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Delivering Extinction

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Delivering Extinction

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Living during a human extinction is something no one is prepared for. No one thought humans would last this long. Even the sun dies eventually. A child's drawing with a dripping smile. Sun rays heating soil into dust, melting metals, and large pine trees would light like matches. Smoke would rise into the air blocking out everything but the fires taking over the once livable landscape of Earth. Then, it would be over. The sun would explode. Simple and quick, painless for the few who wouldn't try to resist their demise. Too bad humans were a few million years early.

Leah continued to daydream about the inevitable death of the sun. When she learned about it briefly in high school the room went quiet. Her science teacher, a tall man with a rectangular head, smiled at the class, "You'll be dead. So you won't have to worry about it." Boys in the back of the class laughed loudest, fighting against the existential dread settling in their stomachs. A quick wave of his hand back to the whiteboard forced the class back to a lesson about Pluto and whether or not it was a planet.

Leah herself had stopped listening, instead opting to gaze at the cover of her classroom textbook. The edges were peeling, the paper layers fanning upwards like a fan making an escape from its glossy cover. The cover was still in decent shape, only a few permanent marker doodles had managed to remain fighting against the many bleach wipes used to clean it each year. The book itself had been here for the last fifteen years, evident from the list of names crowding the inside cover. Columns of names, each with a description of the "condition" of the book. Starting out with a faded *great*, but as the ink became bolder the final condition was left as *poor*. Leah added her name to the list. After an inspection of the textbook, the deep brown yellow dirty edges and finding page three hundred and ninety-four was missing, wrote, *dismal*.

That was four years ago. Her last memory of being in school was only a year ago. Now she was tired of walking and tired of being alone. She wondered why no one had explained how lonely it would be to go extinct.

Dust floated from the ground into the air with each step she took. She was in search of somewhere to stay for the night. The trees above her caught wind, shaking out their dead leaves. She stopped to look at them fluttering to the ground, for fun she tried to catch one. A crisp yellow leaf's descent caused her to tilt her head straight back. Gazing up she followed the leaf first with her eyes, mouth open in concentration. Finally, her feet moved as she worked her way underneath the dead leaf. Leah waltzed under the leaf, eyes drawn into slits against the sun. For a moment she smiled. It wasn't so bad being alone right now.

This thought was wiped from her mind as dust rose like applause from her dance. Her breathing became heavier, more frantic for air. Taking a deep breath, earth invaded her. It stuck itself to her airways and made her choke. Deep gasps for air made her lose sight of the yellow leaf. Her pulse raced, faster with a lack of air, desperate for a clear airway. *Dear god*, Leah thought, *I need some water*. Having been lowered to her knees, Leah was finally able to stop hacking long enough to take reliable breaths. She remembered another time she was brought to the ground from a lack of air. The first fires and their smoke had left her reeling on the kitchen floor.

Leah shook the memory from her mind and focused on what looked like a crumpled tin can, secured the inside of her backpack. She had filled it with water before setting out for the day. Rolling into the shade of the trees, she grabbed the warped metal water bottle. It was a mountain range of scars. Metallic blue paint chipped leaving valleys of steel grey. *It's busted*. She was lucky to find this one a few months ago when looking for supplies in a suburban neighborhood. Most supplies had been taken. All that was left were family portraits on the walls

and furniture too heavy to carry. Leah found the bottle hidden in a home office off the kitchen. Leah, having been too excited at the prospect of finding water brought the bottle to her lips, seeking some kind of communion. Disappointment slapped her, as liquor sloshed forward and burned her throat. She smiled at the memory of her own mistake. She was lucky it hadn't been bleach. A week later she had allowed herself to get drunk, something she did if lucky. Lying on her back she stared at stars spinning above her. The next morning she regretted her drunkenness knowing it actually had dehydrated her more. Although, it was nice to relax for once.

Again, the yellow leaf caught her eye now lying on the ground far from her. She looked at the water bottle, but didn't dare unscrew the top. If the top was off, there was nothing stopping her from drinking the rest. She was not desperate enough to take a sip. Not yet. Bringing herself back to a standing position, she continued walking. Following an overgrown road she kept her eyes out for mailboxes and hoped to find a place to stay.

Leah walked past a few mailboxes. Each one she passed had mail inside. Leah liked reading the long-lost mail of people who had left their homes. Usually the mail was dated, so she could see how long it had been since the last occupants had been there. The box she was standing in front of was very basic. The paint had faded to a grey, but in its prime it was a rich black color. Saddled next to it was a battered green newspaper slot with only the letters *P*, *C*, *E*, and *S* still visible. The door was still on but the rest of the plastic was clearly melted from the first fires. Still, Leah didn't feel like reading old extinction news. Newspapers had only lasted through the early first fires, but still nothing was spared. Surveying over the entire kingdom was a flag, half raised into the air, a final feeble attempt to send out a weak sign of life. It wiggled in its perch, waving to Leah, begging her to take a peek inside. *Why not, it's not like I'm on a real schedule.*

Leah looked around, feeling suddenly self-conscious even though she had been reading mail for months now. At the bottom of her bag she had a few saved letters from her various travels. Nothing seemed to be watching her. *Hell there's no one really left right?* Before losing her nerve, Leah grasped the handle of the mailbox and peered inside.

Beautiful sheets of paper lined the inside of the box. They reminded her of filing cabinets, papers sitting in a neat row. Of course, dust and ash covered every inch of the envelopes. Leah grabbed letters pushing spiders out of the way. She was looking for names, looking for life, looking for a connection to the world left behind. No, not a world, a species forgotten and happily left to discover what it really meant to be deserted.

Her thumb traced the curved edges around the letter's stamps. It was made with a slightly plastic covering and almost felt silky against her rough fingertips. She flipped through more letters, gazing at the stamps and tracing their outlines. Finally she tore her eyes from the still colorful images of hot air balloons and flags. She was hunting for a name, any name. *Aston Weeks, 43 Nettle Lane, Monty MA 07466.*

"Aston Weeks, hmm you seem like an interesting enough person. What are you, or were you doing during extinction?" Leah mused to spiders reconstructing their webs inside the dusty box. She flipped through the thick stack of papers taking note of the dates each was postmarked. The oldest letter was from almost a year ago and the postmark was faded, but it was familiar. She kept looking at the letters, taking care to examine each and every return label. Many were advertisements, junk mail and overdue bill notices. These people had to be dead. Even during the first fires people were checking their mailboxes. A few pieces were folded in on each other but Leah ignored those, probably militia threats or a worried neighbor. A dusty pink envelope with the address written in all capital letters interested her. Unsure of the age of the sender, Leah chose this letter to read.

