

2010

Ghostwalk: A Novella

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Ghostwalk
A Novella

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April 2011

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Chapter 1 -- Ghost Town

Imagine living in a box. Not a little cardboard box, but a big box, made of concrete and glass and reinforced steel. Imagine it's sitting on top of a long concrete tower, like a tree house that landed in a city without trees, and it's lined with barbed wire and fences with electricity running through them. Not a very friendly place. Not one of those pretty towers you see on a postcard and can't wait to go visit as soon as you get your vacation.

Imagine this box, right. Windows on all four sides, from about the waist up all the way to the ceiling. A bit like living in a fishbowl, except a couple floors above the ground so no one can actually look in. All the paranoia of living in a glass home where every move you make is clearly visible, but with none of the actual perils. Because you're not the exhibit, you're the one supposed to be looking outside.

Imagine you look outside and see what looks like your standard prison. Four high walls lined with barbed wire and broken security cameras. An empty yard filled with gravel. Heavy iron door left open, creaking once in a while, like something out of a horror film, but no zombies, no monsters, no undead minions of hell. This isn't some sort of Romero-rip-off B-movie.

But this isn't a normal prison, either. No guards, no patrolling men in uniforms, no shambling prisoners chained and shackled. No rats, no birds. Imagine you look out the windows and all you see for miles and miles is dust and dirt and lots of beige. Once in a while -- just every so often -- a vulture goes flapping by, searching for dead things to eat.

You know the situation's depressing when even the vultures are hungry. They have this look like you owe them some sort of explanation.

Enough of the birds.

Imagine that box again. Call it home. It's got all the necessary furnishings. Two of those iron-frame beds you see in prisons, with thin, hard mattresses and gross off-white sheets spotted with mysterious stains. Two steel lockers. A cheap metal table with two aluminum folding chairs. Two toothbrushes in the chipped mug next to the sink, but one of them hasn't been used in ages. Cupboards full of canned and dried foods, trashcans piled with empty cans and packages. Two sets of cutlery. One lying on the counter, the other gathering dust in a drawer.

Imagine you're the only one living in this home-for-two.

Imagine that, for all you know, you're the only living person for miles and miles and miles. You're living alone in this shitty glass box and the extra furniture, the extra cutlery are just laughing at you. Sneering in your face.

You poor lonely bastard.

Lee woke up for no particular reason sometime after the sun came up.

The digital clock on the wall flashed 12:00 at him, but Lee knew it wasn't noon. He simply hadn't bothered to reset the clock after the latest blackout. The blackout a few weeks ago, while he was sleeping. He'd woken up and staggered over to the light-switch and flicked it on only to get nothing. Frustrated, he'd abused the switch a bit before realizing that the clock on the wall was also dead. Once he dragged himself down to the

lower floors of the guard tower and turned on the backup generator, the clock began flashing 12:00, and it was then that Lee started losing track of the time.

He knew it was a Wednesday, because the day before had been a Tuesday, but he didn't know what date it was. He wasn't even sure what month it was. Maybe April.

It wasn't like dates mattered much. It didn't change the fact that he got up from his bed, listening to the iron frame creak. He hadn't changed out of his uniform in weeks. His T-shirt was soaked through with sweat and dusted with sand, and he knew he reeked. His trousers had accumulated a few small rips and tears. Lee coughed as he pulled the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. He couldn't remember where he'd left his jacket.

The silence outside was deafening, and when he pushed the balcony door open, a gust of hot, dusty air slapped him in the face. He coughed again. His breath came out in dry, sandy puffs. He was getting sand on his blanket.

Backing away from the veranda, he flapped his blanket to try and get the sand off, stumbling over his feet and still coughing. He knew it was growing dustier and dustier, but it hadn't been this bad yesterday. It looked like the conditions were growing worse. What he wouldn't give for a good downpour to glue all that fucking dust to the ground.

Still, he'd have to leave the windows open for a bit if he didn't want to stew in the smell of garbage and his own sweat. Give some, take some.

Ignoring the wind whistling past the balcony, Lee kicked aside one of the folding chairs lying upside-down on the floor and shoved past the cheap metal table over to the kitchen area. He hadn't used the electric stovetop since he'd had to resort to the backup generator. He didn't have the luxury of wasting electricity on cooking. Not much of a

kitchen any more. Ignoring the now-empty fridge, also long since unplugged and dead, Lee leaned up to rummage through the cupboard full of cans and packages.

Beef jerky, canned fruit, corned beef, salted meat. All of the cans wrapped in paper labels stamped with military logos. A few boxes of ration bars. He needed to eat them before they turned completely hard and inedible, but they tasted like cardboard, and he didn't feel like struggling through one of those bastards just yet. He'd had a hard enough time choking down the Ready-to-Eat meal rations a few weeks back when he'd realized one was starting to grow moldy and he wouldn't have long before the rest went bad as well. They'd been terrible and had given him constipation.

He grabbed a can of preserved peaches and wrenched the lid open with a knife. He'd thrown his can opener off the balcony a few weeks ago in a fit of frustration. He'd regretted it for weeks, but when he finally steeled himself to venture outside around the base of the tower, he couldn't find it.

He was slowly running out of everything. Food and items and tools.

He couldn't be bothered to right the two chairs lying on the floor, so he sat on the floor with his back to a wall and ate the half-moon peaches straight out of the can, spearing them on the tip of his knife one by one. He was getting the sticky syrup all over his stubble, but he didn't really care. But he did pause briefly to yank the blanket off and shove it onto the table in a miserable pile to keep it from getting spotted sticky with syrup.

Lee spent roughly half an hour chewing on the can of peaches, then drank all of the sticky syrup from the can, trying not to cut his lip on the ragged edge of the can. But he could taste the copper tang of blood in the last mouthfuls of the peach syrup.

It pissed him off.

If there had been anyone else around, what Lee did next would have no doubt been startling. But because he was completely alone, it just looked kind of stupid when Lee got to his feet and chucked the empty peach can out the balcony door. It was a bad throw, and so the can barely made it over the balcony railing, bouncing off the iron bars with a hollow clang and dropping away out of sight. His lip stung and the residues of peach syrup seeped into the shallow cut as he let out an incoherent scream and kicked the metal table. It went over with a crash. His foot hurt.

Then, Lee rushed to the balcony and leaned over its railing as he puked up half his guts. The sugar-loaded peach syrup had been too much to eat all at once, especially after he'd eaten nothing but beef jerky for the past two days, and he could barely keep himself from vomiting up everything.

No, no, that wouldn't do. That would be a waste of food. He didn't have that much left. God knew how long his cupboard had to last. So he tried to keep it down. Disgusting.

Coughing as a wisp of sand puffed up his nose, Lee wiped the dribbles of saliva off his chin. His eyes were watering, and between his blurry vision and the dust coiling across the horizon, he thought he was seeing things when a little dark spot moved closer to the base of the guard tower.

I didn't always live by myself in that shitty tower. Anyone would go insane if they had to spend their entire lives in a place like that, alone. No, I didn't always live in that place, and even when I did, I wasn't by myself until just recently. Relatively speaking. I used to live in that tower with a fucked-up bastard named Jackson.

He's dead now. Which is all for the better. The world's a cleaner place without him. He needed to go, sooner than later.

For the longest moment, Lee stayed bent double over the balcony railing, squinting at the slow-growing dark spot on the horizon. It had been so long since he'd last seen a living creature other than the occasional vulture that went drifting by, and it was hard to tell what the approaching blob was.

It revealed itself to be a human wrapped in many layers of jackets, dragging along a shopping cart. At this distance, it was hard to tell if this specimen was male or female, but that was a non-factor. The person was inching closer, no doubt drawn to the guard tower in hopes of finding food, or at least shelter.

What to do?

The lack of human interaction had slowed his thought process, and Lee could veritably feel his thoughts ticking one notch at a time towards some sort of decision. Residues of peach juice were dribbling down his chin, and he tried to lick them up as he stared at this approaching human being.

This stranger might have food. Maybe he could let whoever it was in, then steal their food. Having someone to interrogate about the state of things outside might not be bad either. This person must have traveled for quite a while, since there weren't any habitable shelters nearby. So they'd have a bit of food, wouldn't they? And information. It might be worth the effort of extracting it.

But if they had a weapon, there might be a firefight. So conversation would be dangerous, at least before this stranger was disarmed. What would be the best option?

Lee dragged his dirty forearm over his mouth to wipe away the last drips of the peach juice.

Obviously, the best option would be to shoot first, ask questions later.

One of the nicest things about being a soldier, Lee had always thought, was the fact that he had easy access to guns. The problem was whether they were in usable condition. It had been so long since he'd last had to use them, and he'd put them away somewhere in order to keep himself from doing something stupid, like wasting his ammo or putting a bullet through his own head. How long could guns be usable without undergoing any maintenance?

The figure outside continued to draw near.

"Shit."

He nearly tripped over his boot laces when he launched to his feet, lunging for the cabinet that stood against the far wall. He hadn't used his rifle in a long while -- the last time had been when he'd tried to shoot down a vulture to harvest for meat, until he realized that he didn't know the first thing about curing meat, and he didn't want to deal with a rotting corpse that he couldn't finish off.

The rifle, along with a copious amount of dust and dirt, fell into his arms when he wrenched the cabinet door open. His fingers came away gray from the barrel, and it promptly jammed when he tried to check if it was loaded.

Outside, the sound of the shopping cart wheels grinding against the dirt was growing close. He could almost hear the sound of heavy breathing. Or was that just his

imagination? What if he was being too loud? Would they be able to hear him? Would they be able to tell he was in here?

Lee swore quietly and haphazardly shoved the rifle back into the cabinet before lunging for one of the other cabinets. There were quite a few cabinets around the tower interior because soldiers who stayed up here were supposed to keep their belongings in good order. Not that Lee had stuck to those rules. He couldn't remember which cabinet the pistols were in. He'd put them on a higher shelf, he remembered, so it would take more effort to grab them if he ever had suicidal urges -- but now that he needed them, where the hell were they?

A dismantled shotgun lay abandoned in on one of the lower shelves. Lee had started to clean it before he'd run out of steam and left the task half-done. Useless.

The harsh grind of shopping cart wheels against grit was starting to get on his nerves, and Lee muttered a steady stream of profanities as he went from cabinet to cabinet, searching through whatever contents they held. One cabinet spilled forth a set of comparatively clean clothes -- a size too big, and sprinkled with dust -- and he left them sprawled on the floor as he dug through the pile of Kevlar vests and riot armor jumbled in the other cabinet. Why were there so many sets of armor?

Outside, the shopping cart had ground to a halt, and there was silence.

Then, a voice.

"Is anyone there?"

Lee found a M-4 carbine in one piece in the corner cabinet, buried under a mass of crumpled up files and papers that were starting to rot with moisture and mold. It took

him a moment longer to find a cartridge, and while he was trying to jam it into the appropriate slot, a call came wafting up through the balcony window.

"Hello? I can hear you're there."

A pause. He could hear the shifting of wheels against the grit outside.

What if they found his can opener? He'd kill this person and get it back. That can opener was his. Not theirs. Finally managing to get the gun properly loaded, he promptly lay on his stomach and began the long crawl towards the balcony. No point in providing an easy target for this person, if they had a gun. Crawling with a gun was always a clumsy business, and he was pretty sure that he was tracking additional dirt all over his shirt, but that wasn't the main priority here.

There was no way he was going down without a fight.

I'm not sure what I was expecting at that point, but I'd heard plenty before the radio waves started to die. The initial blasts had terminated about eighty percent of the radio stations that were out there, so no, I don't mean official news channels or anything. Those were lost a long, long time ago. But rather, the guerilla channels that flickered in and out of existence.

There were a few military channels, of course, that steadily relayed information that was of absolutely no help. I started ignoring them shortly after I realized that the only thing they had to say was 'stay calm and carry on.'

But there were other channels, managed by crazy I-knew-the-end-was-coming-and-look-here-I'm-so-right conspiracy theorists and desperate survivors looking for some

sort of benevolent human companionship and religious fanatics who were convinced that Jesus would swoop in and rescue them at any moment. These channels were more helpful and said things like, 'Russelton's been burnt to the ground. It just burst into flames and nobody knows why.'

Things like, 'Potsdam's as good as gone, there are riots all over the city.'

Things like, 'I wonder if we'll ever be able to rebuild Chicago.'

And there were rumors about wandering Stragglers, now. Stray individuals that went from shelter to shelter with whatever firearms they'd been able to salvage from empty weapons shops, killing every living thing and eating every edible thing and burning anything that was left over.

But not this guardhouse. This guardhouse was mine. No one was going to get it.

By the time I got to the balcony and raised my head enough to look over the edge, I could hear a pair of hands groping at the steel door. Trying to pry the handle open. Tough luck, the locks were holding. I stared at the wannabe-intruder.

Two jacket hoods layered over each other, barely containing a bushy head of hair, stray tufts sticking out in all directions. Pretty shaggy. A bit long for a man, but maybe it was just someone who hadn't had a chance for a haircut in a while. Two jackets, the outer one starting to spout holes in the shoulder seam, the inner one looking dark with splotches of something.

Blood?

This was a Straggler.

I knew it.

"Don't move." I hadn't heard my own voice in ages, with no one to talk to, since I wasn't crazy enough to start talking to myself just yet. It sounded hoarse, raspy, and a bit manlier than it had before. Boys hitting puberty worried about sounding high-pitched, spend a few months living off shitty food and breathing in dust -- you'll sound like the manliest man you've ever heard. "Get your hands off the door and look up."

It was a man with the beginning of a shaggy beard. He raised his hands and turned a bit so he could properly look up at the balcony. He had an air of madness in his stare.

I put the M4 on semi-automatic and adjusted the stock, while the fucker stared at me like a village idiot.

The dark spots were actually cherry syrup. The man had eaten a dusty jar of maraschino cherries the previous day and had gotten some of the juice on his jacket, because he didn't have any utensils and it had been too cold to take off his jacket while he ate.

The man's name was Walker. He'd been living in a bomb shelter for almost a month. He'd found it with its trapdoor halfway open, occupied by two bodies, a man and a woman. It had looked like the two had killed each other quite some time ago, perhaps in a lovers' quarrel. The bodies had been cold and limp, long after the rigor mortis had faded. Walker had hauled them out, then spent a month in the bomb shelter eating everything he could find. Then he'd walked for three days in search of another lucky find. Up until that point he'd been quite lucky, especially in comparison to a lot of other people.

So when he'd first seen the concrete tower in the distance, he'd thought himself *immensely* lucky, and had eagerly dragged his dilapidated shopping cart towards the tower in hopes of finding more food and maybe a gun. He'd found his shopping cart at an abandoned supermarket. He hadn't found a gun. He'd been wanting one for quite some time.

He'd been startled when he approached the tower only to hear the sounds of someone moving frantically. He'd heard a myriad of clacks and clatters and banging noises, punctured by the stomp of booted feet. He'd heard a husky voice say, "Shit."

But as he grew near, the noises had stopped, abruptly. Maybe he was hearing things? He'd called out, and had gotten no answer. Had called out again, still getting no answer.

Walker turned to the door to try and get it open. It was locked. The handle didn't move, and when he rattled it he could hear a deadbolt holding fast.

Then a husky voice suddenly thundered from above like the commandments of a hungover and pissed-off god, telling him to raise his hands and look up. He looked up. He stared. He didn't know what to do.

