Ellie knew it was Dina’s father. Ellie had finally gotten used to the full house they’d been sharing with Dina’s family.
“Dina, Ellie? There’s a military truck outside Jackson. And some people that are asking for you.”

There was only one person from the greater QZs that could be asking for Ellie by name. Ellie climbed the watch tower overlooking the front gate of Jackson with her heart beating high in her throat, fearful for what she might not see.

One look over the wall shattered her fears. No one but Sarah could cut that figure, even with her blonde hair falling around her jaw instead of the braid Ellie still imagined. The two dark-haired siblings with her further cemented her identity.

“That her?” Tommy asked beside her, a subtle shake in his voice.

“Yeah. That’s her.”

“I’ll be goddamned.” His voice went hoarse, and he had to clear it to continue. “She really grew up, didn’t she? And those two kids? You said they were part of the Seraphites.”

“Yeah. Yara and Lev. I’m sure that’s them.”

“What about the other one with them?”

Ellie glanced at the other uniformed woman and shook her head. “Don’t know her. But if Sarah brought her, she’s fine.”

“I still gonna need them to disarm and back away from the truck.”

Climbing from the watch tower down to the edge of the wall could be precarious sometimes, but Ellie had done it enough not to be worried. She perched there, raised her hand in a wave, and was happy as hell to see Sarah’s white teeth flash in recognition. Sarah waved back.

“Hey! Took you long enough!” Ellie shouted down.

“Saving the world takes some time, Ellie!”

Ellie laughed and shook her head. She shouted down further instructions, and Sarah and her group followed them. Within ten minutes, the gates of Jackson opened enough to admit the group, and Ellie was right there to get swept up in Sarah’s so-familiar hug. She let herself be enveloped and folded within Sarah’s arms, taking a moment just to soak her in: her smell, her warmth, and the whisper of her breath.

Ellie pulled back to study Sarah, to ask if she’d really done it, but she lost her chance. Tommy swore as he cupped Sarah’s jaw, and they came together in an immediate intimate hug, the kind Sarah hadn’t wanted from Joel. Instead of the stiffness she’d had with Joel, Sarah laughed and slapped Tommy’s back.

Sarah looked good. She looked really good. The light caught her mouth funny, and it took Ellie a minute to realize she had a few new scars. Even with that evidence of violence, something about the way she moved her face—the ease of her smile maybe—made Sarah seem years younger. It was as if she’d shed something dark from inside her in the time they’d been separated.

Lev and Yara were met with their own group of happy family and friends deeper in Jackson. Ellie lingered behind the laughing, joyful congregation, feeling a little left out, even more so when Joel strode up with his carpenter apron still on. Sarah and Joel’s approach and first hug were hesitant, but then Joel cupped the back of Sarah’s neck, and they spoke to each other too softly to make out.
Something in Joel’s head shake and smile made a part of Ellie twist up tight. She felt selfishly forlorn.

Then both Joel and Sarah turned around, spotted her, and waved her over to them.

“Stupid asshole,” she muttered to herself, blinking back her tears. This wasn’t a goddamn competition, and there was room enough in Jackson for all three of them.

Even with more than a few helpers, it took some time to get all the supplies from Sarah’s truck unpacked. She brought a plethora of items, all carefully selected to be useful, ranging from corn to tetanus vaccines. Sarah got to meet a variety of Jackson residents as they dropped off most of the supplies at the church and the rest of it at the clinic, and she seemed surprised by everyone who recognized her.

In the clinic, Gabby took one look at Sarah and gaped. “You’re the doctor?”

With her shirt rolled up to her elbows to display her corded forearms, Sarah didn’t exactly fit the part.

“So is Natalia.” Sarah put a hand on the other soldier’s shoulder with familiarity. Gabby greeted Sarah’s companion far more politely, shaking her hand and giving a short tour of the place. Sarah surveyed the clinic with approval, and Ellie could already picture her running the place—likely with Gabby’s relieved blessing—within the week.

“Dr. Miller?” Dina strode into the clinic with Anna in her arms. She gave Ellie an indecipherable look, one that meant they’d be in for a long conversation soon, but those talks had finally stopped scaring Ellie. Sarah caught sight of the baby on Dina’s hip and looked overwhelmed for a single moment before her expression melted into a smile. “Hello, Leah. Is that your daughter?”

“Yes. Say ‘hello’, Anna.”

Sarah sobered. “Hello, Anna. I’m Sarah.”