Pulling against the seal, the paper made a delicious ripping sound as the contents of the envelope were revealed. She pulled the card out showing a picture of an otter floating on its back. Large bubbling letters circled the otter, *You are otterly amazing!* Leah smiled, drinking in the mass produced greeting card. Inside the card was a brief message to Aston Weeks.

Aston,

We are so glad to hear about your promotion! You absolutely deserve it. We will come visit soon, we need a break from the hustle and bustle of the city. Treat yourself to a meal on us.

Love,

Aunt Kathy

If Aunt Kathy was from the city she was for sure dead. Cities were the last place you wanted to be during an extinction. Overcrowded, no real way out and nowhere to hide. Leah remembered hearing stories about city parks becoming desperate farm landscapes when the food shortages started. In theory it was a great idea. A city wide farm in which produce and resources could be equally distributed like a giant commune. Instead it became a way to make money. Immediately millionaires bought wide plots of land within the parks securing their own food needs. Panic bargaining for plots of land started until there was no park left.

People started getting desperate at this point, stealing crops and food from the farms. Large chain link fences were put up with barb wire icing to top them off. But still food kept disappearing. The people who worked the land were losing whatever income was coming in and they blamed for their inability to protect the plots. Silly to think about income in an ending world. Soon the fences were surrounded by armed guards at all hours of the day. Worry lines added to any face that recognized them as militias. People continued their searches for food, trying to overrun the guards and take back the park. They were massacred, over a hundred were

either killed or injured. People stopped trying to get back to the farm. The same thing happened with grocery stores. The memory was too painful for most and they fled.

The woman who had told her the story was shaken, husband in tow in a makeshift sling. She looked scared when Leah spoke to her. But the women had traded her some food for a plastic water bottle so Leah thought she was nice.

Leah closed the letter, taking one final look at the otter on the front before shoving it to the bottom of her backpack next to the many other letters she kept. Her secret collection, one she didn't like admitting to even herself. She continued walking along the road. Leah kept listening for something interesting to tear her away from her travels, she could feel herself getting tired. But all she heard was birds and rustling among the dead dry leaves. She was walking to Orick, a town she had passed through silently ten months before. According to her map, Orick was only another fifty miles north, just past Littleton.

Leah was coming from a New Hampshire beach town called Hampton. She had stayed there for what people were calling the Sun Season. Leah found herself in an abandoned mansion right on the ocean. *I deserved it after walking 30 miles.* She was able to stay cool from the sweet ocean air and walked around the tourist town looking for food. She had gone there a few times with friends before all this started. Sunscreen was always harder to find. Most times she didn't.

It was easier to find water than sunscreen. *How fitting.* When she did find it, it stayed in the pocket along the back of her backpack so she could feel it was there. When getting water Leah found herself covered in mud from wading into the water. It was the best way to collect water and stay cool. When this became too much she turned to the ocean. The salty water was in no way drinkable. The shocking effect of cold water briefly relieved Leah from the heat of the sun. Leah only began walking in search of supplies once the days started becoming noticeably shorter. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck along the ocean for the Rainy Season.

Leah had been walking north for eight days now, stopping for bad weather and when she found a nice place to stay. When she was feeling brave she would wander through towns looking to trade goods with residents who survived. If she was lucky there would be an outpost where she could stop. Once she had walked far enough to get close to a giant concrete shopping plaza with big box stores like Dick's Sporting Goods and Market Basket. The shelves were bare for the most part but Leah grabbed what she could. *Salad dressing, Oreos, a broken lighter and a toothbrush. At least I still have the toothbrush.* She only took trips to the shopping plazas when she was desperate for food and willing to risk running into a militia, or worse a town still trying to act like this was all going to pass.

But mostly she was entering abandoned homes looking for their edible leftovers. When she couldn't find anything, she would resort to her own small stores of food. In her large backpack she was able to carry six cans of food and a small bag of rice. These were used only when she was unable to find food elsewhere. Besides, the water needed to cook the rice was annoying to get a steady boil. And she didn't feel totally comfortable boiling potentially bad water directly into the rice she was eating. She wasn't even sure if it was safe, she wasn't exactly a survivalist before the end of the world. The rest was a miscellaneous assortment of items. Fire starters, change of clothes, pairs of socks. She wouldn't mind a new rain coat or shoes. *A large hat would be nice.* Maybe one of these houses would provide it. She was getting tired. The letter was nice to read, but old memories sunk into Leah. Newspapers and junk mail images were overwhelmed by the day of the first flare. Fires everywhere. She traced scars on the backs of her arms and shuttered before shaking the memory away. Looking at the lowered mailbox flag, she turned down the driveway and continued walking.

The house in front of Leah was well kept. A path leading up to the house from the driveway had been mostly cleared of overgrown plants and weeds. It left ample room for someone to walk

up to the front door without getting stuck on the branches. The outside of the house was dirty, long weeds had somehow taken root on the overhanging roof. She could see a few bird nests scattered along rusted gutters. A waterlogged tire swing hung from a large tree on the side of the yard. It really just looked like a house had been abandoned for about a year. The final flare wasn't long ago and the reminder was in what was left.

In a few places plywood was nailed over windows. It didn't look like someone was staying here. No smoke was coming out of the chimney, not that anyone would have a fire right now. It was still Sun Season and the temperature today was only continuing to rise. Leah figured she'd go inside and leave. She was here to look for food and anything that may be useful then find a house farther away down the street to stay the night. *Never stay where you steal from, that's a rule.*

She entered the kitchen trying to ignore the evidence of the original inhabitants. She would open the fridge right before she left, if something smelled bad she would be leaving anyway. The cabinet above the stove was empty. A few pieces of pasta littered the shelf, deeming them unworthy of taking, Leah moved on to the next cabinet. The one next to the stove was scattered with half used spices. Salt, garlic powder, paprika and cumin were left. Leah pocketed the spices before starting onto the next row of cabinets. The spices could be helpful. Once Leah had run into a large woman who was a chef before the extinction. She was willing to trade for spices, claiming "Life sucked too much for the food to be dull."