Lee knew what to do, and that was to say, "Take your fucking hoods off. The hell's wrong with you, wearing two jackets like a retard."

Walker kept one hand in the air, and used the other to pull off the two hoods covering his head. His hair moved in shaggy, matted bunches, and he was shaking by the time he put that hand back up in the air. He said in a slow, tremulous voice, "Please don't kill me."

Lee squinted at the greasy, dirty hair, and wondered if his own hair was in the same state. It probably was. It made him feel dirty, and that pissed him off some more, so he shifted the stock of his rifle just to make an intimidating clunking noise. Predictably, Walker twitched. Lee shifted his weight and jerked his head at the shopping cart. "What d'you have in there."

"Nothing much. Just stuff."

"Like what."

"S-some food."

Lee's eyes lit up. Walker felt a tremor run down his spine, and he very much wished that his luck had been good enough to grant him a gun before he'd come to this guard tower. Lee simply said, "Tip the cart over."

"What?"

"Tip it over. And don't do anything stupid."

Walker gave Lee a hard stare, until Lee once more adjusted the stock of the carbine with a clatter. Walker promptly turned to wrestle with the shopping cart. It was quite heavy, weighed down with several large cans of pickled pork rinds. Walker had found them in the same supermarket where he'd picked up the shopping cart. Much of the good food at the supermarket had already been looted, but the jars of pork rinds had been almost untouched. They looked like jars of human skin suspended in bile. Walker had tried to chew on a piece, but had gagged and retched and given up halfway through because it had felt a bit like chewing on hardened lard.

He hadn't been hungry enough then, but he'd kept the jars, knowing he'd eventually be hungry enough.

At the moment, Lee wasn't hungry enough either. He wrinkled his nose at the jars of pork rinds that clattered across the dirt, wondering if this Straggler liked that stuff. He thought, I sure as hell am not gonna eat that shit. Then he thought, maybe I will if I get hungry enough. He thought, I probably will eventually. He thought, god that's gonna suck.

The rest of the cart's contents spilled onto the dirt. A dilapidated blanket slumping over the jars of pigskin like a body bag, two jars of preserved cherries bright red against the colorless ground, a couple of packs of leaking AA batteries, an old wooden baseball bat. Lee sneered at the bat and shot it. The bullet shattered the varnished wood and Walker backed off, howling as a piece of wood went ricocheting into his arm. He'd tried so hard to keep himself safe and had been doing well. This was his first significant injury. He was an innocent, harmless man who'd only wanted food and shelter and a chance to survive.

Lee didn't care.

He carefully adjusted his aim and shot Walker through the head.

He didn't bother shooting against to confirm the Straggler's death, because ammo was valuable and he didn't want to waste any more ammo than necessary on a Straggler like this.

I didn't have a choice. That Straggler had to die.

He was a threat, bringing around a baseball bat. Any attempts at civil conversation would have been meaningless. He probably had a gun hidden somewhere on

him, and that bat was his backup in case he found himself in a situation where he could finish someone off with it and save himself ammo.

Killing him in a single, clean shot was probably the most merciful thing to do. Aren't I nice. Bestowing a generous, painless death upon a potential murderer. No -- a murderer, period. Those dark stains on his jacket. He'd probably killed at least one person before coming to the tower. This was just karma that had killed him. I was the deliveryman. Don't blame the messenger.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved that my aim was still good, even after the few months (I think) of stagnating in that guard tower. For a while, I'd considered shooting at passing birds to keep myself in shape, but the need to save ammo outweighed the importance of keeping my skills honed. Another reason why I'd hidden all of the guns. No doubt I would have emptied the shells at a rock in frustration.

I was calm and level-headed and perfectly suited to deal with everything.

The body had hit the pile of pork rind jars with the dull clink of glass shifting, and his blood was pooling all over the jars of pork rinds. It was disgusting. The blood tinted the glass red, and now those pieces of pigskin really looked like samples of human skin collected by some sort of mad scientist. The proud collection of a desperate Mengele. I made the decision right then and there that I'd never eat those things.

Unless I was starving.

Then maybe.

And even then, only if I really had to.

I watched the body for a long moment, waiting to see if it moved. I could have put a second shot in the body to check for reactions, but that would be a bullet wasted. Better to wait.

I'm a soldier. I've killed a lot of people, but spend enough time living alone doing absolutely nothing and you grow rusty at everything. So I nearly pissed myself when the body twitched.

The body shuddered, as skin tightened and muscles loosened. The diaphragm contracted, gases escaping in a low moan, and Lee promptly flinched, aiming for the body's ruined head. It was like aiming at a broken watermelon. But Walker was very much dead. The body turned slightly grey, emptied its bladder and bowels, then went still.

Then there was the matter of looting the body. The vultures were already circling, hungry to get a bite of their first prepared meal in ages, and putting myself squarely between them and this fresh corpse wasn't high on my list of priorities.

But those cherries probably held some nutritional value. Vitamins and minerals or something. They'd be easier on my teeth than those damn ration bars, too. Wouldn't hurt to fetch a jar of those pigskins, either. Wasn't gonna touch'em with a ten-foot pole unless I was hungry enough to eat what looked like human skin, but they wouldn't hurt to keep around. Just in case.

And there was probably a gun hidden somewhere in one of those two jackets. I wanted that gun. One can never have enough guns.

A vulture drew near, so I had to shout at it.

It croaked and pulled back up, circling the tower like it was waiting its turn.

Shoot it?

No, waste of ammo.

Unless it could be eaten?

How do vultures taste? Like chicken?

Everything tastes like chicken, though. That's just a saying.

What if it tasted rank, though? Waste of a bullet.

Fuck, I don't know.

I must have been standing there for quite some time, staring, because the fucker tried to make another dive, and I slammed the stock of the M4 against the balcony railing to get it to back off. "That's mine!" Another clang against the railing. The vulture croaked in complaint. "Get your own!"

It went flapping up until it was just a dark spot in the sky, as if to say, 'Very well. I'll be waiting here.'

It had been ages since I'd been out of the tower's main room. The steel steps down to the ground floor felt familiar enough, but the dirt and grit outside might as well have been the surface of Mars. So loose and noisy and getting stuck in the grooves of my boots. Why couldn't this guard tower have been out somewhere grassy?

'Cause that would have made things too easy for everyone. A military prison on a grassy field would have been too pleasant for the builders, who're meant to suffer.

Would've been too nice for the prisoners, who're also meant to suffer. Would've been too enjoyable for the soldiers, who aren't *meant* to suffer, but suffer anyway.

Would've been too easy on me.

The body was lighter than I expected except the damn coats, and I would have peeled them off except the circling vultures were making me nervous about staying out too long. Felt like they were going to snatch off my scalp. So I just dug through the pockets. I found a penknife with the blade broken off tucked away in the inner jacket's pocket, and a screwdriver that had been blunted down significantly in the waistband of the guy's slacks.

No gun.

Lee spent much longer than he should have searching through Walker's various pockets. Between the two jackets and the sweatshirt worn inside the jackets and the cargo pants, there were a lot of pockets. But even so, Lee spent a lot more time than he needed, thoroughly turning each pocket inside-out in search of a gun that didn't exist. The rifle slung over his shoulder kept getting in the way, too, and he had to keep pushing it out of the way as he went through all the pockets, and then went through them again.

He was convinced that there was a gun.

It wasn't until the vultures started to swoop in low again that he swore and hurled a jar of pickled pork rinds up at them. The jar sailed through the air in a weak arc before flopping back earthward and shattering on the ground. Lee swore, louder this time, as brine and bits of pork skin splattered over his boots, several stray splashes seeping into

the knees of his army slacks. It stank, and he swore once more as he grabbed up a jar of cherries under each arm, and made to snatch up the old blanket until he realized that a corner was soaked with blood and urine.

Muttering an incomprehensible stream of profanities in between huffing breaths, he kicked Walker's body in frustration -- ignoring the way it slumped over the abandoned jars, brine soaking into matted hair -- and tucked the jars of cherries tight under his arms before slinking back towards the entrance to the guard tower.

He'd expended all of his energy by the time he dead bolted the door, climbed the three flights of stairs up the guardroom and locked the door there, too, so instead of putting the jars of cherries with the rest of his food stash, he left them on the first flat surface he came across, which was a one of the cabinets he'd toppled over while searching for his rifle.

The rifle, he put in the cabinet that held all of the riot armor. He should probably clean it to make sure that it remained functional, but he was too tired to care at the moment.

He felt so tired, just from the stress of having to deal with another person.

He was tracking specks of dirt over the floor but that, too, he didn't care about. All he did was pick up the blanket that had been left in a pile on the floor, and drape it over his shoulders like a cape. Then, he slouched back to the room off to the side, with the two cast-iron beds and the flimsy mattresses and the lifeless pillows that looked like they were filled with sand. The bed on the right hadn't been used in a very long time. Its sheets were tucked in with military precision, the bed presenting four sharp hospital corners, and

would have looked almost nice if it weren't for the thick layer of dust that covered it. The pillow looked like it had suffocated under all that dust. So much dust. Dust dust dust.

Lee kicked the bed on the right, causing some of the dust to puff up before settling right back down. Then he kicked off his boots -- grunting when he actually had to reach down to loosen the laces -- and curled up on the bed on the left. The blanket, he draped over himself. And he stayed like that for a long time without sleeping.

Today was a Wednesday. The next time he awoke would probably be a Thursday. Then a Friday, then a Saturday, then a Sunday.

Pulling the blanket over his head, Lee pressed the lifeless pillow to his face and screamed.

Chapter 2 -- Tumbleweed

Several weeks passed. Lee passed the time eating and sleeping. Occasionally, he would sit on the balcony with his legs hanging out between the metal rails and stare at the sky, which stared back at him in a sullen, grayish-yellow hue. The sun never got through cleanly, what with all the dust, but the heat got through just fine, and Lee wondered if it would just keep getting hotter. He would spend hours at a time sitting on the balcony doing nothing in particular, before getting up to pry open a can of preserved something-or-the-other and devour as much of he could and then sleep.

He lost track of the weeks, but he somehow managed to keep track of the days of the week. It was a Friday when he finally shaved off several weeks of beard using a combat knife. He nicked his jaw and kicked a chair over in frustration.

It was a Tuesday when he saw the dead vulture. It was sprawled on the ground at the base of the tower, not too far from where Walker's body lay fermenting. Lee ignored them both.

For the next two days, Lee plowed through what remained of his beef jerky supply as if it were a passive-aggressive way of rebelling against the fact that there were two large, meaty entities rotting outside his door.

And on the third day, as he was contemplating whether to continue his diet of dried meat sticks, he heard the sound of footsteps outside.

It was so unfair. An ambush. People weren't supposed to sneak up on the tower when I wasn't paying attention. I didn't even hear the footsteps until I had a packet of beef jerky in one hand and a box of ration bars in the other.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

I dropped both and immediately went fumbling for my gun. The rifle. I'd used it to kill that Straggler. Where the hell was it?

No time.

The footsteps were drawing closer.

I grabbed a chair. It'd do some damage if dropped from three stories. Break a few bones, at least. You can beat a person to death with a chair, right?

And why the hell was there another person coming this way? I hadn't had any visitors in months. It was unnatural that I'd have two visitors in a matter of weeks. Maybe a nearby town had burst into flames, and the people who'd lost their homes were wandering around. Like that other Straggler I'd kill, and this one. Was the base that visible from a distance? Not good.

The chair was heavier than I remembered, and I quickly gave up on trying to crawl with it. The best I could do was to move sneakily, pressing my back against the wall holding a chair leg in each hand and crane my neck around the frame of the balcony doorway. It hurt my neck. Stupid bastard, making me go through all this trouble.

Again, it was someone swathed in layers of clothes. Why all the clothes? They'd probably melt, if I left them alone long enough. A jacket, and a sweatshirt under that. Only one hood up. Long hair hanging out of the hood, tangled and matted. Gross. Jeans unraveling and sprouting holes at the knees, sneakers with ratty laces. Women's running sneakers. So this one was a girl, probably. (Or some loser that had had to loot women's shoes.)

She was moving slowly. Was she being cautious? Did she know I was here?

I gripped the chair tighter. I was hungry. Better finish'em off fast. Maybe this one would have food. Proper food. Nothing like the jar of pig-skin that was gathering dust.

I could make out the straps of a backpack almost blending into the dusty texture of the jacket. The radio had advised people on the move to use backpacks instead of carts -- or, god forbid, anything as cumbersome as a car -- because backpacks were durable, easy to carry, and they'd let you keep your most important possessions on hand even if you had to suddenly start running from something.

So maybe this one had something nice.

Like a gun.

God I wanted another gun. I'd almost finished cleaning that shotgun and had started dismantling another rifle to clean it, but it would be nice to have a gun that I knew was clean and functional.

I was just about ready to dash out and hurl the chair over the balcony when the Straggler stopped, right in front of the two dead bodies. The vulture and Straggler number one, side by side. If I killed Straggler number two right there, I'd have a nice collection of rotting meat. It would attract more vultures. Not what I wanted.

I'd have to wait until Straggler number two moved away a bit.

So I waited.

I waited a long time.

The fucker wouldn't move.

This Straggler wasn't actually a Straggler, because she was neither a permanent wanderer nor a killer.

Stragglers were defined -- by word of mouth across the radio waves and between the few wanderers who trusted each other long enough to make conversation for more than 30 seconds -- as people who had no shelter and stuck to the road constantly. They rarely stayed in any place for more than a couple of days, just long enough to loot any food and supplies.

They were considered the most dangerous, because if they were willing to take to the roads, that meant they were usually confident about their abilities to survive. They were usually armed and willing to kill people they stumbled on. Rumor had it that some Stragglers would live off of the butchered flesh of people they came across. One particularly terrifying rumor went that a Straggler dominated the area near where San Francisco used to stand, scouring the buildings that remained standing, using a machete to slice apart victims he found into strips of delicious meat.

(Rumors were rumors, of course. There were plenty of Stragglers around San Francisco who did such things, but there wasn't anyone named Big Red. Big Red was a purely fictional construct based off of fear.)

It all came down to survival.

The individual that approached the guard tower was not a Straggler. Her name was Kim. She had been living in a small town, about a two days' walk away from the military prison where Lee's guard tower was. The town had been a collective of barely-standing houses, each containing a single, bedraggled survivor. The town had been in a sort of unspoken stalemate -- none of the survivors bothered each other, and lived off of their individual stashes of food. It had been borderline peaceful.

But then one man ran out of food.

The man starved for two days, then picked up the pump-action shotgun he'd stashed away for this very purpose. He went from house to house, all the way down the street, killing anyone he found. By the time the man had gotten halfway down the street, everyone who could promptly grabbed whatever was on hand and fled.

Kim had lived at the very end of the street and had, fortunately, had just enough time to grab a backpack full of canned foods before she had to make a run for it. She'd nearly been shot in the back as she fled, the shot grazing past her back and ricocheting off the pavement just near her feet. She'd had difficulty resisting the urge to scream, and had broken down into tears only after running for a full hour, when she was well away from the street that was now smoldering darkly. She hadn't cried like that in years, since she was just a teenager.

Then she'd walked for a long time.

When she first spotted the scraggly white rectangle squatting on the horizon, she'd thought she was starting to see things. She's been eating canned foods -- all salt and sugar -- and hadn't had anywhere near enough water to drink. But no matter how many times she rubbed her eyes and shook her head, the dingy shape remained hovering in the distance.