As expected, Anna didn’t say hello. She shoved a finger up one nostril and gave Sarah the thousand-yard stare. Sarah wasn’t immune to the disarming nature of that greeting. She stifled a laugh and said, “Well, aren’t you adorable?”

As soon as she was addressed again, Anna—still with a finger in her nose—turned her head, feigning shyness. Little flirt. Dina unceremoniously passed Anna to Ellie and kissed Anna’s cheek. “She needs to nap.”

“You want me to put her down?”

Dina walked away with a wave, which meant ‘yes’. Ellie glanced at the baby in her arms, wondering if this would be a happy pass or a mad pass. Anna settled her head on Ellie’s shoulder sweetly and then darted a shy look at Sarah. On her best behavior for the pretty lady, apparently. Ellie glanced at Sarah helplessly. “Guess I have to get this wild beast wrangled.”

Sarah touched Ellie’s sleeve. “I’d like to talk with you later. In private.”

There was nothing in Sarah’s expression to betray her intent. Ellie decided the foreboding words didn’t dampen her desire to do just that. “Come by tonight if you can. Joel knows where I live.”
Sarah came around just after nightfall, apologizing for interrupting the tail-end of dinner. Not that it mattered; Ellie had set aside plates aside for Sarah and Joel because the chances of them feeding themselves were slim to none. Ellie walked out on the porch to greet them both, pointed Joel inside to eat with a stern stare, and paused at the sight of several boxes stacked up next to the porch railing. Sarah patted the top box.

“I brought you something.”

“That had better not be different ways to poke me.”

Sarah’s smile was gentle. “I promise.”

They studied each other in an odd moment of silence. Then Sarah stepped forward, and Ellie sank into her arms again. “You look good,” Ellie said into Sarah’s shirt.

“So do you.”

“I’m really glad you’re here.”

“I am too, kiddo.”

Ellie wiped away her tears in irritation. “Okay, enough of this stupid emotional shit. What’s in the boxes?”

“Let’s take them inside.”

Once inside, they argued about whether to open the boxes now or wait until Sarah had eaten. Then Dina strode into the den, directed Sarah into an old recliner, and set a plate of food in her lap. “Just do both at the same time, you idiots.”

The rest of the family followed, Joel with his own half-eaten plate of dinner. Generally, they didn’t use the electric lights after nightfall on Sundays, but today, Dina walked over to turn on the overhead.

Anna toddled to one box and stood against it, gazing up at Sarah with a wide, interested stare. Her hair was tied on top of her head in a curly red spout in preparation for her bedtime, and she wore her favorite pink pajamas. She held her hand up in a wave, come-hither gesture.

“Hi again, Anna,” Sarah said as she leaned closer.

“Shit,” Anna pronounced.

This time, Dina shot Ellie a deceptively innocuous look, one that made Ellie wince. Sarah wasn’t
distracted. “Ellie, Ben kept all of his wife’s possessions. Everything. I may not have clear memories of her, but…” Sarah opened the first box and handed Ellie a book from within it. Ellie stared at the bright print and illustration on the cover before she turned it over.

“What is this?”

“A yearbook, from school. Pre-Outbreak. She was probably thirteen. I marked the page.”

Ellie found the tab and took no time at all to find the small picture of a hauntingly familiar face. That was Ellie, with greener eyes and a wider smile. And glasses and metal wires on her teeth. Below the picture were the printed words: ANNA WALSH.

“Turn to the last page.”

Ellie did. There were small handwritten paragraphs in a range of colors, all written by other kids proclaiming how much they liked Anna, how they wanted to do certain activities together, and how smart she was.

Before Ellie was ready, Sarah set another heavy book in her lap. Ellie wasted no time opening it, but she was shocked into stillness by the glossy stickers, illustrations, and photographs. Sarah nudged the first page, and Ellie flipped it over. She didn’t need Sarah to point out the picture of interest.

Anna and Marlene looked young, younger than Ellie was now. They stood with their arms around each other’s bare shoulders against a backdrop of impossibly blue water. They were both grinning at the camera. Ellie was stunned by how much the picture reminded her of herself and Riley.

She brushed tears from the book and her face impatiently. Sarah caught her attention again. “I wish I could give you more information about your mother, Ellie, but you’ll get more from this than I could ever give you.”

It hadn’t been a hard decision to give up on her mother in Seattle, but having her in reach now meant more than Ellie would have guessed. Ellie had to clear her throat twice to say, “I didn’t think… Thanks, Sarah.”