Leah riffled through each cabinet, avoiding the various animal droppings and excessive spiderwebs. *No one talked about how many spiders would survive extinction.* She ended her search with a long-forgotten box of macaroni and cheese and a box of table salt. She closed the cabinet only to be faced with a children's drawing tucked carefully into the molding of the cabinet. There was no avoiding the reality this wasn't a house forgotten. This was a house of

memory; a tomb. Out the window a trampoline overgrown with weeds and plants was the only remaining structure of the backyard. The burnt wood from some kind of shed sat in the corner of the yard like a stack of fallen cards. *What happened here?* Leah's memories once again invaded her mind, struck by the leftover burned structure of the shed.

Looking around the home, Leah's breaths struggled to quell the rising loneliness. *This place has lost everything that even mattered. Everything I've lost.* The occupants, the family; the imagined laughter floating down from the stairs. The living room, across from where she stood, the couch was shedding its layers like a birch tree. The once nice leather had started to sag, but there was almost none left. *Did they take the leather and use it for something? Smart.* She could imagine movie nights or super bowl parties taking place there.

Leah forced herself to turn away. She placed an imaginary concrete slab over the cold rising foam of sadness that threatened to choke her. With every breath she exhaled the concrete was pushed harder, deeper and deeper until the darkness within her swallowed it whole. She had to move forward, it was time to look for clothes and move on. It was no good to stay in a place of memory for this long. Turning to the stairs, she began to climb avoiding the few stairs in which floorboards were ready to splinter. They creaked as she pushed off of them. She reached a carpeted second floor and looked at the ceiling where water had leaked in. Frozen bubbles of paint lined the upper area of the walls like a molding. If Leah was a little taller she would have reached up and tried to pop them, watching the dim yellow paint crumble to the floor.

Walking into the first bedroom she took in the sunken bed frame. The curtains had been torn down and used as a blanket it seemed. Leah thought it was a pretty good idea, she had once used an old ornamental carpet as a blanket. In some places it smelled bad, but the weight on her chest helped her to drift into a deep sleep. Leah began assessing the room.

First find the closet. Built into the wall she approached the closed door anxious for new clothes. Movement in the corner of her eye caused her to jump. She turned backward ready to run but only saw her own dirty reflection on top of the dresser. The mirror there was very dirty covered in dust and various droplets of liquid. She hadn't seen herself in a while. *Jesus.* Her hair was unevenly cropped and the heat of the day had caused it to expand. Her circle shaped head added to the largeness of her hair. She sighed looking at her face. Leah didn't think her face looked dirty, it could be the mirror which was still covered in debris. Ignoring the possible dirt on her face she focused on the dirt making residence on her pants and shirt. She made a mental note to clean them when she found some water.

She looked at her loose t-shirt now clinging with sweat to her body. Maybe she would be able to find a replacement in the closet. The best clothes during an extinction were workout clothes. They were light, easy to clean, and even easier to layer. When Leah first left her town Topsfield she joined looters at a Marshall's to grab the few clothes left. She didn't even know what she was grabbing, only that they fit into her then empty backpack. Now she was looking for them in this abandoned house. This abandoned home.

Framing the dresser were family photographs. Some were clearly taken at what looked like a theater. The young girl had giant red spots on her cheeks from blush and her hair was pulled into wild pigtails. A posed family photo was next. She looked at the oldest man, very clean cut with a thin beard. Around his eyes were wrinkles; he was smiling clasping his hands on the back of a young man and a little boy. There was no telling where they were now. Leah thought about the family escaping somewhere safer as she slid open the closet door. *Probably one of those rich family's that escaped to a second house far away from here. But not Hampton, that place was still pretty deserted.* Still, this was their home.

Walking through the room felt like a violation. She was consuming the life these people left behind. Rummaging through their mold speckled clothing felt invigorating. This was what they wore. This was who they were. *Where are they now? Is there more mail?* Once she was done grabbing clothes from the closet she moved back to the dresser, looking in the drawers for anything more about the person who lived here. A diary would be the jackpot. But even before, no one kept a diary, people never thought the internet would disappear so they stored their thoughts there. Her eyes burned as she felt hot tears drip out of her eyes. *What a waste of water.*

Leah never wanted her innate human instinct of survival to kick in. Never look for past signs of life. Yes, she was surviving until something killed her or whatever, but wishing for the world before was devastating. These were the days she was unable to walk. The ones when extinction consumed her, pulling every muscle in her body to the earth, begging her to just bury herself now. The house was pulling her in, begging her to stay and pretend this was her home. Leah felt it the moment she read this home's letter. It was going to be one of those days, consumed by a need to know the past occupants. Letters from houses she longed to go in usually kept the need at bay. It wasn't working today.

Finally surrendering to the pull, she wandered around the house with fingers trailing the walls. She was trying to leave a mark with no paint. Rain clouds passed over her eyes, making it hard to focus on just one thing. Leah was unable to lift her arm to trail over the walls. Leah couldn't look anymore, she couldn't walk anymore, maybe she could stay here for the night.

She tried reasoning with herself. *It's stupid to stay longer, you still have to get to Orick. Traveling at night is a good option because the heat lessens. Even less likely to be seen by other people, if there are people still out there.* Shut out of her own mind Leah climbed wooden stairs until she reached the bedroom she had uprooted. Finding a clean, dry bed was a pipe dream. Not having any energy left to look at the other rooms, she would settle for this dry dirty one. The torn

curtains did make a nice blanket to put some distance between herself and the insects lurking between the polyester folds of the mattress. She laid her sleeping bag across the top before curling into herself. She would lay there for a day or two looking at the ruins of civilization. There were still two more bedrooms to look through. After she felt rested she would get start walking to Orick again. But for now she would lay there. The orange light of the sunset soon faded to a dark purple haze as night crept sweetly in. The house was silent and Leah soon fell asleep.

The morning left Leah feeling damp. Major signs of the incoming rainy season were dew and humidity during the first hours of the morning. The windows had a very thin layer of water droplets on them. Leah watched them race to the bottom of the frame for a few minutes before moving to get up. She rolled and tied her sleeping bag onto her backpack with fraying rope. She would search through the garage and the other two bedrooms. She wondered if a belt would be better to secure it to her bag.