It had felt like she'd seen an oasis.

She'd been too tired to run -- weighed down by the cans still in her backpack, feet aching with blisters from the hours and hours of walking -- but she'd speeded up her slow plod to a more enthusiastic clip, gaze rarely leaving the outline of what was now clearly a prison compound in the distance. Perhaps it was inhabited, perhaps it was not. She tried not to think about what she would do if it were full of men (or women) with ill intentions and focused only on getting there.

Maybe there would be food.

And water. She needed water.

Shelter, too. The two nights she'd spent out in the open had been terribly cold. She wouldn't mind sleeping under a roof.

Would they have water? A shower would be wonderful, she thought. She was caked with dust. Even if the pipes were down, just having a reservoir of water would be more than enough. She'd use an empty can to ladle out the water and pour it on herself. Just the thought sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

She nearly tripped over the outstretched, rotting arm of the dead man. She'd stepped on the dried-out flesh -- graying with age and missing huge chunks that revealed bleached bone, lying next to an equally mutilated bird corpse -- and she stared, unable to process what to do.

What the fuck was this Straggler doing?

I stood there, sneaking glances out the balcony door at random intervals, for ages. What felt like ages, anyway, because my arms were starting to grow tingly with pins and needles from holding that damn chair for so long. Would I have to time look for my rifle?

No, it'd draw too much noise. And it was just a girl. I'd be fine without a gun.

Even in this situation, it would feel sort of shitty shooting a girl anyway.

But I hated that hooded, long-haired figure like I'd never hated an anonymous person before. The lack of a face made that stupid lump of jackets easier to hate. I could imagine a hideous face, snaggletoothed and drenched with the blood of cannibalized victims. Yeah, this straggler was evil, pure evil -- had to be evil, keeping me trapped like that.

It was maddening, standing there just waiting, and when the Straggler -- after all that waiting and silent cursing -- took half a step forward to crouch down and close the eyes of the dead Straggler number one, I'd decided I'd waited long enough. This bastard deserved to die.

"Hey." No use sounding agitated. I kept my voice cool, calm -- but gruff. The voice of a man who knows what he's going. My boots against the balcony's steel floor sounded impressive, each step resounding with a dull thud. Even better. Maybe I could terrify this girl into submission. It sent shivers up my arm, when I swung the chair down and against the balcony railing, steel bouncing off steel. "Back off. This is my turf."

Shouldn't have hit the railing with the chair. Arms hurt now. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Wanted to hurl the damn thing off the balcony to keep that can opener company, wherever it was, but it wouldn't be a good idea to start chucking everything overboard.

I cleared my throat and said, "And don't even think about reaching for a gun."

Somewhere behind me, Jackson was leaning into my ear, voice hoarse with laughter as he barked, *You haven't seen a girl in months, you know you wanna fuck her.*

Shut up, Jackson.

Kim saw a man suddenly emerging from the looming tower ahead, face dotted with stubble. Eyes sunken, dark with shadows and lined with exhaustion. And holding a chair. Why a chair?

He muttered something low and incoherent and hoarse that Kim couldn't understand. She could just barely make out the words "back" and "turf." Then he clanged the chair against the balcony railing. What was the purpose of that?

The man was dressed like he'd stolen a military uniform and had never bothered to wash it. Even from down on the ground, Kim could make out the stains of dirt and other things she didn't want to know about. Was it blood? Hopefully not. She didn't want a fight.

Shifting the weight of the bag against her back, she opened her mouth to say, 'Please, I don't want to fight, I only want a place to rest.'

But the man suddenly let out a horrible, grumbling noise and then shouted at her, his features twisting into a frighteningly hateful expression. Eyes wild. She couldn't make out the details, but he was clearly furious.

He raised the chair.

She didn't know what to do, she was terrified.

Without really being aware of what she was doing, she screamed.

Doesn't matter how many people you've shot on a battlefield, the sound of a woman screaming is still terrifying. What the hell was I supposed to do when she started shrieking? Now I was the bad guy.

"Shut up." She didn't shut up. "Shut the fuck up!"

I chucked the chair at her, and it bounced off the ground near her feet. She backed off a step and kept screaming. The vultures were starting to circle irregularly, probably

disturbed by the noise. I didn't know anything about vultures. Would they attack if she kept screaming? Even if they didn't, what if her screaming attracted someone else?

"Seriously, shut up -- stop screaming." I had to clear my throat. How the hell was she still screaming? Somewhere just above my shoulder, Jackson was howling with laughter, and if he were still alive I would have slugged him -- but he wasn't, so I had to settle for grabbing the blanket off the table and crumpling it into a ball to chuck at the woman instead.

It hit her smack in the middle of the chest, and she went reeling back. Finally going quiet. I grabbed the next closest thing and pointed it at her.

"Stay there. Don't move, or I swear I'll -- do something to you. But don't start screaming either. Just shut up and sit there."

Lee had threatened Kim with an empty can.

It had been so confusing. This confusion, combined with the exhaustion and tension in her limbs, meant Kim actually obeyed Lee's demands. Seated on the ground still in range of the two dead bodies, she sat petrified until the door to the tower suddenly burst open and the man came thundering out. The first thing he did was snatch the blanket off her chest.

"Don't start screaming again." It was easier to understand him at this distance even if the man's voice was still gravelly and hoarse. Kim nodded. He furrowed his brow before going on, teeth bared in a growl. "Get up. I'm gonna check you for weapons."

"I don't have any." Kim was startled by how calm her words sounded.

Lee was startled, too, and he repeated himself, "Get up. I'm checking. And take your backpack off." He'd abandoned the empty can in the stairwell and was suddenly aware of the fact that he was empty-handed. Maybe it was better this way. Given how irritated and hungry and eager to get back inside he was, he might have shot her on impulse already if he'd had his gun. And then he would have regretted it. Shooting a girl this close up would be the only thing worse than shooting a girl in the first place.

Kim dropped her backpack and stood in place like someone waiting for a pat-down at an airport, from the days before the end.

The air was heated with an awkward silence for a moment before Kim struggled to her feet with the grind of sneakers against loose, dry dirt. Lee pointedly avoided looking at her as he shoved her arms aside, then rummaged through the pockets of her jacket, the kangaroo pouch of her sweatshirt. He found a handful of lint and some crumpled dollar bills. He yanked all of it out and threw it on the ground.

He only roughly patted the contour of her jeans, because he could feel her shivering, and it was starting to make him feel like a rapist. "Shut up." She hadn't said anything, so it made her jump a bit, when he muttered under his breath, "Just shut up. I'm not gonna eat you." She remained silent until Lee finished patting down her jeans and backed off a step.

Then they stared at each other for a long moment.

Lee seemed to be scrutinizing her, and he nudged the backpack with his foot. "What's in here?"

"Stuff."

"Got any weapons?"

"No."

It felt like some sort of interrogation, both with the way Lee was spitting out these questions and Kim was giving Lee a timid, accusatory stare like she thought he was seconds away from beating her to death with a that empty can.

Lee cut straight to the point and kicked the bag's clasp. There was the clank of cans from inside the bag, and his toe immediately ached from the blow. Lee grunted as the bag spilled its contents across the ground. Canned foods. A blanket, some shirts, a can opener. Lee couldn't help staring at the can opener.

Overhead, a vulture squawked. Lee bent down to pick up the abandoned chair in one hand and the can opener in the other, the blanket tucked under his arm.

"I'm taking this." He straightened up, still avoiding looking at her. For a moment, he considered claiming some of the canned foods, but that seemed like overkill. The difference between a pragmatic soldier and an unnecessarily cruel one, after all, was very scant. He could probably take the can opener and have her understand, but once he started taking her food as well, she might label him a villain. So he left the cans and only tightened his grip on the can opener.

He didn't cut the most dignified figure, holding such an odd assortment of items, and was still as filthy as a homeless man despite the fact that he'd actually had shelter. But he honestly didn't care. Boots grinding against the dry dirt, he turned to walk away from her in a wary sideways shuffle. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you. Now fuck off."

Kim didn't move. She'd merely been watching this strange man go through her stuff, confused by the circumstances. The last man she'd confronted had tried to kill her.

This one was stealing her can opener. Faintly, Kim knew that she should be terrified but the lack of a concrete threat like a gun or a blade made everything seem so bizarre and far off. The situation felt so unreal. It wasn't until the man was halfway into the guard tower that she found her voice.

She said, "Wait."

She fidgeted with her jacket zipper for a moment before looking at the man, who immediately looked away, staring determinedly at the wall of the guardhouse. She said, "-- let me in. Just to sleep. You can take some food in exchange."

This girl had to be kidding.

Jackson was still laughing in my ear, that gross barking laugh of his, and he was muttering gleefully, *Throw her down and have your way with her.*

I ignored him. "Are you stupid? Do you want to get raped? I'm not complaining, if that's the case. Come on in." I would have gestured towards the door except I had both hands full, so I sneered at her instead. "Be my guest."

"I think, if you wanted to do something like that to me," This girl was calm, though, and if she were a man I would have punched her purely out of irritation. (But if she were a man we wouldn't have been having this conversation in the first place.) "Then you would have already done it."

"This isn't the best place to rape anyone."

"That doesn't matter."

"What the hell are you talking about."

"Just let me in."

"I'm gonna kill you."

"No you're not."

This bitch was frustrating. Not that I wouldn't mind fucking someone, but she wasn't particularly pretty and I wasn't a rapist. (Jackson probably was, because he was still snarling crude encouragements in my ear.)

"Go away."

"I just need a place to sleep."

"Get in the compound. There's probably a bunk somewhere with a bunch of rats. Have fun."

"I'm sick of being alone."

This conversation was getting long. I didn't want to stay outside any more than necessary, especially with the vultures. And the faint possibility that other people were around.

One stupid girl wouldn't get me killed.

Kim was taken aback, mostly, when the man suddenly turned and headed straight into the guard tower's open door. The dust swirled in after him, framing just how ridiculous he looked, arms burdened with a blanket and a folding chair and a can opener, clothes filthy.

Naturally, she gathered up her bagful of cans and followed him

He did try to close the door on her, but when she jammed her backpack full of cans in the gap and successfully blocked the door from locking into place, he only grunted in annoyance before continuing up the stairwell. She could tell that he was irritated because he was growling under his breath with each step, but she thought she wouldn't immediately be in danger even if she followed him.

And she knew this was a stupid thing to do. She knew that the chances of her getting raped and killed and eaten (in any possible combination or order) were good. But she was tired of hiding alone. It had been too similar to the life of something like a mouse, alone and terrified. This strange and grizzled man looked terrifying, but he hadn't killed her on sight.

And that was good enough for the moment.

"Lock the door."

The grunt echoed down the stairwell, and Kim looked up to close the two industrial-strength locks that latched the tower door shut. They clicked shut with resounding mechanical thunks, and Kim once more felt mouselike. She tried to shake off that feeling.

So she was hurrying, when she yanked the backpack over her shoulders with the metallic rustle of cans, the whisper of fabric. It was heavy, she was tired. She really needed to sleep.

By the time she hauled her backpack up to the main room upstairs, the man had already set a chair on its legs by an old metal table, adorned with that balled-up blanket. The room was a mess. He didn't seem to care, because she saw him make a beeline for the kitchen with her can opener in hand.

"Hey." She put her backpack on the floor, near the entrance to the kitchen. "I'm Kim. What's your name?"

No response.

Lee was busy wrenching open a can of pineapple chunks. It was his last can of pineapples, but the stress of dealing with a live human being -- even worse than the stress from when he had to shoot Straggler number one -- meant he needed that sugar. Popping the ragged can lid off and throwing the can opener on the filthy counter, he took his open can and seated himself on the floor against the wall. A pause, before he fished chunks of fruit out with his fingers and chewed on them.

He kept his newest acquisition firmly at the edge of his peripheral vision.

The girl -- Kim, that was her name, he hadn't called anyone by name in ages, it was going to take some time to get used to -- Kim was looking into what constituted the bedroom. She had abandoned her backpack near the kitchen, and Lee nudged it with a foot. A can of peas came rolling out. Her wondered if she had any more pineapples. He felt liked canned pineapples were the only things saving him from scurvy.

Stuffing three chunks of the sour fruit into his mouth, Lee watched as Kim looked at the dusty clothes lockers and squinted at something. She looked at the two beds, the two shelving unites, the two towel racks that now held nothing. She squinted some more, then looked at him.

Lee promptly stared down into his can.

"Are you Jackson or are you Lee?"

Kim had seen the metal nametags nailed to the edges of the shelving units.

Lee responded immediately with a guttural snarl, ignoring the drip of juice down his chin. "I'm not Jackson."

"So you're Lee."

"Fuck Jackson."

An awkward silence hung heavy in the air, and Lee returned to his food. Kim was staring at him, he could feel it in his spine, but he ignored it.

"What happened to Jackson?"

Silence.

"Is he dead?"

More silence, punctured by the slurping noise of Lee drinking a mouthful of the sickly-sweet pineapple juice.

"I can sleep in this bunk, right? The one next to his shelf?"

"No."

Kim hadn't been expecting a response, and that single, blunt word made her jump. Craning her head back to look out of the cramped bed area and at the figure hunched on the floor, Kim was lost for words. There was something deeply pathetic and angry about the way that Lee was glaring up at her, and she instinctively backed away from the dusty bunk beside the shelf that read, JACKSON. A couple months' worth of dust had built up on that bed.

She looked at the other bunk. The sheets were rumpled and dirty. The shelf beside it read, LEE. The metal label was too large for such a short name, and the three letters looked lonely in the middle of that long strip of steel.

She'd been waiting for some sort of explanation about Jackson, but one never came.

"I'm not allowed to sleep in this bed, then?"

No response. Lee was draining the pineapple can, inhaling the juice with greedy slurping noises. Kim was hungry, too, but she wouldn't eat like he was eating right now. She fought to keep from wrinkling her nose in disgust, and walked out of the bedroom area before she irritated this guy too much. She felt like Lee -- it was probably Lee, not Jackson -- wouldn't kill her, but he'd throw that empty can at her if she said the wrong thing. It felt a bit like being in the same room as a bad-tempered drunkard: not fatal, but slightly risky.

"I guess that's your bunk. I'm okay with sleeping on the floor. I just wanted to be around someone alive." Kim mentally weighed the risks of saying what she was about to say. "This guy, Jackson. You must miss him, if you want to leave his bed like this."

"Fuck him. Jackson was an asshole." Lee's words were thick with juice as he muttered into the can, pausing to lick his lips. "But don't touch his stuff. It's mine now. Don't touch my stuff."

Kim couldn't tell what kind of logic Lee was operating on.

Lee thought it all made perfect sense.

Stupid woman barging into my guard tower.

Chasing her out would be too much effort, though, now that she was inside.

Throwing her off the balcony wouldn't be any easier

Hopefully, she didn't know how to use firearms. Last thing I needed was for her to try and muscle her way into control with one of my guns.

Fuck, it was too much to think about.

The can of pineapples was mostly empty, with just a pool of saccharine-sweet juice lurking at the bottom inch of the can, swirling with flecks of yellow pineapple flesh, and now that I'd finished eating, I felt a bit sick. Too much sugar at once.