Her attention focused entirely on the treasure trove of memories within those boxes for the rest of the night. Long after Anna was put to bed and Joel left with Sarah, Ellie poured over the pictures, notes, report cards, essays, and letters. Every treasure had been touched in some way by Anna Walsh.

Sometime later, Dina sank down behind Ellie and cupped her cheek to draw her attention. “Ellie, come to bed. It’s the middle of the night.”

“Sorry, I just…”

Dina kissed her forehead. “I know, but it’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Sorry, I just…”

Dina kissed her forehead. “I know, but it’ll be here tomorrow.”

Ellie slept poorly, wrapped up in the odd agitated excitement of knowing she had so much to discover about her mother. She hated to leave it all behind to work, but the herds didn’t stop just because Ellie had something she wanted to do more. By the time she finished her work for the day, it was late afternoon. She ached from head to toe, and that physical exhaustion compounded her mental weariness. Her enthusiasm still burned bright, but the need to rest weighed heavy.

She pulled up short when she saw Sarah leaning against the paddock fence that paralleled Broadway. Instead of fatigues, Sarah wore jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt. She raised her hand in a
lazy wave and asked, “Can I walk you home?”

Something silver caught the sunlight as Sarah moved her hand, and Ellie’s realization dropped like a stone in her gut.

“What?” Sarah straightened in alarm.

“You got married?”

Sarah looked at her own hand as if surprised by it. “Yeah,” she said, sounding just as surprised as she looked.

“You and the other doctor?”

The smile on Sarah’s face faded into wariness. “No. Not to Nat.”

Her voice was thick when she asked, “Where’s your wife, Sarah?”

“Ellie…”

What a fucking bitter pill to swallow. Ellie turned away and shook her head. She didn’t bother to disguise her disgust. “You aren’t staying, are you?”

“I can for a few weeks. Maybe a month if I stretch it.”

“Jesus Christ, I can’t believe this.”

“Ellie, don’t do this.”

Ellie turned away in anger. Her sleepless night meant tears burned her eyes faster than they should’ve. She was as pissed at herself as with Sarah. It wasn’t like Sarah had promised to come live in Jackson. Ellie built up the possibility in her head all on her own. “So what is this? A long goodbye?”

“It’s an hasta la vista. There were a couple more sequels.”

“I got the reference, thanks,” Ellie muttered sarcastically.

The silence between them stretched. Sarah seemed just as disappointed as Ellie was. “Why are you so angry?”

“Because you’re perfect!” The gobsmacked look on Sarah’s face would have made Ellie laugh at any other time, but now she could only shake her head bitterly. “After everything you’ve done for me, you’re surprised? You even brought me my mother. Goddammit, I fucking like you.”

The line of Sarah’s shoulders loosened, and her lips pursed in an unhappy smile. “What am I going to do when you realize I’m not?” Her smile faded as she studied Ellie. Sarah folded her arms in front of her in the most defensive move Ellie had ever seen her make. “Ellie, I missed you too. It wasn’t an easy decision, but I still feel like it’s the right one. I have a life in San Francisco. A career.”

“A wife.”

“A very worried wife who thinks I might not come back.” Sarah paced away. She rubbed the back of her neck and winced. “The only reason I would stay here would be you.”
Of all the shitty things to say… It was like expecting a cold draw from the hose and getting burned by sun-scalded water instead. “Not Joel?” Then Ellie thought of the other part of this mess. “Jesus, does he know?”

“Yes, he knows, and he’s not a factor in this.” Something in the way Sarah said it suggested Ellie would be treading on thin ice to push. “I don’t know what to tell you other than: I will come back. Trust me on that. But for the first time in my life, the thought of leaving a place, not of staying there, scares me. Can you understand that?”

Against her own anger, Ellie got it. Just the memory of the fear that had whispered in her ear for months that Jackson would turn them away was enough to drag her sympathy out kicking and screaming. Ellie looked at her own wedding band—Dina’s grandmother’s keepsake—and twisted it around her ring finger. She blew out a hard breath and nodded.

“Yeah. I get it. I’m just disappointed.”

Sarah cleared her throat, tears shining in her own eyes. “I’m sorry. I really am. I’ll try to come back regularly. Hell, maybe one of these days you can come visit me in the city.”

“Maybe.”

“Are we good, Ellie?”

“Yeah.” She nodded and looked up. “We’re good, Sarah.”