The weight of yesterday seemed to have left in the night, though she still felt sluggish. Her mind was awake, while her body groaned in protest as she stretched her weary limbs. Every morning her body was tired, but today it felt exhausted. *I'll walk slow today.* Not ideal but at least she was still moving. Leah chewed on her last piece of dried meat as she wandered through the house. She had a few cans of beans in her bag and if she got desperate she could make the old macaroni and cheese. Her mind was on food when she entered the other bedrooms. The second bedroom held no real interest, it seemed to be converted into some kind of office. There was a large map of Massachusetts and New Hampshire on the wall, red pins marking various towns. *Wonder what their job was.* She grabbed the pens and papers to write on before moving on to the double doored master bedroom. Nothing could have prepared her for the master bedroom.

It looked like a small grocery store. Large shelves had been positioned around the bed, each filled with different foods. An entire shelf was dedicated to just to canned tuna and sardines. *Am I dead, what is going on?* Her eyes traveled to the containers of crackers and bread. She wondered how long this had been here. Dirt layered upon dust made the cans look almost fuzzy, but the rest of the room wasn't nearly as dirty. Leah couldn't imagine someone living here, hell there were still squirrels in the kitchen. She moved through the shelves until she reached the last shelf. She decided to affectionately call it the produce section. It was full of fruits and vegetables. Cucumber, zucchinis, squash, and potatoes lined the produce shelf. They sat on top of linen cloths which gave the whole shelf a homey comforting feeling. It looked like someone actually cared about these little garden gems. Before she could question again if someone was living there, a grouping of red on the lowest shelf caught her eye.

Apples sat in an orange sandcastle bucket. It was similar to the one Leah herself had played with as a child. Shoveling sand into the mold before searching for shell shape treasure along the shore. But alas, the apples came back into view, their explosive red color destroying her daydream. Leah's mouth watered at the sight of the waxy red apples. She crouched next to them resting on her haunches. She picked one up, balancing it on her fingertips inspecting it for blemishes and signs of tampering. She moved on to the next apple meticulously inspecting the taunt red skin.

Once deemed worthy, she took a large bite, savoring its sweetness. Leah closed her eyes, enjoying the freshness of the apple and enjoying the mere fact she was eating fruit. She was almost able to pretend it was before extinction started. Picturing herself in her kitchen listening to the crunch of the apple with each bite, juice sliding down her jaw. She smiled to herself, looking around again at the shelves. What would she take with her? Would she even leave? She

could just stay here, search the house and the garage. There were surely more supplies hidden somewhere. Taking another large bite, Leah's eyes moved lazily along the shelves.

Peanut butter. A few jars took residence on the top shelf. Living high above the rest, overseeing all the other jars. She reached for it balancing her left foot on the second shelf. The jar popped open with a satisfying burst of air. Taking a knife out of her bag, she pierced the smooth creamy surface. She had always loved being the first to ruin the neatness of its surface, creating her own ripples in it. Leah took a large glob of peanut butter to spread across the apple, but impulse took over and she ate it plain. *I'm gonna be so sick. Who the hell cares it's so good.* She swallowed quickly, and repeated the process again, this time taking a bite of her apple afterwards. She closed her eyes and sunk to the floor, enjoying the mix of flavors across her tongue.

"Enjoying yourself are you?"

Leah's entire body went rigid, her muscles tensing turning her casual crouch into an attack position. Leah looked up to see a tall man with long black hair in two neat braids. He stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips, looking down at her on the floor. He didn't seem dangerous, he was actually smiling a little. It was easy to tell, his cheeks rounded out when he smiled and his almond eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Mmhm," she grunted with her back hunched as she took another slow bite of *her* apple. She refused to break eye contact with this man. Leah stood up slowly, making a show of moving her knife to her dominant hand. There they were, watching him watch her. Once standing at her full height, she pushed her shoulders back and said, "I was just leaving."

The long-haired man smiled. "It's alright. Would you like to take something with you?" Leah just stared at him. *What the fuck?* This was a strange survivalist.

“No,” she said, “I’ll just go.” She didn’t want to owe him anything; those who offer help usually want something in return.

“Would you like a bigger backpack?” He urged, “Perhaps a wagon to tow behind you during your travels, I think there’s one left. You might as well take the peanut butter, you’ve already put your mark on it?” A bigger backpack would be nice Leah thought. Maybe this one would let her stow more food or at least fit her sleeping bag.

“Where is it?” Leah asked, her eyes narrowing.

“It’s downstairs, in the room down the hall from the kitchen. I’ll lead if you follow? And maybe put the knife away?” With that he turned on his heel and made his way to the stairs. Leah followed behind him, hastily putting the knife in her pocket and fumbling to put the peanut butter into her bag.

The man turned to look at her, “Oh, I’m Ben.” He smiled again before turning away. He hadn’t asked her name, so she didn’t provide one. Ben led her downstairs to a large doored room. Inside was a collection of backpacks, rope and other various non-food items. Leah was surprised to see gas masks, Ben didn’t look like the type to use them. She stood in the doorway observing Ben as he began picking up backpacks to show her. He was yammering on about something, but Leah was too busy taking it all in to pay attention.

She interrupted him saying, “Where did you get all this?” It was becoming hard to keep the awe out of her voice. This place was like a big box store; full of food, clothes, backpacks and sporting gear. She wondered what he kept in the garage. *Bikes?*

Leah had been wanting a bike for a few months now, but hadn’t been able to find one that was working. Seems everyone either took them for parts, or used them for some bizarre extinction need. *Maybe someone made a last resort spin class.* Leah smirked at her own joke,

imagining middle aged women scattered about a burnt field with sweatbands glued to their foreheads.

He pulled a large green backpack out from bottom of his pile, “Here and there, but a lot of it was here before the electricity went out. My aunt lived here, started hoarding things. She’s to blame for the gas masks. I guess they could come in handy if the universe wants to throw another thing at us. I like to collect things to trade, comes in handy when trading for water or more important supplies.” Leah met his explanation with silence. She felt jealousy rising in her, here he was sitting among extinction riches with little to no care in the world. Leah let heat rise off her body, frustrated with the cards she was dealt. She snatched the large backpack out of his hands, afraid he’d ask for it back. He raised his eyebrows at her, as if to say, “Really?”

“Thank you for the backpack,” She managed a small smile, “mine was getting a little worn.” A little worn was an understatement. The straps were held together with plastic zip ties while the outside had holes of all sizes. Leah had used duct tape and crooked sewn patches to cover them. She had just recently been worried the bottom was going to fall out.

“Do you need anything else? Coat, more food...another night of rest?” His eyes looked sad when he said this. Ben looked at her expectantly.