Still didn't mean I was going to let that girl take over the place, though. Jackson was gone and dead, but that didn't mean his place was hers to claim. She was still looking at Jackson's bed, and I made sure she didn't disturb it.

I hated Jackson. I enjoyed hating Jackson.

Losing the place where he used to be would make it harder to hate what little was left of him. It's hard to hate something that doesn't exist any more.

Jackson was crooning into my ear as I thought that -- murmuring between puffs of those unfiltered cigarettes he was always smoking -- saying, *You know you want to screw that chick. Throw her down, rape her.*

He said, *The longer you let her stay, the harder you're gonna be on her when you finally snap. You think you can be the noble knight guarding this ragged princess?*

He was laughing as he gestured with his cigarette, drawing thin smoky lines through the air like hieroglyphs. He had a way of slurring his R's like a backalley thug, and it made everything he said sound particularly sleazy. Like when he said, *You're lying to yourself if you think you're being a good guy by sparing her. You're just in it for the ego trip. A form of massaging your self-worth. Esteem masturbation.*

It was easy to picture him sitting on that rusty bed, boots unlaced, dog tag jangling around his neck as he sucked at his cigarette, muttering, *You're not any better than what I've always said you are. You're trying too hard to play the good guy that you're not. What are you trying to prove? Is there even anyone left to prove anything to?*

Kim had settled into a quiet, dusty corner with her jacket wrapped around her in lieu of a blanket, but she jumped when Lee suddenly shouted some four-letter obscenity at nothing in particular and hurled the empty pineapple can against the wall. Drops of juice splattered everywhere. A sliver of pineapple sailed out the balcony, while another hit the dusty refrigerator door.

"I'm not Jackson. He's a woman-hater and a murderer and a bastard. You know what he did?" Lee had clambered to his feet, and he stomped forward, eyes narrowed with a feral sort of anger. "I'll tell you what he did."

Kim backed off a step, flinching when Lee jabbed a finger at her shoulder, his voice rising to a disdainful snarl. "-- He shot a defenseless little girl. This little girl like fifteen years old that didn't do shit. He shot her." And there was a sick, desperate variety of glee in his snicker. An almost childish gun-shooting gesture with his thumb and forefinger. "Point-blank in the face. Blam."

Lee was grinning the manic grin of a badly-carved mask as he went on, "That's the kind of guy Jackson was. Don't ever confuse me with him again. I'm not Jackson."

The silence was almost palpable as Kim struggled with her thoughts. She wasn't sure whether Lee wanted to argue or just wanted to vent, so she wasn't sure whether to

answer or stay quiet. She eventually settled for just saying, "Okay," and hoping Lee didn't kill her.

Another moment passed before Lee snapped out of whatever angry daze he'd been in and took a step back. "Don't touch that stuff. Or I'll throw you off the balcony. I don't know why the hell you followed me up here in the first place, and I don't care, but piss me off and you're dead."

Kim just nodded.

Lee grunted, and returned to his place against the wall.

It's true. Jackson did shoot a little girl, once. He was the worst.

He'd been stationed at this guard tower with me for weeks and months. It was usually quiet, but once in a while the POWs in the camp would act up and things would get messy. Riots were especially bad, lots of bloodshed. Prisoners would gather in huge groups to try and break past the guards and run away.

Not that they'd get far. There wasn't any cover for miles around the prison, and anyone running on foot would be sniped down before they got far.

But they tried anyway.

That's human nature, isn't it?

It was during one of those prison riots. A bunch of the men in the yard for their daily hour of exercise managed to overwhelm the two guards on duty at the east gate. They got free. So some of the women in the adjacent yard took this as a chance to also try and run. Some had children with them. They all tried to run.

Most of them were gunned down before they could run 500 feet.

But one unlucky little girl got past the eastern gate, after crawling under its bars. She'd been starved thin enough to make it through that little gap. She'd run sobbing out of the compound and had run into Jackson, who'd been standing just outside the guard tower because orders had come through the radio to keep an eye out for anyone who tried to run away. I was there right behind him when everything happened.

Terrified and pissing herself, the little girl had clung to Jackson's leg, sobbing at him to protect her.

He'd smiled, and said, *Sure*.

Then he shot her.

That's the sort of person Jackson was.

And he had the gall to tell me once, his breath stinking of nicotine, *You're sick, you know?*

Kim watched as Lee dozed against the wall, grunting in his sleep.

She couldn't help thinking that there was an air of intense discontent about the way that he slept, brows furrowed and teeth gritted, drool hanging off his lower lip.

Chapter 3 -- Stagnant Pool

Lee woke up to the knowledge that there was another human being in the guard tower -- he could hear the faint sounds of breathing that wasn't his. For a moment he thought it was Jackson, so he staggered to his feet muttering a steady stream of obscenities under his breath. Jackson never snored, but always breathed in a very hoarse, throaty way that never failed to piss Lee off.

It wasn't until Lee staggered to his feet -- licking his lips to try and get rid of the strange sticky sensation that lingered on his chin, rubbing the back of his hand over his stubble -- and stomped into the bunking area that he properly woke up. It all came back when he saw the dusty, untouched sheets on Jackson's bed. Sluggishly turning in place, he looked at where that girl -- what was her name? Something short and stupid -- was sleeping in the corner.

She was sleeping fairly peacefully, even with her head jammed against the wall at an odd angle and barely covered by her ragged jacket. For a second, Lee felt an intense desire to kick her, if only because she looked more content than he felt.

But that would be cruel.

-- no. He refrained from doing it because it would be impractical, not because it would be cruel. It would just be very impractical.

While she was still sleeping, Lee found the girl's abandoned backpack and dug through it. Carefully, this time, looking for a gun. It never hurt to look for weapons.

He only found a couple of cans of peas, mixed vegetables, tomatoes. One of pears. A little tin of tuna. Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, Lee stared at it with disdain. He thought that it looked a bit smaller than regular tuna cans were, but it had been quite some time since he'd seen a can of tuna.

He grunted and put it on top of the pile he'd made of the other cans. He'd let them spill all over the floor at first, but after a brief moment of hesitation he stacked them in neater piles. Easier to keep track of how much of what was left.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor between the emptied backpack and the towers of cans, Lee looked from them to the sleeping girl and back. (He'd have to ask her name again. It had been too long since he'd tried to remember anyone's name.) He was trying to decide whether these cans were now his or if they still belonged to her.

Both the cans themselves and their owner (this girl) were in his property (the tower) now, so they were his, weren't they.

A rough exhale as he scratched his head. He needed to wash his hair.

Was it too mean stealing everything from a girl? It seemed villainous.

He stared at the puny can of tuna. He decided that he would take some as payment for this shelter, when the time came. When he ran out of food. Then he would take this.

So at least for now, he would let these cans remain her property.

He didn't dismantle the cans from their towers though. She might appreciate the effort he put into making them more manageable. Not that he was doing this for her. It just happened to be something that he did for himself that might also be helpful to her.

Before he'd realized it, Lee had been sitting there for a quarter of an hour, staring blankly at the cans. This was what Kim first saw when she woke up. Blinking groggily and trying to think, she stared at where she could see Lee's outline looming over the towers of cans.

"What're you doing with those cans?" She ended up sounding a lot sleepier than she had intended, each word slurring a bit at the edge. She cleared her throat before adding, "Why did you stack them like that?"

Lee promptly stood up and walked into the kitchen.

"What's your name." His voice came floating over from the kitchen, sounding a little less grumpy than it had the previous morning. It was still phrased as a demand more than a question.

"Did you forget it already?" She laughed to indicate that it was a joke, but there was a no answer, so she added quickly, "It's Kim."

A grunt. The rustle of wrappers.

"Are you eating?"

Still no answer. Kim thought this felt no different from when she'd been trapped in that lifeless house in that lifeless neighborhood trapped in its lifeless standstill. She stared at the surprisingly neat towers of cans and remembered that she hadn't eaten in quite some time.

"I'm gonna eat something, okay?"

She could hear Lee ripping a package open in the kitchen, and she took that as an unspoken 'yes.' Pulling the jacket off herself, she grasped at the nearest tower of cans.

Peas.

She reached for another.

Beans. They'd be okay for breakfast.

"Hey. Can I have the can opener?"

All Kim got in response was a prolonged moment of heavy silence. Not even the sound of wrappers rustling. Then the clatter of steel. The can opener came sliding across the floor out of the kitchen until it bumped into the lone tin of tuna.

I'm not a bastard. I wasn't going to make her starve.

Kim slowly opened her can of beans. She thought about asking Lee if he had any utensils, but then she remembered that he'd eaten those pineapples with his fingers. Even if he had one, Lee didn't seem the type to care enough to give her a spoon.

She had just popped the can open and was looking for the side of the can that would be least likely to slice her lip open when a spoon came sailing out of the kitchen and bounced off the front of her jacket.

"I'm not hungry enough to bite you," was what the girl -- Kim -- said. "Can't you just come over and hand it to me?"

Like I would.

I was merciful, but I wasn't some sort of lapdog.

Sitting in the corner, knees drawn up almost to her chest and the can held between her thighs, Kim carefully scooped up a spoonful of cold beans. They didn't look particularly appetizing, but they tasted alright once they were in her mouth. She didn't have to look at them much in order to eat them.

She'd hungrily gulped down several mouthfuls when Lee came slinking out of the kitchen, a stick of beef jerky hanging out of the corner of his mouth like a cigarette. He had the half-empty package clutched in grimy fingers as he walked over to the balcony.

And as she watched, he seated himself on the balcony, his feet hanging past the railing, blank gaze directed off into the dusty distance. Kim followed his gaze but there wasn't anything out there.

Not that she could blame him for festering like that. She'd done much of the same back at her little shelter, in between reading the few same books over and over again. There wasn't much to do in these times except try to survive. A conversation would have been nice, but maybe it was too much to hope for in these circumstances.

"Hey."

I'd gotten to the tail end of the last piece of beef jerky when she spoke up. She'd stopped scraping at the can a few minutes ago, so she must have finished eating.

"Lee? Do you wanna talk?"

"Not really."

"Aren't you lonely?"

"No."

"Really? You look like you've been here for a while."

Didn't bother answering that one.

"And it looks like it's been a while since anyone else was here."

Not answering that one either. Somewhere, Jackson was chuckling darkly.

"Why did you kill the guy outside?"

Lee stiffened up suddenly and visibly, the beef jerky still hanging from his lips. Kim, in response, also tensed up. Something about Lee's posture -- shoulders hunched, one hand grasping at the balcony railing -- reminded of her of a dog about to attack, and she wondered if he would throw her off the balcony like he had threatened to earlier.

Instead, he only glared at her over his shoulder.

"Why the fuck do you care?" He spoke in the same harsh growl that he'd used the night before. "Was he someone you knew?"

"No." Kim had placed the now-empty can against the wall, the spoon lying across its open top, and she reached to pick the spoon back up. She'd moved instinctively, despite knowing that the spoon would provide no real comfort. "I was just wondering."

"He was a threat." Spitting the rock-solid stub of beef jerky over the balcony railings, Lee turned to give her a more direct glare. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you too. Fucking Stragglers trying to barge in."

"I wasn't."

"I don't care." He cut her off ruthlessly. "You think I can trust anyone in these conditions? It's a dog-eat-dog world and I'm not going to get eaten. Got that?"

Kim thought this conversation sounded awfully cliché, like something out of a cheesy old action movie, but faced by Lee's angry stare, she only nodded. She added, "I understand," for good measure.

That didn't stop Lee from clambering to his feet, though, his boots loud against the metal balcony as he took a step closer to her. "You seem to think you're someone high and mighty just 'cause I let you in here, but don't you dare forget -- this is my place. *Mine*. Take a step out of line and I'll kill you."

Terrified, Kim nodded.

Another step closer, and Lee grabbed her shoulders, fingers grasping tight at the fabric of her jacket. "And don't think that just because I was nice enough to let you in here and eat your fucking beans in peace, that means I'm gonna be your crisis buddy and listen to -- ."

His words cut off abruptly, like the crackling of a corrupted audio file. Still clutching the spoon in both hands, Kim stared, waiting for the end of that sentence, but nothing more came from those cracked, stubble-marred lips. Only Lee's eyes moved, darting to shoot a wary glance towards one of the metal cabinets.

Kim followed that gaze. At first, she couldn't figure out what Lee was looking at. Then she realized that he was listening, rather than looking.

It was the radio. One of those solar-powered models that could catch maybe a few days of airtime as long as you left it somewhere bright for long enough. Reception was terrible, but it was better than nothing.

I flicked through whatever channels were still alive once a week or so. Not that there were too many left. Most radio stations had fizzled out, and the only ones left were automated messages from paranoid religious nuts convinced that the Rapture was coming, or the remains of hopeful guerilla groups that wanted to rebuild the human race. There was one memorable channel that met a gruesome end when its sole broadcaster -- a chirpy young woman who claimed to have been trained as a lifeguard -- was mauled and raped and killed while on air. She'd claimed that her broadcast room was a safe house for people who needed shelter. Stupid thing to say.

A lot of the individually run stations had withered away after that. Seeing what can happen to you on a bad day does a lot to deter you.

Even most of the military stations had gone quiet in the past few months. I'd last scrolled through the radio stations a few days ago and left the radio broadcasting silence from a dead military station. Nothing but faint white noise.

And now, there was a voice.

It was marred with static, almost impossible to understand, but I could just barely make out a few words if I concentrated. Words that sounded like, 'searching' and 'for' and 'survivors.'

For a man who'd apparently been cooped up in one place for at least a few months, Lee moved pretty quickly. Kim had been craning her neck back in Lee's grasp and she nearly toppled over backwards when Lee suddenly let go of her to lunge for the cabinet. Groping for the wall to keep herself from falling over, she stared as Lee tore through the

meager contents of the cabinet -- spare metal fixings and nuts and bolts -- to grab a radio in both hands.

He might have been muttering something under his breath, but it was hard to hear when Lee cranked the volume for the radio up as high as it would go. For a moment, the harsh grind of static filled the air, before Lee fiddled with radio knob to adjust the channel. The sound whined, then settled into a gruff voice that was in the middle of finishing a sentence.

"-- individuals who can provide military identification will be permitted safe shelter in the bunker located in Rachel. Over."

Kim stared. The shelters had spots open? The last she'd heard they'd been full. Overcrowded, even. Before she holed herself up, she'd heard rumors that some shelters were already running low on food -- food that was supposed to last for months longer, according to the information pamphlets that had been handed out in the past.

It didn't make sense for these shelters to suddenly have spaces open. But then again, maybe the state of the country was improving. That would be a nice change, right?

Lee, however, had a strange look on his face. He was holding the radio tight in both hands like he was trying to subdue a struggling animal, brows furrowed, eyes focused in a hard stare. It looked a bit like he was trying to stare down the radio.

Then he suddenly threw the radio back into the cabinet.

Nuts and bolts poured over the edge of the shelf, scattering across the floor, and Kim stared in disbelief as Lee went slinking back to the balcony. The radio fizzled with white noise before starting its message anew.

"Following an increase of people residing in the outskirts of Alamo, a scout team has been dispatched to observe the state of the city and check if it can be inhabited again. In the meantime, fifteen individuals who can provide military identification will be permitted safe shelter in the bunker located in Rachel. Over."

Lee didn't seem to hear any of this. He only let out a grunt and slumped over the railing of the balcony, resting his forehead against the cold metal bar. Though his shoulders shifted slightly with each breath, he was otherwise still.