Ellie meant it, and the long look Sarah gave her communicated she didn’t take that for granted. They loitered awkwardly in the middle of the road before Ellie led Sarah over to the sturdy fence that marked the start of the second herd’s field. They climbed up onto it to face the yellow grassy expanse, comfortable in their silence. In the near distance, a few high peaks broke the skyline. Ellie closed her eyes, scenting cattle and taking in the soft rustle of the tall grasses that surrounded them.

“It’s too quiet here. I’d go crazy.”

Ellie was surprised by her bark of laughter. “I was just thinking how much I love it. Joel and I traveled in this kind of quiet. Probably the safest I ever felt in my li—” Ellie jerked her head around as she realized, “Shit, I never asked! Did you do it? Did you spread my cure?”

Sarah’s smile bloomed into a grin, and Ellie couldn’t help but reflect that grin as she read the triumph in that expression. Hope buoyed her; then an emotion too complex to name brought those damn tears out again. Ellie looked away as she swallowed against the pressure in her throat. “Of fucking course you did.”

Sarah reached out to grip the back of Ellie’s neck the same way Joel did when he was feeling affectionate, and the gesture only made the pressure worse. Ellie pressed her fingers to her eyes and choked out a laugh. Sarah squeezed gently. “For the first time in thirty years, we have a successful treatment for CBI. All because of you, Ellie.”

Incredulous laughter was the only proper response. “You were the one who did it! I just kissed a few people.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes before Sarah let Ellie go. She turned to study the fields again and said, “Funny how it opened up the doors to cooperation. There’s talk of reestablishing contact with smaller settlements like Jackson, drawing everyone into the fold to gain access to the
post-exposure treatment. We hope the hyperparasite can be utilized to clean up the environment too, destroying fruiting bodies to reduce the number of human exposures.”

“How about infected animals?”

Sarah’s smile faded. “Rare, thankfully, but because they’re rare, we’ve only studied a couple carcasses. Not enough data to make any conclusions.”

“I got bit by one a few weeks ago. A racoon put out spores that infected one of our dogs. Made it through quarantine again.” Ellie raised her right arm so Sarah could see the scar that misaligned her ferns. The look of fascination on Sarah’s face prompted Ellie to heave an all-suffering sigh. “Shit, now you want to poke me again.”

“Ellie, I will always want to poke you.”

Ellie couldn’t stifle her cackle, and Sarah broke down into surprisingly sweet giggles for a woman her size. They paused in their conversation to watch a line of cattle in the field trot over to stand in a row and stare at them. Sarah seemed spooked at first, though Ellie saw nothing threatening in her dairy girls. She smooched at her ladies and only got a few tongue-in-nostrils in reply.

“Any health consequences to my little parasite?”

“Why are they staring at us?”

“I feed them every day from this fence. Sarah, focus. Is it safe?”

Without taking her eyes from the cows, Sarah answered, “So far. We just don’t know yet about long-term consequences: Alzheimer’s, meningitis, cancer. The hardest part on the body is the CBI, at least acutely.” She affected a casual tone, but Ellie sensed Sarah’s words were anything but. “You know something I never figured out though?”

“You not knowing something? I don’t believe it.”

Sarah didn’t laugh. Her sudden stare was vehement enough to command all of Ellie’s attention.

“We had to inoculate two women who were exposed to the fungus, but we found out later they were pregnant, likely at the time of infection and post-exposure treatment. Their babies were born completely normal. I went to them privately, and they let me take samples from their children. Both of those babies had a small amount of antibody to the hyperparasite but none to the fungus. The antibody was from them, not their mothers. I suspect they’ll be immune if exposed to ophiocordyceps. That your little girl will be too.”

Sarah let that point hang for a moment before continuing, “Your mother was the foremost expert on the hyperparasite at the time of her disappearance. And then you wind up with it in your CBI fifteen years later. Makes you wonder.”

Ellie looked away, shaken by the certainty she read in Sarah’s eyes. She could invent a thousand ways that the theory didn’t make sense, but… She turned her skeptical mind off and let Sarah’s suggestion settle into her bones.

Why the fuck not?

Anna Walsh had given Ellie life, maybe in more ways than one. A few years ago, Ellie wouldn’t have understood, but she knew that choice was easier to make than most others. The right thing for the right fucking reason. She’d take the implication of that over the certainty of the opposite.
Forget god, forget religion. Maybe that was all the faith the world needed for a future.

Chapter End Notes

As always and forever, thank you for the comments. To the anonymous reviewer (,) who discussed Judaism with me, thank you so much for your enlightening information.

There may be another part to explore the gap in the story; there's certainly more in my brain that I'm having trouble getting down. Consider the story finished as is for now.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!