“No, I really should be going. Good luck.” When she said his height shrunk and his cheeks sunk deep into his face. Leah couldn’t stay, movement was what she needed. Besides she already had a place in mind to stay for the Rainy Season. It wasn’t perfect, but she had been there before.

Ben began walking her to the front door, his shoulders hunched. “Okay, but I have a small favor to ask of you.” He turned and looked at her, gentleness settling back into his soft face. The hair on Leah’s neck stood, ready to fight her way out. She only tilted her head in response, questioning without words.

“When you get to the end of the driveway put up the flag at the mailbox please. And at the end of the street, there’s a rusted mailbox surrounded by a large bush, it may be flowering if I’m correct. Anyway not the point, please put the flag up on that one as well.” Leah looked at him, her eyes darting around his face, looking for signs of malice. She couldn’t find any.

“I will. Thanks again.” And with that, Leah left what she had then started calling, The Department.

It was mid-morning by the time she left Ben and The Department. Stopping at the bottom of the driveway she pushed a blue metal flag into its upright position. She walked another ten minutes wondering if she missed the rusted mailbox. Once Leah had seen the actual bush, she laughed at the idea of missing it in the first place. The mail box was covered in a blooming flower bush. Leah was unsure of what kind of flower, but found the long light blue flowers a nice change to the dryness of the street around her. *Funny how even after fires, floods, radiation and people, plants still find a way to grow.*

Not only was this mailbox surrounded in flowers, but it was massive. She approached the mailbox, admiring its wrought iron metal work which struck right into the ground. The flag itself was the size of a loaf of bread. As she lifted it into the air she was shocked at how heavy it was. It had to have been at least five pounds. The actual box used for holding mail was the size of a couch cushion. She allowed her hand to feel its rusted surface. Its grittiness was unsurprising as was its stability to its wrought iron post. Clearly this mailbox had had purpose. She was unsure of why Ben felt the need to raise its flag. Maybe it was a signal for people to capture her, drag her back to where ever they came from and use her. She shuttered, thoughts of forced labor, marriage and sexual favors flooding into her mind. At this thought she quickly ducked into the woods, and remained off the roads for the remainder of the day.

Once a safe distance into the woods, she looked back at the larger than life mailbox and admired how the blue of the flowers only made the red flag brighter. She waited there for about an hour, waiting to see something happen. Then Ben came flying by on a bike, wagon in tow. Unsurprisingly, he was singing at the top of his lungs and ringing a bell to the beat. *He's gonna get himself killed.* Leah waited another half hour before getting up. She continued onward to Orick liking how comfortable her new backpack was. It was big enough for her old backpack to fit inside the new one, which meant it created a nice pillow at night. For the first time in a few months she was comfortable at night and she had a brand new jar of peanut butter.

Orick, supplies, campground, Orick, supplies, campground, Orick, supplies, campground. This is my mantra. Oooom. Marching across the ground she thought of the soft woodchipped dirt which wooden cabins nestled into. White chipped planks of wood made the cabins look worn. Leah remembered her mom and her unable to help themselves at further pick the paint of the sides. They tried to do it discretely, but somehow a dusting of white over the brown dirt always gave them away.

The campground was a good place for the rainy season. The whole place was along a river that she had gone to at the start of all this. The cabins and surrounding land hadn't flooded even during the most torrential of rain. Of course, the old office's basement was in a perpetual state of unwanted indoor pool, but Leah didn't go in there. After Orick it would be only a few more hours of walking and she could relax. Leah walked forward with her little lake cottage floating in her mind.

* * *

Orick's outpost was in the bones of an old gas station. Each filling station was remade into a kind of bike rack. Walking up to the door she passed by a cow, horse and about four stray dogs. Leah would love a bicycle. She could picture gliding along the road pulling a cart behind her full

of useful things. *I wonder if they're for sale here. I should've taken the cart from Ben.* The cow and horse probably belonged to locals in the area. Animals that large weren't reliable for long trips. They ate too much and getting attached to potential food lowers one's survival while simultaneously raising it. Go figure.

Orick was a quiet town surrounded by sloping forests. It was a town where nothing really changed prior to the extinction. When she walked into the outpost she was actually surprised to see a list of town events still being run. One listed was a class on homeschooling. *Well there's the reason I never stayed.* The sign was either old, or there were people who still felt the need to have children taught about the three branches of the government. *There's not even a government anymore! Who cares?* An attempt to keep the human population growing. Leah thought it was useless, just bringing to life more people who would eventually die off. *Why fight it?*

The outpost she walked into was held together with spite. Humans really felt the need to hang onto everything they created, even if it seemed the end was near. Spiteful only when destruction is happening to them, funny how that works. Various pieces of shabby plywood and zip-ties desperately kept the store together. As Leah glanced at the back corner, it was clear it was the newest edition. A shelf was built with what looked like small trees because they still had their bark on them, the shelves were home to breads. The ceiling above her was giant tiles of white speckled foam. The rainy season had shown holes in the roof, giant yellow rings of water were scattered throughout. One cluster in the back almost looked like an overlapping flower pattern.

The person behind the counter gave her a wide smile while trying to sell her some dried meats. Leah could see plastic melted onto the meat in various places. Clearly it was some kind of leftover grocery store brand that wasn't collected immediately during the first heat wave. Only they were wrapping it in leftover tissue paper trying to sell it off as something they made. Leah

rolled her eyes, “Couldn’t you give me something a little more... I don’t know fresh? This is clearly a 70% plastic beef jerky stick. The plastic doesn’t blend with the pork as well as you think it does.”

“This is all that we have for those passing through.” The blonde woman behind the counter claimed. She wasn’t really blonde, her dark brown roots were about 3 inches too long.

“I could trade you some things. I have a bunch of magazines from around the region. I also have lots of pens and pencils. Could be helpful for your homeschooling.” Leah pointed her chin to the town events sign. The woman’s eyes widened, larger and hopeful for the first time since Leah had started speaking with her. Clearly magazines and writing utensils weren’t something everyday travelers really collected. *They probably don’t read other people’s mail either.*

“Fine. Let me see them and then we can discuss what they’re worth-”

“No.” Leah said cutting her off, “show me what you sell to locals before. I want a fair deal.” A scrawny guy in the corner shifted. Leah examined him from the corner of her eye, taking in his shaggy beard and fedora perched atop his head. He didn’t seem dangerous, but then again underestimating someone is asking to be killed.