Lee's response to the message was incomprehensible. Kim fidgeted with the ragged sleeves of her jacket before asking, "Are you going to go?"

The message seemed to have deflated whatever aggravation Lee had been building up. For a moment, Lee raised his head and Kim prepared herself for an answer, but he only stared off at the horizon before once more lowering his head onto the balcony railing.

"You're a soldier, right? Or -- something like that. Aren't you going to go there?"

Lee grunted.

"I think they'd let you in."

"Not going." Lee's voice sounded more subdued than it had before. It sounded almost childish. "Gonna stay here 'til I rot." A pause. He seemed to be thinking with great intensity. "If you think I'm gonna run there so you can take over my place you can go fuck yourself."

"That wasn't what I meant." Kim's voice trailed off. She had never had such intentions, but persuading Lee of this seemed like an impossible task. "I just thought someplace like a shelter would be better. A military shelter, especially."

"And what's it to you?" Lee had looked over, eyes narrowed. "You can't get in. You look like a civvie."

"Well, I am."

"So what do you care if I get in there or not?"

Kim hesitated before saying, "I thought if you went there -- I might also get in. If I followed you." It was a selfish motivation and she felt guilty saying it, but she couldn't think of a reasonable excuse. 'Because I care about you' would have been too obvious a lie and probably would have gotten her laughed at. "They probably have more food there -- or at least a proper place to stay, instead of here."

"I'm fine here."

"Maybe you're just used to it."

Lee gave her a long, contemptuous look before resting his forehead on the metal railing once more and sighing.

Not like I could blame her for wanting to save her own skin. Human nature and all that. She probably thought I could talk the guys at that shelter into giving her a spot. Probably not. I was never that good at talking people into anything.

Jackson was the one with that talent. Like the time he talked a hooker into coming all the way out here, catching a ride with one of the army jeeps from the city. There was no way the guys at the gates would let her in, and he knew that from the start, but he got a good laugh at the fact that she'd been dumb enough to listen to his unrealistic request. He was the worst.

That was great, wasn't it? Jackson sat on an upturned chair, sitting on the underside of its seat, the legs of the chair spiking up around him like the back of a throne. *Even you laughed a bit, with that massive stick up your ass.*

But even if I had that sort of talent, not like I was going to risk traveling for a shelter spot I wasn't even sure about. I was comfortable not moving.

You're really gonna rot here? Jackson blinked, then leaned back. Neck craned backwards, chest up in the air, he shuffled his boots against the floor. *Can't say I'm surprised. You were never the type to get anything done.* A slow exhale.

Guess it doesn't matter how much I try to fix you.

Go away, Jackson. You're delusional.

Lee fell silent, and Kim felt like he'd erected an invisible barrier between them.

Chapter 4 -- Coup d'état

"I'm leaving." We hadn't spoken in a day or two. Maybe more. It was hard keeping track of time when every day was the same. The silence had been wet and thick, heavy in the air like cheese, and it almost made me jump when she suddenly spoke. "I'm going."

I didn't want to look over because it might imply care, but I did anyway. She was standing at the doorway to the stairwell. Her hoods were up, her scraggy backpack slouched over her shoulders. It looked mostly empty. It looked a little bit pathetic.

"They might not let me in, but maybe if I go to that shelter, they'll at least give me some food, even if they don't let me in." Her voice was hoarse, and it was obvious even to me that she was trying very hard to sound calm. "I might as well take my chances."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She looked taken aback.

"Because -- ." A pause. "Because."

Lee snorted. He hadn't expected her to come up with any coherent explanation, and it made him smug when he saw that he'd been right. He was sitting at his usual spot on the balcony, forehead resting against the cool steel of the railing, a rock-hard ration bar held between his teeth. He'd placed it in his mouth an hour ago, but hadn't eaten very much of it. It was too hard to chew on without feeling pain and its taste didn't make the effort worth it, but there wasn't much else to eat.

"You'll get there and you'll be locked out and you'll be lucky if they poke their heads out to tell you to fuck off." The ration bar slipped from his mouth and out past the balcony railing as he spoke. Lee was too tired to care about it. Regardless of how hungry he was, that ration bar wasn't worth his attention. "If you're unlucky, they'll just shoot you, but only once and not somewhere fatal. Then the vultures will eat you."

Standing by the door, Kim swayed on her feet. She was hungry and a bit dizzy. She hadn't eaten in some time in an effort to make the food she had left last as long as possible. It had, perhaps, been stupid to wait this long before leaving the tower. She knew she'd have to walk for at least a day or two, maybe three, and making the trip alone in such a bad state would be risky.

She wondered what would happen if she fainted along the way. Would someone find her? Or would the vultures get to her first? If someone *did* find her -- what then?

She tried not to think of cannibals.

"It's better than starving to death here." She wasn't sure why she was telling this to Lee. Maybe she was trying to persuade him to come along with her, but she knew that it wouldn't be worth the effort. Maybe she was just trying to make sure someone remembered her, in case she died like Lee said she would. "I don't want to just wither away here."

Like a dying cactus.

"Go ahead." Lee turned his back to her and resumed his bitter staring match against the line of the horizon. He still didn't seem to notice that his ration bar had been lost. The signs of exhaustion and anger lined his face, forming pockets of shadows around his eyes.

Kim turned and started down the stairwell.

The door closed with the clank of steel and a billowing puff of dust.

You could've gotten a lot out of her, Jackson crooned as the dust settled. Pretty stupid to just let all that free food and clothes and sex walk off.

He hadn't spoken up in several days -- like he'd been waiting for us to talk first. He was seated on the railings an arm's length away, back to the open air. A hard gust of wind would have pushed him off the railing and sent him plummeting down to the ground. The breeze was blowing his cigarette smoke into my eyes as he drawled, *You could still catch her before she goes too far.*

"Fuck off, Jackson."

Hey, hey. I'm not the woman-hater here.

"Fuck off."

I was hungry, but I had to save what was left of the food. That ration bar had been my food for the day, but it had been miserable and now it was gone. Who knew how long it would be before I'd be able to get more? Although part of me wondered if it would be more merciful to gorge myself full one last time before I starved to death. Like a death-row prisoner's last meal.

That's a grim line of thought, Jackson chuckled. I always knew you'd die like this. I told you. Even a girly like that is more motivated than you.

Lee suddenly sprang to his feet and punched the railings. It was a stupid thing to do, because his bones rang with a dull pain. His knuckles would bruise. He stomped into the kitchen area and scrounged up a second ration bar even though he wasn't scheduled to allow himself another one until the next day. It tasted like cardboard. He ate it anyway.

Kim, on the other hand, had taken one a compass from one of the survival packs piled high in the supply cabinets. There had been a cardboard box full of them, covered in an oily rag and a thick film of dust. She had had to open a few different survival packs before she found a compass that wasn't rusted over or broken. But she figured that Lee would never notice what she'd done. After all, he hadn't seemed to notice at all when she searched through his cabinets in search of a map to consult -- he hadn't batted an eye, seemingly buried deep in thought.

Standing in the waxing afternoon shadow of the tower, she turned around until the compass needle stopped spinning and pointed north. She had to walk northwest. It was a bit terrifying, knowing that she had to leave the tower's solid presence behind and start walking into the dusty surface that spread out before her. The wind kicked up a billowing cloud of reddish dry-dirt. Overhead, the vultures circled closer.

She turned to what she guessed was due northwest and started walking.

Leaving a faint line of dusty footsteps behind her, she walked in as straight a line as she could. She passed directly under the line of Lee's vision, but he didn't notice because he was busy pacing about the perimeter of the tower interior.

There was no way I was just gonna die like that. As if I'd wither away.

You're in denial, aren't you? Jackson lay down on his bunk, arms crossed behind his head. The bed remained pristine and neat, covered by a solid blanket of dust. *You're gonna stagnate here and quietly rot away, like you always have.*

No I'm not.

I won't.

The air was dry and empty and dusty, and although the heat could be almost overwhelming under the midday sun, the nights were still cold enough to strike deep into marrow. Kim sat with her back to a small rock and wrapped her jacket close to herself as if that would keep the heat from running away from her. She wanted to make a fire but there was no wood, and her clothes were too valuable to burn. She suddenly regretted not having picked up one of the books she'd found buried amidst the junk piled high in the supply cabinets. They wouldn't have lasted very long, but even a short fire would help.

Other than the tower poking out of the horizon in the far distance, small as a pinprick, there were no signs of life anywhere. The day's walk had placed her solidly in the middle of nowhere.

Kim curled up on her side, hugging her backpack close in hopes that no wandering Stragglers would find her. If she was found, they would probably rape, kill, or eat her. Perhaps all three. The thought made her shiver more than the cold did.

She closed her eyes and spent the rest of the night trying to fall asleep, oblivious to the shadow that stalked forward from the darkness.

The stupid girl slept like a rock.

She was still sleeping when the sun came up, and I watched her sleep for a while in the dim morning light. It was creepy, but like I cared. After a while she turned over

and opened her eyes to look at me, and then closed her eyes and went back to sleep. I was tempted to kick her awake, but Jackson would have been too pleased by that. I wasn't originally the type of guy to kick girls. I wasn't originally a bastard.

It wasn't until the vultures started gathering that she finally started waking up. I sped up the process by shaking her shoulder.

"Hey, wake up." She rolled over onto her back and started muttering something until I gave her a harder shake and yanked her hair a bit. (Just a little bit.)

That woke her up.

Kim sat up, startled. At first, she had thought the hand against her shoulder was little more than a hallucination. But when it pressed hard against her bones, accompanied by a small tug at her hair, she opened her eyes and stared at the shadow looming over her. She automatically opened her mouth to scream, except a grimy hand quickly pressed over her lips.

"Shut up."

She promptly closed her mouth, and Lee felt a twinge of guilt. He quickly removed his hand. Kim let out a heavy, rasping breath. "Let go of me, you're really scary."

Lee came very close to saying sorry, but his pride won out in the end, and he only pulled his hands back, sitting back on his heels.

Kim sat up and rubbed the sore spot at her scalp where Lee had pulled her hair. Her eyes were still filmed over with sleep and she had to resist the urge to ask if he was

really there. He obviously was. He has loaded himself up with multiple guns, a backpack that looked packed full, his full uniform -- as dirty and ragged as it was, it made him look vaguely imposing -- half-covered by what looked like a canvas sheet he'd wrapped over his shoulders. He looked ridiculous.

"You look ridiculous."

"Shut up." Lee's vocabulary had deteriorated even further over the past few days, and it was all he said as he straightened up back onto his feet. He'd picked up the compass and was studying it. "We have to go this way."

There was no explanation, no elaboration, as he simply started walking.

Kim thought it would be unwise to ask for details so she only picked up her backpack and followed after him.

Chapter 5 - Jackson

They started walking. It was a very grueling way to spend the time. Although Kim had made the trek from her hometown to the prison tower before, making this journey to the distant army base was a new and uncomfortable experience. Especially because Lee was present.

Lee's presence was heavy.

He didn't say very much, but he was hefty from the full backpack slung over his shoulders, and his gait was the tired, determined march of a soldier. Kim would have struggled to keep up with him if it weren't for the fact that Lee had to stop often. He

would stop suddenly and silently, plopping down on the ground and resting his forehead on his knees, his luggage slumped over his back like a turtle's shell.

It was the guns, Kim thought. They were probably weighing him down.

Lee had a rifle slung over one shoulder, a shotgun over the other, the straps crisscrossing over his chest. There was also a bulge below his arm, masked by the canvas sheet Lee was apparently wearing in lieu of a cape. She couldn't make out its exact shape, but she guessed that it was a pistol.

It was around midday when they stopped to eat. Lee had taken a seat on the ground without warning, shaking his shoulders free of the backpack straps, and wordlessly pulled out a can of canned peaches. The sun shone brightly overhead. The light bounced off cheap tin as Lee cracked open the can.

Kim took her seat an arm's length away from where Lee sat. She wasn't that hungry just yet, probably because she didn't have as much to carry.

So instead of eating, she just stared at Lee. She would have looked elsewhere, but the only things around them were miles of sandy terrain and a couple of sad-looking dead shrubs. Lee was the least depressing thing to look at, comparatively.

Lee ignored her staring.

It wasn't until Lee grumpily pulled the canvas sheet off his shoulders and unloaded the guns from his shoulders that Kim got a look at the gun holster sitting at his armpit. It looked uncomfortable.

"Is that a pistol?"

"Yes." Lee answered with his mouth against the rim of his can of peaches, and the word echoed around the can before coming out mangled. He swallowed, then raised his head to repeat, "Yeah."

"Aren't the other two guns enough?"

Lee gave Kim a look like she had asked something monumentally stupid. It felt that way to Kim, at least. Resting her chin on her knees, she curled up smaller into herself. A wind kicked up from the west and blew a large wisp of sand into the air.

"It's best to have more firepower." Lee shoveled a syrup-drenched half-peach into his mouth, crunching through the grains of sand that had filtered into the can. "If anyone tries to fuck with us, then it'll help chase them off."

The use of the word 'us' as opposed to 'me' made Kim blink. She was startled that Lee would use that pronoun, but she didn't necessarily dislike it. After pausing for a moment, Kim peered at the pistol. Lee noticed, and lowered his arm to hide its holster from view. It was an uncharacteristically shy movement, Kim thought.

Lee pretended he'd done nothing, and spat out a peach pit into the sand.

"It's mine. Stop staring at it."

The gun wasn't mine. It was Jackson's.

It wasn't even one of the regulation guns. It was one he'd snuck in by bribing the guys who brought in supplies to the prison once a month. We were all given standard Beretta M9s, but it apparently wasn't enough for him.

I remember when he got his hands on this pistol -- a clunky semi-automatic monster that was given to guys in NAVSOC. It didn't belong anywhere near the prison, but Jackson had wanted it badly.

"Took a month's pay to bribe him to get it for me." Jackson had sounded terribly pleased with himself, when he pulled it out of its holster to admire its matte finish. "But like we have anywhere better to spend that money."

He'd hidden it in his locker for the most part. Our carbines did most of the work when we had to take down a runaway prisoner, and he probably would have been punished if he got caught by the commanders using a gun he'd gotten from god-knows-where. It never saw much action. But he used to just sit around polishing it, stripping it, reassembling it, unloading it, reloading it. It was pointless.

I found the gun sitting in his locker gathering dust after he died. I took it mostly to spite him. When he was alive, he hated whenever I touched that gun.

You little hypocrite, was what he hissed in my ear when I picked it out of the dusty, tangled mess of clothes he kept piled in the corner of his locker. *Thought you never wanted to touch that gun again?*

I couldn't blame him for wanting that gun, in the end. It had a nice weight to it. Its shape was familiar in my hand, and there was something comforting about having it tucked under my arm. Like a businessman's newspaper. Like a crutch.

Kim watched as Lee finished eating and chucked the can in the direction they'd come from. It rolled sadly across the sand for a bit before a gust of wind picked it up and kicked it out of sight.

They kept walking.

After an hour or two, Kim decided she wanted to stop. She wasn't sure how to signal that, though. Should she say something? Lee would probably say something scornful. Or he would ignore her. She wasn't sure which would be worse. So she imitated Lee and simply sat down, slipping the straps of her backpack off her arms.

Lee took notice only after walking several feet ahead. He stopped and turned back to look at her -- he seemed to be considering whether walking back to where she was would be worth the effort or not. Then he simply sat down.

Kim looked at the footprints -- the footprints of Lee's hefty boots -- left behind in the sand between where she sat and where Lee was. They were faint, quickly swallowed up by the sand. What remained of them looked small and insignificant.

She carefully dug a plastic bottle of water out of her bag. The bottle had originally contained some sort of long-gone fruit juice -- she'd been smart enough to save bottles from the six-pack of juice she'd bought so long ago. While Lee slept, she had filled them with water from the prison tower's reservoir. Originally, she had been terribly worried that Lee would be angry at her for taking so much water. There hadn't exactly been a lot of water left in that tank. Maybe he would be glad for it now. She glanced over at him to see how he reacted to the sight of the water bottle.

But Lee seemed to be off in his own world, staring off into the stretch of sandy terrain. He was chewing on his lower lip. Kim stared at him staring off at nothing for a

long moment before carefully taking a sip of water. She made sure not to spill a single drop. She couldn't afford to be careless.

She popped open a can of peas, eating straight out of the can. She was carefully tipping the can back to spill some peas into her mouth when Lee gave a sudden low growl that made her jump. Several peas scattered into the sand.

Kim mourned her lost peas. Lee hissed something under his breath, forehead pressed against his bent knee.

It was unfair. Weren't dead people supposed to stay where they'd died? I was out of the tower. And yet, here was Jackson. Stubborn bastard.

He'd taken a seat on the ground at equal distance from myself and the girl. Like we were forming an equilateral triangle for a cult ceremony. Boots planted in the loose sand and elbows resting on his knees, he entwined his fingers like some sort of scheming megalomaniac. He smirked as he said, *Well, I guess that's a step.*

Like I'd give him the satisfaction of answering.

The sand shifted as he hauled himself to his feet. His laces were undone.

His cigarette tip glowed bright as he inhaled. The smoke haloed his face as he breathed, *I'm proud. Never thought you'd have the guts to get out of that little safe tower, my darling little Cactus plant.*

Kim jumped, when Lee suddenly leapt to his feet. He was staring at a patch of sand, teeth gritted and shoulder squared.

If he were a dog, he would have had his hackles raised.

Kim looked over at the sand. An innocent breeze blew a dust cloud into the air, but otherwise, there was nothing.

Oh ho! Jackson's eyes were narrowed in a gleeful, wolfish sneer. *Kitten's got claws, huh? Did I say something wrong?*

The loose dirt made it hard to move. It was like trying to take a boxer's stance while standing on a bed. I could hear it grinding under my boots and it pissed me off.

Fuck off, Jackson. You belong back in the tower.

Careful there. His words were a soft croon, and he breathed out smoke through his nose. The cigarette smoke engulfed the entirety of his face except his Cheshire smile as he said, *You wouldn't wanna give girly there the impression that you've completely lost your mind.* He threw his head back, howling with laughter. The sound was loud. So loud. It rang in the open air, like it was echoing off invisible walls, and it was almost scary. Certainly made me take a step back and think over the situation.

He was still laughing when I looked back to the girl.

It was startling, to see Lee act so strangely. Stranger than usual.

Even though Kim could hardly say that she knew Lee well, she could still tell that something was wrong when Lee stood bristling at a clearly empty patch of said. She couldn't make out the exact words, but he was muttering something under his breath. How long had he spent alone in that tower? Maybe he'd lost his mind.

Maybe it would be too dangerous being around him?

She wasn't sure what to do. She was well aware that he could overpower her if he put his mind to it, and she wasn't confident about how she would defend herself against Lee. She quietly put down her empty can of peas and got to her feet, trying to silence the rustle of sand beneath her sneakers.

She had just decided that she would make a run for it -- abandoning her supplies - - if Lee tried to do anything dangerous, when he suddenly turned to her. The movement was quick enough that she heard the cracking of his neck. His eyes were narrowed angrily and she seriously considered the option of bolting.

"Nothing." Lee's voice was hoarse, the one word choked out as if it tasted exceedingly bitter. Kim flinched as Lee went on. "It's nothing. Nothing's wrong. It's nothing." He swallowed. "I'm fine."

Kim had to force herself calm.

"It didn't look like nothing." She didn't dare sit down yet, but she at least released the tension in her legs to indicate that she wasn't planning on running. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it."

"I'm fine." He said the words firmly, sounding closer to the gruff, disgruntled tone that Kim had gotten used to. His eyes were still ringed with shadows, his gaze bordering

on frantic, but he no longer held himself like a spooked animal, and Kim felt that inquiring further wouldn't get her anywhere.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, fine." She retrieved her backpack and allowed its weight to settled against her shoulders and back once more.

When she look back, their footprints had mostly faded between the natural shifting of the loose dirt and the faint breeze that continued to corrode the contours of the dead terrain.

Close call, Jackson said. She looked ready to run away from you.

He was quick to vanish when I looked up. All he left behind was a whiff of cigarette smoke. He always smoked unfiltered cigarettes, and the stench lingered for a long time.

It always gave me a headache. It was giving me a headache now, even if I knew for a fact that there was no smoke. There was no Jackson. Jackson was long dead and gone -- his body had either been cremated, or shipped back to wherever he'd come from. I was the one who'd snapped off that second dog tag.

I knew he was dead.

Dead men don't talk, yet there he was, always lingering at the corner of my vision.

Stubborn bastard.

Lee grunted as he hauled himself to his feet. The sand shifted beneath his boots, unsteady his balance, making him scowl angrily at the ground. Kim flinched. If he was this grumpy about something so small, she hated to think how angry he might be if she accidentally set him off.

She waited for Lee to walk ahead before following in his footsteps. She tried to ignore the way Lee kept raising his head, then bowing it, lips moving as if he was mouthing a one-sided conversation.

It wasn't until well into the war that I met Jackson. Which was all for the better. I would've shot myself into the foot to get out of duty if I'd had to tolerate him from the start.

Before Jackson, I was in a regular battalion. Just some guy yanked from civilian life and thrown some gear, like most of the other guys I ended up meeting. They weren't my friends, but I didn't have to be friends with them to share in their displeasure at the situation. While there were always a few guys disgustingly gung-ho about the war who announced very loudly that they were proud to be serving their country, they weren't the majority.

The majority was us. The tired ones. The ones who didn't want anything to do with the war. The ones who probably would have lived our lives never touching a gun and never getting shot at, if the war hadn't overwhelmed us. Half of us weren't even sure how the war had really started, after all. Most people who cared enough to search for

answers had long since been extinguished by circumstances. So those who remained were largely tired and apathetic and just wanted to go somewhere quiet and sleep.

It's hard sleeping when you don't know when you're gonna die.

They took turns sleeping. Though they didn't plan this, or discuss any sort of schedule, it ended up being an unspoken agreement of sorts. Kim would usually grow tired first after a few hours of walking. She'd sit on the ground and once Lee noticed that the sound of her footsteps no longer echoed his own, he would also sit. Kim would eat something, perhaps. Lee might, too.

Then Kim would lie down on the ground, using her backpack as a lumpy pillow and wrapping her jackets tight about herself to keep in the warmth. If Lee felt that it was too soon to sleep, he would get to his feet and start walking again. The sound of his footsteps trudging away would frighten Kim into also gathering her supplies and jogging after Lee to catch up to him. They would walk some more.

On the other hand, if Lee felt that a nap was permissible, he would wait for her to fall asleep. Once her breathing calmed to the regular rhythm of the deeply unconscious, he would drag himself to sit closer to her.

Not close enough to touch.

Just closer.

Just a little bit.

He would shake her awake in three or four hours. If she was particularly drowsy, he would yank her ear. Once she was sitting up and taking a drink of water, he would lie

down on his side and curl up and promptly fall asleep. Kim would sit exactly where she woke up and give Lee an equally long nap.

This way, their journey was tolerable. Not enjoyable. Just tolerable.

While Kim slept, Lee spent his time staring into the sky. Kim knew this because at one point she'd opened her eyes and rolled over to find herself looking up at Lee. His stubble was growing untamable, his hair equally filthy with dust and grime. His eyes were glossed as if in thought, and during the time she watched, he muttered something under his breath several times.

When it was her turn to keep guard while Lee slept, she also looked at the sky at first. But because the sky was cloudy and it was daytime, there was very little to look at. Bored, she instead studied Lee for a bit. Tucking greasy, dirty strands of her long hair behind her ear, she stared very intensely at Lee.

At least when he was asleep, Lee looked a little less grumpy.

I got shipped off to that tower because I got into a fight. It wasn't like I'd meant to, things just happened. The other side started the fight. His name was Cedar, and he was an idiot. He got drunk during a rare moment of off time and started a fight with me just because I'd called him an idiot.

He threw the first punch.

I acted in self-defense.

The commander caught us.

He got sent to some shitty run-down town to fight the uprising of civvie rioters.

I got sent to that prison. It was supposedly a lighter sentence than Cedar's.

When the commanders announced that I was being sent to that prison, my squad mates told me all about the rumors surrounding this other guy who'd been sent there. This guy was named Jackson. Jackson had already been there for several months because he punched out some guy who tried to mess with him by screwing up the lacing on his boots. Rumor went around that Jackson knocked out five of his teeth and broke his nose and the guy had to spend months in the medical bay from a resulting gum infection. I don't know if it's true.

When I first entered that tower, bag over my shoulders and tired from spending two days on a truck, he was sitting on one of those spinning office chairs, straddling it backwards. Those infamous boots had been halfway laced, and I remember this only because the leather flapped annoyingly when Jackson ground the heels of his feet against the steel floor, leaving long streaks of black oil from god-knows-what. He'd been holding a cigarette, and his breath reeked when he looked towards me and drawled, "Hey. Don't you look exciting."

As Kim watched, Lee sniffed in his sleep.

It wasn't a smelling-sniff or a sad-sniff, but a disdainful-sniff.

Kim resisted the sudden urge she had to pinch his nose to see how he would react. For a moment, he seemed so much like any, normal, sleeping guy that she wanted to pretend that an innocent prank like that wouldn't possibly earn her a hard shove.

The way it worked was this: the prison had four towers, one at each corner of the square-ish compound. Each tower had two guards stationed there permanently. Jackson and I were chained to the tower that stood roughly to the northeast.

Seven hours of sleep each. The other seventeen hours a day were for sitting around the tower, watching the activities that went inside the compound and the nothing that went on outside the gray walls. Seventeen hours minus the seven that the other slept, that meant for ten hours a day Jackson and I had to tolerate each other. Ten hours during the day, when most prisoners milled about and the chances of a riot were highest. Ten hours of high tension.

I tolerated him.

I don't know if there's a word for how he treated me.

He was difficult to understand. The guys on the truck -- guys who regularly made trips from that prison to the closest cities and bases and back to deliver supplies -- had told me additional rumors about the worst of the individuals at the compound. Not the prisoners, no one gave a shit about the prisoners. There were plenty of rumors about the craziest, nastiest soldiers -- and one of the nicknames mentioned was Mad Dog.

No one actually called Jackson "Mad Dog" because Jackson would have just laughed and nothing renders an insult more useless than the scorn of its recipient, but the name hung around like a bad stench. He acted like one. His teeth were a bit too sharp and he always turned his head a bit too quickly and the way he laughed at things sounded a bit too much like barking. Rumor had it that the one time someone called him Mad Dog, Jackson slugged him out of a second-floor window. (It wasn't true. Jackson denied it.

Howled with laughter as he said that if anyone called him Mad Dog, he'd just laugh them out of the compound.)

He was the worst. The absolute worst.

A despicable human being.

A despicable living creature.

Trust me, he was the bottom of the barrel.

He was the type to constantly stick his nose in other people's business, sniffing around and baring his teeth. The type to know that he was infallible. The type to make his presence known all the time, between his barking laugh and the way he wouldn't shut up and the way he always stunk up the tower with cigarette smoke --

Lee bolted upright with a vicious sneeze. Kim had been peering at him curiously.

He barely missed knocking heads with her. He propped himself up on one arm to rub the mucus and saliva off his face with the other arm. It was a disgusting sight, and Kim stared a bit. Watching Lee wipe the mess off his face, roughly scrubbing it out of his stubble, she felt slightly disgusted at having even thought that he might be close to a normal person.

She had accidentally woken him up without knowing it. When Kim leaned over, some of the sand had brushed off the folds of her jacket and onto his nose.

Lee didn't particularly care why he'd woken up.

He was more distracted by the sound of footsteps. It took him a long moment to realize that it was the sound of footsteps rather than the rustling of the cold breeze that lit

the evening air. Half-awake, he narrowed his eyes at nothing in particular, tilting his head slightly in order to try and separate the various noises that filtered through the chill air.

That was definitely the sound of footsteps.

He moved slowly, quietly. The rustle of his clothes was almost inaudible, and even when he hauled himself onto his feet, he remained bent low to the ground. Kim hadn't quite grasped the full details of the situation, but she knew enough to stay quiet. She also got to her feet into a catlike crouch, but less gracefully. Distracted by the clicking of Kim's backpack buckles, he looked over to stare at the way that Kim had pulled on both her hoods, pulling her long hair out to the sides of her neck in two bundles. They stuck out weirdly, bristling like animal tails.

Lee almost smirked. She looked so dumb.

Kim, feeling his smirk, looked wary, so Lee returned to casting about for the source of the footsteps. There wasn't much cover, and in truth he knew that kneeling was a pretty pointless move -- there are no hiding places on a smooth, flat surface. He knew he stuck out like a flaming match, but that meant the opposition did too.

It wasn't too difficult to find his opponent after a few moments.

A shadowy lump came drifting into view from behind a scraggly tree that sat on the horizon. The tree was a pathetic, dying specimen. Lee cursed himself for not having seen the person sooner -- especially as the person drew closer and turned out to be a kid. Probably a teenager.

What was worst about that position in that tower was probably how boring it got. Not for me, but for Jackson.

People think war is glamorous. People have romantic ideas about being in a war. People generally don't understand that for every hour of actual fighting, a hundred other people need to slave through boring manual labor. War, for the most people, is soul-crushingly dull.

Sitting in that tower and watching out for people who might be stupid enough to try and get out of that compound without permission or get in that compound without permission, we spent most of our days sweltering in mind-numbing, brain-blowing boredom.

I wouldn't have been surprised if it turned out the guys before us had blown their own brains out for some excitement.

I worked in a library before the war. Mostly the physical stuff that the delicate little old ladies and skinny college volunteers couldn't handle -- moving book boxes, rearranging whole shelves, shifting around the computers. Even with all of that, the library was always quiet, so I was accustomed to the silence and stagnation. I was comfortable with vegetating.

I don't know what Jackson was before the war, but he never adapted to the tower.

He was always moving, always shifting around. Always in search of some sort of excitement. He'd straddle that one office chair with the squeaky wheel that he favored, then drag it around the entirety of the tower floor, forcing it over the cracks and bumps in the floor. Letting it topple over one time, after he tried to ram it too quickly over an

electrical cord. Spilling himself across the floor and laughing like a lunatic. It was just how he spent his time.

That, and being a nuisance to me.

He'd rarely leave me alone. Constantly biting.

He saw me as some sort of challenge.

Kim eased the weight off the balls of her feet and instead sat down on the ground. She had pins and needles all the way down her legs from crouching in such a tense position for so long, and since Lee had suddenly straightened up she figured that it wouldn't hurt for her to sit down. She tried to massage the feeling back into her numb feet, but it was a difficult task to tend to through the thick fabric of her jeans.