The woman looked at Leah a few moments more before moving towards the fridges lining the wall. They of course weren’t working, electricity had finally stopped several weeks into the fires, generators didn’t last very long after the gas was gone. It was an adjustment to say the least. The fridges were lined with tattered purple curtains, concealing their contents from view. Pulling back the curtain Leah’s mouth began to water. Hanging from a combination of string and metal hooks was meat in all shapes and sizes.

There was a large leg hanging next to fish strung up together. Each piece looked golden brown and cooked to perfection. The smell was intoxicating as rosemary and chives seasoned the

air around her. It drew her in closer. Leah wondered how much this was going to be and tried to think about the cost of some meat and a bike would be.

The curtain snapped shut and the door was closed. Leah jumped back, aware her daydream caused her to forget the tense situation. For a brief moment there she actually felt relaxed. The fedora man laughed before his face settled into a smirk. “Well we showed you ours. Now you show us yours. That’s the rules right Anna?” He said as his eyes rolled over Leah. Anna gave fedora a sharp look before turning back towards the counter.

“Fine.” They all walked back to the counter and Leah gathered the different magazines and pens to show not-so-blond and fedora beard. She pulled out first the magazines. There were ones from the beginning of extinction, she sold them as historical documents. It was really the only way those who were younger could understand how the world changed. These ones were mostly gossip magazines featuring silicone celebrities and their various failed relationships. Leah could tell these weren’t quite as interesting as the blonde women had hoped.

“Think of these as cultural textbooks that give a glimpse into what life was like before. It could be a whole week of lessons depending on the age of your students. It might be a comfort to the elderly too. I also have a few newspaper pages from the first fires.”

Anna only nodded, “What else do you have?”

“These are probably more of what you’re looking for.” Some magazines were ones she remembers reading in doctor offices, filled with word searches and games. These were part of Leah’s main bargaining power. “These are real educational documents from before. Games, real historical facts and math problems. They’re not as shiny as the others. They’re not textbooks; pages are missing here and there, but they are valuable. You can flip through them if you like.”

Leah slid the small pile towards the women, admiring the soft red cover of the top magazine. Anna looked through them, fingertips barely holding onto the pages, afraid to damage them.

Clearly she hadn't seen things like this in a while. *Probably burned in the beginning, when everyone thought this would pass.* Leah watched her eyes, rapidly scanning the pages, taking in lost information and remembering the world before. She didn't have to wait long until Anna looked up, in a warm haze of past normalcy.

"How much are you asking for them?"

"Pork, two fire starters, bread ...oh a bike," she added quickly to the end, trying to sound confident.

The woman eyes narrowed, "I can do the first three easily. A bike is much more. Silly to consider."

Fedora decided it was his turn to speak again. "Yeah, the only people with bikes here are the messengers. You're not a messenger and you're not from here. Sorry little girl."

Leah's temper flared as she whipped around toward him, venom on her lips. Taking in his lanky thin limbs she only glared. Those with little strength tend to rely on weapons, and she wasn't planning on dying today. Forcing her mouth into a thin smile, she turned back to Anna.

"What would it take for a bike?"

"Phil's right, it takes more than magazines. Textbooks, pens, a few teaching sessions, and labor."

"I have some pens. I'll give you five. I bet I could find a textbook somewhere in this town."

"Still not enough." Leah wasn't an idiot. She knew she wasn't offering a fair deal, but neither was Anna.

"I'm gonna keep looking around the town. I might come back if there aren't other trading posts here." Leah turned and walked out the door, hoping there was at least one more trading post to use as leverage. She walked down the road, eyes on potential outlooks or stores or schools or whatever. She wanted this over with. The campground was only a few more hours of

walking. Then she heard the singing. Followed by the bell. Finally she saw Ben, from The Department. His braids whipped against his back as he picked up speed before turning into the gas station. *What the hell? He gave me a jar of peanut butter and now I have questions.*

Broken bits of road crunched under her feet causing the horse to look up at her. Its large black eyes looked through her before bending back down to graze the weeds surrounding the forgotten gas pumps. She inspected his bike, making sure to keep an eye on the gas station door. The wheels were as wide as her fist and surprisingly had air in them. Considering the state of the road, Leah assumed they'd be patched up from holes. Calling the wagon behind the bike was generous, it was more like a large wheelbarrow with a two dresser drawers nailed to the inside. The drawers were dusty and full of papers. They were thrown together with mismatched door hinges to keep pieces of plastic siding on top of the drawers. Stuffed between the walls of the wheelbarrow and the set of drawers were what looked like packages wrapped in blankets or old unused paper. They laid amongst survival supplies like a tent, *lucky find*, various food items, a few different length knives and lastly a bike pump.

Leah approached the wagon even closer, making sure she faced the crumbling gas station. She could see Anna, Phil, and Ben talking. *Was creepy fedora even laughing?* Ben didn't seem like the type to enjoy Phil's company. They were too busy with their conversation, to notice Leah opening the plywood drawer doors. The hinges were so rusted they gave out squawks like birds when turned.

Inside were letters. Real letters. Not long dead mail, but breathing mail that's meant to go somewhere. *Are there really this many people left? Is there a letter in there for me?* She stepped away from the wagon and used the old gas pump to steady herself. The side of the wheelbarrow had hand-painted lettering, "The Chariot Post." Leah finally saw the wagon for what it was, it was a mail service.

Like a moth to a flame and drew closer to the letters. Leah pulled out a purple magazine advertisement for some long-forgotten perfume. Carefully written was a letter around the various letters and photos was a message home to someone. It was short, *probably conserving ink*, and addressed to someone named Casey of South Pine Township. Signed, "Love, Dad." Leah didn't dare open it. She wanted whoever Casey was to live in the first opening of the letter, enjoy the news from a loved one, and know they aren't really alone during extinction. She put the letter back in the drawers and wandered into the gas station, looking to trade and looking for answers.

Anna was looking at Ben, "There's a Casino just north of the campground up there. I'm looking for my family, they went there a few days ago. I haven't heard from them since, they should've been back by now. My two children and my wife. I just want to know they're safe." Leah's mind spun. *A campground? My campground?*

Anna's voice was thick as she finished speaking. Her chest seemed to shutter as she drew breath into her lungs. Leah couldn't help but feel sorry for her, they were most likely dead. Just because this was the way things were now it didn't make it easier. Leah stayed behind the shelves avoiding Phil who was following her every move. Anna was locked in conversation with Ben, unable to tear her eyes away, as if that will help her.