Sand and dirt shifted around her as Lee stepped forward and shoved aside his bag with the tip of his boot. He seemed to be clearing a path between himself and the teenager that was approaching.

The teenager. Probably still a highschooler, although Kim thought that he might just be a very young-looking college student. A boy with a headful of pale, straw-colored hair that fell in tangled clumps around his temples and ears. He was either clean-shaven, or hadn't grown hair yet. Though there was dirt all over his cheeks and jaw line, he still somehow looked fairly clean.

It was probably his smile. It was a grade-A Boy Scout smile.

"Hi," he said, as he slowed to a stop a couple of feet away from them. He was wearing an old, green mechanic's jumpsuit. Dirt streaked all the way up the legs. He had a backpack over his shoulders, and no visible weapon.

Compared to Lee, who was bristling with weapons, he looked very harmless.

"Hi!" An echo. The boy was drawing closer, sneakers scuffing against the dusty ground. He wasn't very tall, and his features held a distinct trace of something very charming and innocent. "Are you guys also heading for that base that's around here? I was hoping I'd bump into someone on the way, y'know. I'm Copper."

The teenager drew even closer.

Lee drew his gun. To be precise, he pulled out the pistol from its shoulder holster and pointed it square at Copper's forehead.

Chapter 6 - Tagalong and Spectre

I lied. Jackson once told me what he used to be before the war. I didn't ask for it -- he just told me one day while he was bored and pestering me. I was reading -- an old instruction manual for our carbines -- and he was straddling his favorite chair, arms crossed across the top and chin resting on his wrist.

"Hey, you wanna know what I did before I ended up here?"

I didn't bother answering. He wiggled the chair around a bit to pull closer.

His voice had long since acquired that cringe-inducing smoker's rasp.

"I used to be a firefighter, you know. I used to be called noble and heroic. Saved kitties from trees, kids from burning buildings, damsels in distress from fires." He raised an arm to gesture idly through the air. "Got in the newspapers a few times, too. They always said nice things about me. Got a medal, too."

I said, "Good for you."

He laughed, resting his chin back on his arms. "I used to be the good guy. And then I make one wrong move against the commander's pet and I get stuck in a chicken coop like this. Not exactly fair, is it?"

"What, do you want a hug and an apology?"

"You're being awfully sassy today."

"I'm not here to comfort you."

"Never asked you to."

He was quiet for a long time after that. He didn't even bother to pull out a smoke, like he always did. He stared out the window like some sort of brooding movie character. Usually, he bothered me while I read -- flicking ash at me or nudging a foot against the legs of my chair or reading out loud over my shoulder in a purposefully cloying voice -- but he was quiet for once that afternoon.

It was disgusting, like he was trying to play the victim. He had no right to play innocent, and yet there he was, staring quietly out the windows like he was waiting for me to say something. I didn't take the bait. There was nothing to say. He was a villain through and through, and there was no way he'd fool me into thinking otherwise.

I really wasn't surprised when he shot that girl. That innocent little girl who'd done nothing except cling to him in a moment's panic, no doubt scared out of her tiny little mind.

What kind of bastard shoots a *kid*?

And there he was now, standing behind this stupid kid called Copper, fingers threading through that pale hair. He looked bored, and though he draped his full weight over the kid's shoulders, the kid didn't even buckle. Jackson leaned an elbow against Copper's temple and smiled at me saying, *What're you doing, you madman? Don't go pointing guns at an innocent kid.* He chuckled softly. *Have you completely lost it?*

What a dirty hypocrite.

"Stop that!" Kim's shrill voice was what made Copper flinch, not the gun.

Lee also flinched, but more because Kim's voice had interrupted Jackson. For this, he was almost grateful. But he wasn't grateful for Kim trying to control his actions. He shot Kim a rebellious glare before prodding Copper's forehead with the muzzle of his pistol.

"Don't tell me what to do."

It was a juvenile phrase that managed to sound threatening only thanks to the heavy presence of the gun. The gun's safety mechanism was on, and Lee had no intention of undoing it yet -- he doubted that Copper or Kim knew about it, so he thought that even a locked gun would be a good enough threat. He pressed the muzzle of the gun against Copper's forehead until Copper was forced to take a step back, grimacing.

"Where are you from?"

"Over that way." Copper had his hands raised in the universal 'I'm not going to do anything' surrender gesture, and waggled one hand to gesture back behind him. "Been walking for about a week, though."

"A week." Lee repeated the phrase, as if to test its weight in his mouth.

A week. Kim vaguely wondered if Copper was from anywhere near her neighborhood. Her hometown was probably about a week's walk away from where she was. However, this wasn't exactly a meaningful contribution to the conversation, so she remained silent and tensely watched Lee prod Copper with the gun again.

"You're not carrying anything. You can't walk a week without water. You're lying." Lee's voice grew harsher with each word, and Kim recoiled. She was pretty sure that Copper was going to get shot. Lee pressed the barrel of the gun harder against Copper's forehead, right between his pale eyebrows. "Where are you from?"

"No, actually." Copper's smile had juddered nervously a few times over the course of the interrogation, but it had never fully vanished. It was still there, lingering on his face like a shadow. "I just got robbed last night. Rotten luck, eh?" He shifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. "A rowdy bunch caught me while I was sleeping and took what I was carrying. Even took the extra boots I had. Shame, huh? I have pretty small feet so I doubt they would have even fit any of them."

"Shut it." Lee had been looking progressively more annoyed with each word Copper said, and stopped him by prodding him in the forehead once more. His gaze shifted from Copper, to Kim, to a nondescript point in the sand, and back to Copper -- his

indecisive gaze made Kim flinch. "I don't trust you. You're pretty calm for a guy who has a gun pointed at his head."

"The guys last night held me at gunpoint, too," Copper supplied in an attempt to be helpful. His smile still lingered, and while the amount of confidence and actual cheer it showed fluctuated wildly from 'none at all' to 'very earnest,' it stubbornly stayed on his face. "I don't know much about guns other than stuff from films, but it looked like a musket? You know, the really long and clumsy ones from really old movies. Didn't even look like it would fire properly. They might have stolen it from a museum, I think." Lee frowned and moved to prod Copper in the forehead again, and Copper promptly fell back a step. "Okay. I'll get to the point. I've been held at gunpoint before. They left me alone as long as I did what they told me, so -- I figure you can't be any different."

It was somehow irritating, what the kid was saying.

He's right, isn't he. Jackson was back. He was loosely hugging the kid from behind, arms wrapped around the kid's shoulders. *You're not any different from anyone else. Not at all.* He straightened up, ruffling the kid's hair. *All you gotta do is go with the flow like you always do.*

He paused dramatically to studying his ragged nails. *Hey, Cactus.* A low laugh, as he ruffled the kid's hair. *If you either had to go against what people expected you to do, or shoot a kid, which would you do?*

Everything he said grated on my nerves even worse than whatever the kid was babbling on about and I hadn't gotten enough sleep and Kim was staring like an idiot and this was all too tiresome to deal with.

That was the main reason why I slapped him. With the gun.

I hit his temple with the pistol butt, and he dropped like a rock.

Jackson laughed like a jackal.

Kim didn't scream, and the lack of screaming was more startling to Lee than if Kim had actually screamed. He had, in a way, grown slightly accustomed to the idea that a person much more sensitive and shrill than himself had started to accompany him, and thus the absence of an alarmed shriek made him worry for a moment that Kim had somehow vanished.

He immediately felt weak for having worried about Kim.

Kim was standing exactly where she had been just moments ago, and though her eyes were wide in shock, her lips were pressed together in a grim slash. She was pale, her fists clenched tight. Lee lowered his hand holding the pistol, still looking irritated.

"He was talking too much." He muttered the words under his breath, and it felt unfamiliar because it had been quite some time since he'd justified his actions to anyone. "I didn't kill him. I just shut him up."

At Lee's feet, Copper groaned and rolled onto his side, one hand pressed against the side of his head. The hard edge of the pistol butt had opened a jagged cut at his temple, and he was bleeding slightly. It was clear that Copper was badly disoriented. He

rolled onto his back in the sand, nostrils flaring as he breathed. "That hurt." His voice was slurred. "That really hurt. Did I say something wrong?"

"You were talking too much." Lee bent down and grabbed Copper by the back of his shirt, shoving him face-down in the dirt once more. "I'm gonna check to see you don't have any weapons."

"I don't."

Lee grunted in response and returned his pistol to its place in his shoulder holster. Once it was safely stored away, he tightened his grip on Copper's clothing before patting him down with his free hand.

Kim, who had been silently watching the events unfold before her, sat down on the ground. She knew that Lee could have easily killed Copper before her, and the thought drained every last bit of energy from her legs. Breathing deeply to calm herself, she waited for Lee to finish patting Copper down for weapons -- he didn't have any -- before saying, "I don't understand."

Lee pressed his hand over Copper's mouth before the boy could start babbling. "Don't understand what?"

"What you're doing. What you're thinking." Kim's voice was tight with tension and even Lee, who only spared her a brief backwards glance while using his free hand to pat down Copper's pockets once more, could tell that she was nervous. "You didn't need to hit him."

"I'm not taking risks." Lee answered without looking over. A pause, before he leaned down to growl in Copper's face, "If you -- scream, I'm going to hit you again. If

you start talking too much, I'll also hit you again. Just stay quiet. You were giving me a headache."

Copper nodded as well as he could with Lee's hand against his mouth, so Lee peeled his hand away. Copper remained silent.

She doesn't get you, Jackson was saying.

It wasn't normal for him to linger. He usually backed off after saying a few things, but it was like leaving the tower had made him antsy. Like the open air and the new people had given him more to talk about.

Maybe he was jealous that I was getting all the attention now.

You're one to talk.

Shut up.

She -- Kim kept staring when I got up. Kept staring as the kid -- Copper also got up. Jackson lingered an arms length behind them both, hands jammed in his pockets and cigarette clamped between his lips, the smoke feathering in thin plumes around his face. He smirked when Copper rubbed at his bleeding temple.

The kid was saying something about how a bandage would be really nice.

Says a bandage would be nice. Jackson shrugged his shoulders. He took his time pulling a hand from his pockets and tapping at his temple. *Poor guy, head wounds bleed for ages. Looks pretty gruesome, doesn't it? You should do something about it.*

Lee almost reached for his pistol.

Only the worst of the worst would hurt a kid, huh.

Kim bolted to her feet and yanked at Copper's sleeve to pull him back a couple steps -- closer to her, away from Lee. Copper, distracted by the blood trickling down his jaw line, hadn't noticed Lee reach for his pistol, but Kim had. She felt the need to defend Copper from a second pistol-whipping. Perhaps it would make up for the fact that she hadn't done anything to prevent the first blow.

But she didn't need to worry so much.

Lee stopped partway through drawing his pistol. His movements staggered to a halt, and he stared into the air like a bloodhound.

Kim grabbed a handful of Copper's jumpsuit and pulled him, along with herself, two paces further away from Lee. Copper gave her a confused look, and she shook her head before pressing the sleeve of her jacket against the bleeding cut at Copper's temple. She didn't have any bandages, and she couldn't afford to tear up any of her clothes, so this was all she could do. She hoped it was enough.

Copper looked somewhat embarrassed by the gesture and tried not to shift his weight, even when Lee muttered something incoherent under his breath to their right.

Jackson was the worst one around. The biggest villain. The main antagonist. He adhered to all of the stereotypes and acted off the script that every bad guy went by. He wasn't evil like any sort of mastermind, but evil in the vein of an anarchist.

He was insistent on breaking rules and finding loopholes whenever he could.

The type to cause trouble at every opportunity.

He always walked a thin line, being enough of a nuisance to annoy people but not enough to earn himself an execution. I'd often get people talking to me over the walkie-talkies, babbling about the various rumors that surrounded Jackson's actions. They'd ask me, are these rumors true? They'd ask me, did he really do these things?

Rumor went around the compound that he once tried to find one of the few remaining prostitution services and request that a trio of girls come to the compound for a foursome. (He did make the call but he got hung up on just like he'd expected.)

Rumor went around that he once threw every piece of detachable furniture in the guard tower out the windows during a small prison riot, trying to excuse his actions by saying that he'd panicked. (He hadn't actually panicked. He'd just enjoyed trashing the room.)

Rumor went around that he interrupted the execution of some prisoners one week by setting off an alarm, saying that there was an escape attempt on the other side of the compound. (He'd made up the information about the escape attempt. He'd just been pleased that the lives of several prisoners had depended on his actions)

There were some rumors that I didn't know enough about to confirm or deny. Rumors that might have just been products of vicious gossip, but I wouldn't have been surprised if they were all true. It was impossible to tell what Jackson was thinking.

"Aren't you tired of being invisible?"

He said that, more than once. I never listened closely, but there were just a few phrases that he repeated enough for me to remember even if I never paid him more than the minimum attention. Most were to mock me, like,

"You're like a goddamned plant."

"I'm offended."

"No you're not. You never are."

"It wasn't worth getting offended over."

"Nothing is, to you."

But the phrase he repeated most often was,

"Aren't you tired of being insignificant?"

"Everyone's insignificant."

"Only if they allow themselves to be."

"What, you think you're so important just because you used to be a firefighter?"

"Naw, it's not that."

He started calling me Cactus after a while. It started after we'd gotten a monthly shipment of supplies that was severely under stocked. I was the one who'd signed off with the guys on the truck saying it was fine. I knew that we were a bit short on cigarettes and some supplies of food, but I didn't care. There was probably a reason for it.

Jackson raged, when he found out. I woke up to the sound of him shouting into the walkie-talkie and kicking his favorite chair to the ground. He snarled his way through a lengthy argument until the guys in charge of rations and deliveries promised to send a guy over the next day with extra supplies to make up for the shortage. Threw one of the broken chairs out the window before grabbing me by the shirtfront.

"Are you fucking *blind*? Why the fuck did you sign for this stuff when you knew they were stiffing us?"

"There must have been a reason."

"What, and you didn't bother to ask?"

"They'd tell us over time."

He'd seemed disgusted by that. Had let go of my shirt, sneering, "You're a plant, that's what you are. A little potted plant. Just waiting for people to come to you and tend to you." Jackson laughed like a madman and shoved me back a step. "Isn't that right? You little Cactus. You'll die that way, sitting around waiting for other people to tell you what to do until you just rot."

He was talking nonsense. Clearly insane.

"Is he insane?" A few minutes had passed in uncomfortable silence punctured only by the soft growl of Lee muttering something under his breath. After the first minute, Copper had tiredly taken a seat on the ground. Kim had followed suit if only to keep her sleeve pressed against the bleeding wound.

Copper kept his voice low and his sentences short as he leaned closer to Kim to whisper, "Aren't those military supplies? That gun and stuff. Is he like a mad army guy? You were traveling with a mad army guy?"

Kim shook her head to shush Copper, and pulled her sleeve away from Copper's temple. The hair around his temple was blotched red.

"Is he like your boyfriend?"

The only reason why the question didn't make Kim recoil was that Copper had a look of complete innocence on his face as he asked it. He looked like he honestly had no

idea how convoluted an issue he had walked in on, and Kim suppressed the urge to grimace and only said, "He's nothing like that. I ran into him. That's all."

"Oh." Copper gingerly touched the cut at his head, which had stopped bleeding. The skin around the injury had darkened with bruises, but he didn't seem to be suffering any other ill effects. Kim thought it was lucky he hadn't been concussed; she wouldn't know how to deal with a concussed teenager while trying to survive Lee. Copper lowered his hand and said, "Friends, then. Guess that's okay. Must be tough having a kinda crazy friend."

"I'm not crazy." Both Copper and Kim jumped. Copper scrambled halfway to his feet before realizing that Kim hadn't followed suit, so he knelt back down to the ground. Lee frowned at the fact that Copper seemed to be taking cues from Kim. Kim wasn't the most experienced, or most likely to survive -- he was. But that could wait. Lee shifted the weight of his weapons and luggage before giving Copper a hard stare. After studying the boy, he said, "We're going."

"We?" Copper echoed the word, then looked at Kim.

"We." Kim also echoed the word, but more quietly. She sounded resigned.

"We." Lee tightened the belts of his pistol holster. His words were curt. "I don't want you walking off and blabbing to someone you might run into about having seen a guy with guns. Don't need people trying to hunt me down to take them. So I'm dragging you along."

"To where?"

"The base. Not too far from here."

"Well, I can't complain about that! I was heading there in the first place."

Kim sighed. She was somehow unsurprised that Copper would agree to being dragged along. The fact that Lee still had three guns slung rather conspicuously over his shoulders might have contributed to the decision. Even if Copper seemed like something of an overly naive simpleton, she knew it was unlikely he trusted Lee.

She certainly didn't fully trust Lee.

And yet. She looked over to find Lee walking ahead, seemingly occupied with making sure Copper wasn't trying to stray off. Part of her felt that she could very easily make a run for it. Lee looked distracted, and Copper would no doubt provide a diversion. And yet, she quietly gathered up her belongings and struggled to her feet.

Something told her that, despite everything, her chances of survival would be best if she stayed near Lee. A part of her believed that Lee

Now three sets of footsteps that padded on.

Chapter 7 -- Oasis

They reached the base near dawn. The sun had made its way up the horizon a few hours ago -- shortly before Copper woke up from a nap and they'd resumed their tedious trek. Kim had managed to build a small fire from a dying tree near where they stopped, and the night was spent in comparative warmth.

Lee, of course, had kept his distance from the fire.

Kim spent a long time staring at Lee's hunched silhouette several feet away from her seat near the fire, and at Copper comfortably sprawled on the ground. He slept

extraordinarily deeply. More than once, Lee had shifted his weight as if preparing to get to his feet, and Kim had tried to wake Copper up before Lee could come do it himself in a more unpleasant manner. But shaking Copper's shoulders had only yielded quiet, drowsy grunts.

Each time, Lee had glanced over rather grumpily from where he sat, before returning to staring at a point in the distance.

Jackson wouldn't shut up. It was hard getting any sleep.

The presence of that kid -- Bronze, or whatever his name was -- was making Jackson more talkative. More twitchy. He took to pacing large circles around the perimeter of that pathetic campfire, just out of range of its light. He didn't leave footprints, of course. There was just his sickly presence, always talking.

There's a kid here, now. You should really be more considerate. He left a trail of smoke in his wake. *You didn't even give the kid any food. Terrible, aren't you?*

Gave me a headache.

And you call me a monster.

Fuck off.

He's right in calling you a crazy man.

Fuck off.

You don't even know what you're doing, do you?

Kim flinched when Lee finally did bolt to his feet.

She scrambled to her feet immediately, and Lee prodded Copper with the toe of his boot until he got a response. He started walking without waiting for Copper to get to his feet, and the responsibility fell on Kim to pull Copper up and lead him along until he was properly awake.

Lee walked in silence.

Copper tried to make small talk, but Kim didn't have the heart to make the same effort. Somehow, Copper's chatter about the people he'd met (all unpleasant), the things he'd seen (similarly unsavory) and what he'd done before the war (insignificant) were hard to focus on, and Kim felt like Copper's presence somehow invalidated the purpose of this walk. Made everything feel trivial.

Copper felt like a joke. Like a misplaced checker sitting amidst rows of chess pieces. He didn't treat the situation with any sort of seriousness or gravity, and she felt that if this continued, he would cause everyone's chances of survival to drop.

As Copper trailed several paces behind her, Kim watched Lee trudging on ahead. Watched the steady up-and-down bob of his two guns. They clacked rhythmically in a way that was almost hypnotic. She was so focused on the small details of his backpack -- the twisted straps, the frayed threads, the little wrinkles in the canvas fabric -- that she didn't even realize at first that the base was looming ahead in the distance. It wasn't until he suddenly stopped that she followed suit and looked up.

It sat heavy on the horizon like a fat man, and Kim stared at it.

It was supposed to be the same as the dozens of other shelters scattered around the country. A big fat grey dome with a little square door in front. When the government first started building these, there was plenty of fuss about whether they'd be strong enough (they were) and whether everyone would be able to get into one (nope). Ten centimeters of concrete to block the fallout, some measure to make sure the air was circulated, some basic radio functions. Food and water supplies.

Plenty of complaints at first. That these shelters were poorly made. But when the body count started going up, everyone made a rush for them.

It was massive. Bigger than I'd imagined.

But foreign. Made me miss the tower at the compound.

Knew you'd miss it. Jackson was just ahead, back to the concrete lump and hands in his pockets. *Course you'd miss that place. Little boy misses his home, eh?* He turned to glance at the shelter, and his lips were pulled in a scowl.

Don't like the looks of this place anyway.

Some brave -- or phenomenally stupid -- person had attempted to leave their mark on the base by way of graffiti. The bright green spray paint drew arcs and squiggles on the dusty concrete, etching out the rudimentary outline of a signature. But the line terminated rather abruptly in the middle of a large loop. The paint can must have exploded, because a large splattered starburst lingered below the graffiti like a period.

The effect, in whole, was sad.

Copper, who had been trailing behind, caught up with Kim and Lee. Sneakers kicking up a cloud of dust, he trotted forward to stand next to Kim. "Oh, that's silly. Trying to paint the base. Why would you do that?" He wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his forearm. "Guess they didn't get to finish."

"Yeah."

"What d'you think they were trying to paint?"

"Dunno."

"Probably their name, huh? Think most graffiti guys go for that kinda stuff."

"Mm."

Kim was more occupied watching the way Lee paced left to right, then right to left in front of her. He seemed to be studying the base. The footprints he left in the dirt grew increasingly muddy, each time he paced back and forth. After a few rounds, he lowered his backpack on the ground before resuming his pacing.

"What're you doing?" Copper leaned forward to ask.

"Shut up."

Copper looked offended by the response, but Kim wasn't surprised.

"What's he doing?"

Kim hesitated to respond. She wasn't sure what Lee was doing, but she felt like it would be best not to question him. Between Lee and Copper, Lee might have been less friendly, but he was also probably the one with the best chances of survival.

"I think he's checking for danger." Kim kept her voice low.

Lee continued pacing. He had also pulled the rifle off his shoulder and was now holding it, the stock tucked under his right arm. He briefly raised it to peer through the scope, then lowered it again.

"They're not just going to let us in."

"They're not?" Copper leaned forward again to ask. Lee shoved him back with the butt of his rifle. Copper backed off a step before repeating, "They're not?"

Lee gave Copper a look of disgust.

The kid didn't belong here.

That kid doesn't belong here.

He was nothing but a burden.

Doesn't he remind you of someone, though?

Might as well make him useful.

"Get over here." Lee grabbed Copper by the sleeve and yanked him forward. Feet scuffing in the dirt, Copper stumbled for two or three paces before regaining his balance. Shoulders slouched and neck tensed, he stood before Lee, looking nervous.

"I didn't do anything."

"Yeah. But you're going to now." Lee prodded him in the small of the back with his rifle. The steel left a smear of dirt against the fabric of Copper's jumpsuit. "There's some sort of intercom there. Near the entrance. Go use it."

"What? Why me?"

Kim took a step forward. She seemed to be asking the same thing silently.

"You're a kid. No one's gonna hurt a kid." He shoved Copper forward another step.

"They station plenty of men in these bases to make sure no one causes problems. I'd probably get shot. She might too. You're obviously young. You won't."

A pause, as Copper fidgeted. "I don't wanna."

Lee scowled. "You said you were heading here on your own, before you ran into us. What were you gonna do, sit outside and hope they'd let you in?" He prodded Copper's back again, more forcefully. "Go on. Pretend we aren't here."

Kim stayed quiet. She felt that Lee had constructed a mental chart in which the words 'we' and 'us' encompassed him and her, but excluded Copper. She wasn't sure how she felt about it. She, too, had been feeling that Copper was the outlier in this situation, but it was difficult to define why. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he didn't seem to comprehend the gravity of the circumstances. Even with a gun pressed against his back, he didn't seem afraid enough. It made him seem detached from reality.

But Kim did flinch when Lee shoved Copper forward with the flat of his hand, growling, "Hurry up. There's no cover here and we probably look suspicious. The longer we linger, the bigger the risk." Lee took a step forward to make sure Copper was forced to stagger closer to the base before falling back once more. "You just hurry up and get over there."

Copper shuffled his feet against the ground for a moment, tapping a clump of dirt off the heel of his sneakers, before looking up. "Alright. I'll go talk." For the first time, he looked frightened. "But don't go anywhere."

Kim at least put in the effort of nodding and quietly saying, "We'll be here."

Lee only grunted.

The kid wasn't the one in danger here.

It's not exactly false, the way movies avoid showing kids dying during wars.

People don't like shooting small things. There's a natural impulse that prevents people from harming things that are small. Small animals, small birds, small people. Small things are harmless so people believe that there is no need to start a fight with them.

The kid would be safe. Maybe it was a good thing we'd run into him.

Haha, you don't actually believe that, do you?

Copper trotted forward towards the gates with the unsuspecting, pattering gait of a puppy. Halfway there, he stopped to look back at Kim and Lee. If he had a tail, it would have been wagging hesitantly before tucking between his legs.

Lee jerked the barrel of his rifle up to indicate that Copper should go on.

A brief pause, then Copper gave them a hopeful, watery smile and continued walking.

His footprints left a faint line in the dirt from where Kim and Lee stood all the way to the entrance of the bunker, where he stood before the intercom system. It was too far for Kim to see clearly, but Lee was able to observe the situation through the scope of his rifle.

Copper pressed a button and leaned forward to speak into what looked like a mic. He spoke for several moments before straightening up and giving Lee a large wave. He was smiling somewhat awkwardly. Leaning down, he spoke into the mic once more before walking back towards where Lee and Kim were.

"What do you think happened?" Kim leaned in close to ask to Lee. "Could you see what happened?"

"Couldn't hear anything." Lee lowered the rifle. Copper was making his way towards them at a brisk jog. "Didn't look like there was any trouble, though."

"I guess that's good."

Copper slowed down to a trot "I think it'll be okay!" He announced as he grew closer. "They said they don't know how much they can do for civvies, but they'd try their best, and that if you have military ID you can --"

A soft noise went *phut* from the bunker, and Copper's forehead suddenly spurted forth a fountain of red. His head seemed to rupture like a crushed fruit.

By the time Lee lunged forward and tackled Kim to the ground, Copper had keeled forward and collapsed face-first on the ground with the wet sound of meat slapping against a hard surface.

Must've been a sniper. I couldn't tell where they were shooting from.

Kim was shivering when I dragged her away from the kid's body. It was convulsing against the dirt, bleeding a lot. The kid was dead for sure.

Like I said -- doesn't he remind you of someone?

Jackson stood at the other side of the body, nudging the twitching hand with the tip of his boot. His expression was solemn, for once. It was a jarring sight.

C'mon. I'm sure you remember.

I don't know what you're talking about.

You sure?

I don't know what you're talking about.

Liar.

"Why did they kill him?" Kim had her face buried in her arms and her voice was muffled by the coarse fabric of her jacket. "He's dead, right? Why would they -- " She hiccupped, breathing in shallow bursts. She wasn't crying yet, but it seemed inevitable. "Why would they kill him?"

"Cause there's no use for him." Lee had dragged her a couple steps further back before allowing her to collapse on her knees. He had one arm wrapped protectively around her shoulder, the other helping him balance as he crouched low to the ground. There were no more gunshots.

Copper's body quietly bled on the ground.

I lied.

"Why -- why would they shoot a kid?" Kim's voice cracked and she finally sobbed. "Why would they kill a kid?"

"I don't know." Lee responded immediately but he was already miles away and it showed in his voice. His words held no conviction and his gaze was directed at the distant horizon. He seemed scared and guilty.

I lied.

That girl that Jackson killed. Jackson didn't do it.

It was me.

Lee's teeth were gritted hard enough that Kim could hear them grinding. He was suddenly pulling her very close to him, wrapping both arms around her as he kept his own weight low to the ground. Between the hot air and the stench of filth that hung about both of them, the air was suffocating, but Kim was more concerned with the way Lee's vision remained glassy and unfocused.

"Lee?" She grasped loosely at his arm. A blotch of red at the edge of her peripheral vision marked the spot where Copper lay. "Lee? What's going on?"

"It's nothing." Lee exhaled sharply. "It's nothing."

It's not nothing. Jackson was seated on a rock, elbows resting on his knees. He smiled thinly. *Pretty mean to call a little girl 'nothing.'*

Shut up.

Like I said -- if you either had to go against what people expected you to do, or shoot a kid, which would you do?

Fuck off.

Pretty obvious what you chose last time.

It wasn't like I'd had a choice then.

The riot had happened so suddenly. Jackson and I had just exited the tower at ground level when that little girl came running over from the north gate. She was a filthy little thing, dressed in a torn dress that was too big for her, red trickling from a scraped knee. She had smudges of dirt all over her shoulders and arms and face, and I remember they left a Rorschach pattern across the front of Jackson's shirt when she clung to him. She was sobbing as she begged Jackson to help her.

Jackson had looked awkward. At a loss for words for the first time. He'd pulled one hand away from his carbine to give her a small pat to the head as he said, "Sure."

It was precisely then that the walkie-talkie at my belt squawked with the commander's voice, demanding that we make sure no prisoners escaped alive.

I moved without thinking. Orders were orders.

My carbine was out of bullets from gunning down other rioters. So I grabbed Jackson's pistol. The one he wasn't supposed to be playing with, but hadn't had time to hide away before we were commanded to come down from the tower. The one with the

polished steel sheen and flawless weight. The one he prized so much and yet had never been used before.

I remember it was so easy to reach over and yank it out of Jackson's shoulder holster and place it against the girl's temple. She still had her face pressed against Jackson's jacket when I pulled the trigger. The gunshot had been deafening. Jackson flinched heavily as the girl juddered against him, then collapsed to the ground.

Jackson had given me a look of utter disgust as I lowered the gun. He snatched it back with jerky movements and opened his mouth to say something before shaking his head and falling silent. He, who I thought had no right to make any criticism of me, gave me a look of pure and complete disdain before turning away to return to the tower.

That's the kind of guy you are.

Jackson got up off the rock and walked over to crouch down next to Kim. He carefully studied the way she was trembling before patting her on the head.

Guess she's gonna be the next to go?

Kim almost screamed when Lee's arms suddenly tightened around her. She almost screamed again when Lee suddenly buried his face in the crook of her neck. He was stiff with tension, and his voice was sharp as he hissed, "It's gonna be different, this time."