"My crew is spread really thin right now. That's a two person job, maybe three. Especially with the deliveries I have to make in the next two days. Give me a week to get people together and I promise I'll come back." Ben sounded uneasy saying no to Anna.

"Please. I'll pay double what you usually want," Anna paused, "There's a bike I can give you to make it worth your while."

Ben seemed to be thinking, he twisted his braids around his hand. Leah was pretending to look at some washed out sweaters lying next to a stack of romance novels, still no one wanted to

buy them. She was waiting for her moment to jump, to take the bike from Anna, get on with her life and get to *her* campground.

“The delivery of a message two ways for a the usual fee along with extra supplies?”

Anna’s face seemed to glow assuming Ben’s early acceptance of their deal. “Yes, I’ll even add an extra blanket for your trouble.

Leah saw her chance, “I’ll go too.”

Ben turned, recognition settling in his eyes. He smiled against Anna’s growing scowl. He turned to Anna, “Deal, but we’ll need the bike now. She doesn’t have one yet, been riding in the wagon.” *He lies easily.*

Anna’s eyes narrowed into slits and examined Leah then back to Ben. Clearly she thought Leah was going to just run with the bike and not turn back. Leah had to think quickly, find a way for Anna to trust her.

“I’m slowing us down. Extra weight and all.” Leah tried to make her eyes wider, sweeter and more trusting. She tried to sound like she’s been doing this all along.

“Yeah, Peanut, that’s her nickname, isn’t the size of a peanut you know what I mean? Adds to the load.” Ben looked at Leah smiling, but Leah only looked at him with contempt. “Not that Peanut is large by any means, but, just, uh pulling an extra person is adding to our delivery times.

Anna rolled her eyes, “I send Phil with you. He’ll make sure you know where you’re going. And that the job gets done properly.” Leah turned to look at Phil from behind her left shoulder. He was grinning, Leah was surprised she didn’t see fangs. Traveling with fedora would be exhausting, she was sure of it. But a few days of exhaustion would be worth it when she had a bike. And Ben seemed to be able to handle himself well. *I could literally be eaten or killed or*

whatever. I don't actually know any of these people. But, Leah could cover more ground and get to her lakeside cottage before the rain settled above them.

When she had a bike she could pretend she was flying, it would be fast. Flying of course would be fastest. What would it be like to soar through the air? Leah imagined her hands running through cloud vapor and bringing sweet water to her lips. The ground below her layered with trees only to be sliced through by the soon overflowing rivers of the rainy season. Her hair would tangle behind her, creating great knots. Knots giving proof to her flight. Proof she had flown through the air, and fought against their detangling and erasure of evidence. Landing would be soft, gentle and safe. Once she landed the rains would start.

Tearing herself from her daydream Leah took a deep breath, taking in the smell of dried meats mingling with the rotten ceiling. She looked at Ben and Phil trying to size them up. Would they take advantage of her? Would they have her back if they ran into trouble? Leah had so many questions that needed to be answered. But her first goal was delivering some letters and finding Anna's family. Then the bike would be hers and she be far from here.

Ben looked at Anna before reaching into his bag. Everyone shifted to grab the nearest weapon. Phil clearly had a large knife stuck into the belt of his pants, Anna reached for something under the counter and Leah grabbed the mace she had been saving for an emergency. Ben pretended not to notice when he pulled out a pen and a scrap of paper. Leah saw everyone let out a breath. Anna tried to hide her watery eyes from them, but the tears pushed past the moment Ben said, "Just in case, I'm going to need some directions."

* * *

CHAPTER 2

Riding along with Ben turned out to take longer to get to the campground than if Leah had just walked. He stopped a lot to deliver mail and packages. Sometimes he'd knock on the door and other times he'd just leave it in a leftover mailbox. But being able to be riding a bike made the whole ordeal worth it. The clicking of the gears and steady ticking of the spokes when Leah would coast down a hill was nothing short of miraculous.

Ben tried teaching Phil and her how to use the bikes to communicate without talking. He had come up with what he was calling "Acoustic Radio. You have to pedal backwards quickly, kinda like morse code. *Of course* using the bell but only if you can find one and it's safe. Three click backs mean stop. A continuous one means someone is following us. Two is the response to a bell chime."

Leah's head spun as she tried to remember the secret language Ben created. Most of the time Ben was discussing openly with them about how to make it easier to use and learn. Phil was less helpful, claiming his only feedback would be, "to just talk instead." Even Leah grudgingly gave small giggled.

Leah was also learning there were many more survivors than she had thought. In her mind the entire world had completely stopped and people died in droves. And while people did die, those who lived had the instinct to find one another. People after the fires seemed to flock to town centers or suburban neighborhoods. Some of these places even had converted front lawns into large gardens or corrals for different animals. There was an old grocery store that had been converted into a living space for a least six groups of people.

The store used old tarps and cardboard to create some privacy. Shelves were being used as bunk beds for the groups with kids. When the messaging services arrived, the grocery group got up from their various work and huddled around the cart. They greeted Ben, asking him about

his bike and offering food if he needed it. Ben always said no, but instead asked if there were any new people since he'd last been there. His face fell when they shook their heads. Phil grabbed a few pieces of chocolate the grocery group offered and shoved them deep into his pocket. Leah hoped they melted.

Leah couldn't stop staring at the people when she helped hand out letters. There was an old woman, hair pulled back into a tight bun who smiled when she received a letter from a friend a few towns over. A young boy skipped over to Leah asking if his mom had written him yet. Her hands shook when she sifted through her pile of letters desperate to give him a good answer. She couldn't.

Even more surprising was Ben seemed to know everyone. They looked eagerly at him when he said hello and wished him safe travels as he left. In one small home, the older man greeted him before introducing him to his friends. Everyone was surprised when Ben greeted the man's friend by name with a large hug. Ben introduced Leah and Phil to everyone they met too. He seemed excited to finally be introducing his own tribe to the communities he served.

When Ben wasn't busy being the spokesperson, he led them along the roads and driveways. The wagon rattled and once a letter escaped. Leah stopped to pick it up before quickly pedaling up to Ben. He seemed distraught the letter had fallen out. "Do you think that's happened before? Oh no, it most certainly has. I wonder how many. Did I ever deliver to them again?"

Leah shifted uncomfortably, "Probably a few fell out, but I'm sure they kept sending letters even without a response?"

"Is that what you would do?"

"No!" Interrupted Phil. Ben scowled at Phil before again starting to lead them forward again.

“We are getting close to the Casino, but it’s starting to get dark,” Ben had turned his bike towards them. “We’ll stop at the campground for the night and get a head start in the morning okay?”

Phil sighed and slouched over his handlebars. “Thank god. I wanna lay down.”

Leah rolled her eyes, he probably hasn’t left this town since before the first fires. Ben began peeling again with Phil and Leah following. Phil’s backpack was dirty. Not even old, just dirty like he’s never washed it. It wasn’t even zipped all the way because a browning pillow was peaking out the top. *I gotta ask.*

“So Phil do you always bring a pillow with you or are you just afraid the hotel won’t provide one for you?”

“Hardy har har,” Phil threw a sneer over his shoulder, “I like to sleep on something comfortable if it’s only my head. It’s dirty but I get better sleep than you do for sure. I’m sure you carry something with you that’s just as weird.”

Ben hearing the third argument of the day brewing circled around them ringing his bell. He was making a yodeling noise that pulled Leah away from her remark about the stupidity of fedoras. Phil and Leah both looked at Ben, confused as to why he thought now was the time to start his singing career. Leah glanced toward Phil to see if this was something Ben had done before. He looked bored.

“Alright! Enough bickering you two. It’s like traveling with middle school kids, my god. You carry a pillow, I carry my aunt’s ancient address book from the nineties. It has gaudy flowers and everything. Who cares? We’re getting close anyway. Come on.” With that he peddled down a dirt road Leah hadn’t seen approaching. Phil huffed and rode quickly away from Leah who rode the caboose.

The dirt road had signs along the road announcing new summer rates from the year before. They were in pretty good condition considering what the world has gone through. They drove with shadows of trees cutting through the end of daylight. Shadows created a strobe light effect against Leah's eyes which reminded her of when she used to drive a car. Except this time, she wasn't able to pull down a sun shield. They biked for another ten minutes before a repurposed stop sign read "Welcome" in bright orange. Leah didn't remember seeing the sign when she was there a year ago. Realization settled in. *Someone's living here.*

Ben rode ahead yelling out "Hey Harper!! Haaarrpeeeerrrr! We're here!"

Leah's muscles turned to stone as she rode closer. They passed what Leah previously knew as the flooded basement office. There was smoke coming out the back. A tall woman leaned against the railing who waved them ahead to the first row of cabins. As they biked through Leah saw people working in gardens which were newly planted since Leah had stayed there a year ago. There were some kids playing corn hole, adults cooking over fires and even old people sitting in chairs along the soft dirt road.

All over the place there was life. *People are living here. I can't stay here. There are families here. A community here.* She nervously scanned the crowd. Ben pulled into the middle still hollering at the top of his lungs. Phil even had a smile poking through his beard. The tall woman who waved them ahead was steadily walking towards them smiling.

"Ben, haven't seen you make a personal delivery like this in a while." She said raising her eyebrow

Ben smirked, "Harper, good to see you too. These are my associates," he winked towards Phil and Leah. "We are here to make some deliveries, take some mail for you and I was thinking I won't charge you at all."

“Oh really? What’s the catch?” Leah could tell they were friends. There was a lightness around them and their stances were relaxed.

“Oh course it would be exchange for a night’s stay here. We are headed towards the casino in the morning.”

“Can’t say no to my only mail service! Find me after you hand out the mail.”

Leah and Phil were put to work handing out mail the many inhabitants of the campground. Phil convinced a few kids to help them out so they finished early. Leah started to look for Ben wanting to get settled for the night. She began to wander around the campground, still shocked at the mass of people living there. She wandered to the river and stuck her hand in savoring the velvety water. *At least this is just like I remember.* Leah stood back from the water’s edge, taking in the new plant growth making a last ditch effort to reach the clouds before the rainy season set in.

Leah followed the smell of cooking food and found herself next to the cabin she had stayed in during the rainy season at the start of all this. She looked around the outside walls looking for where she had carved her name into the wooden beams. Unable to find anything she accepted the large scratches and chunks missing from the walls was where her name previously resided. *Even here I’m extinct. Where am I supposed to go now? Orick is okay, but here I kinda knew what I was doing.*

The weight of extinction closed in on Leah. Locking ribs against her chest pushed the air out of her lungs. She walked quickly back towards the riverside, desperate for some privacy to breakdown. Her vision blurred before she reached the shore and raging hot tears burned her skin. Leah’s body shook from a combination of anxiety and sobs. *God this is so pathetic. Get a grip.* Leah had thought she would stay here for a few months. All the planning seemed for nothing. She was once again without a home.

Screams threatened to unleash into the quiet woods around her. Screams and yells that would leave her throat raw and her body tired. No use. She took off her shoes and plunged her feet into the chilly water, desperate for any distraction. *Focus on the water. All that matters is the water. Fucking breathe Leah.* Her struggle for air lessened and she felt the tears taper off. All that was left was empty exhaustion and her submerged feet cold.

Footsteps approached from behind Leah. She didn't even bother to turn around convinced whoever was behind would just leave her alone. Ben sat down next to her, his feet quiet against the sand. He pulled his shoes off too, letting them sink into the water. He let out a content sigh with closed eyes. "How long have you been alone?"

If Leah squinted she could see his rippled reflection in the water. She focused on it. "Since the fires." She answered in a little more than a whisper.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"Harper gave us a spare room with beds—"

Leah interrupted him, "I was going here you know."

"What?"

"When you asked me at your house where I was headed, it was here. I came here with my mom on a vacation. It rained the whole time. I stayed here during the first rainy season." Ben just looked at her, studying the side profile of Leah's face.

"Harper would let you stay if you wanted. But I think you could've figured that out by now. It's a nice place."

"Yeah. You know of other places safe for the rainy season?"

“My house is set up. I run a lot of deliveries though. I have to focus on keeping people connected you know? If people don’t have that they’re just alone, out there in a world they don’t know is still living.”

She turned to face him, “That’s very knightly of you.”

“Nah, if I don’t do it, I’d be alone too.” They both got quiet. Just two lonely people, in the middle of extinction with no where to be. Leah pulled her feet out of the water and pushed them into the the still warm sand.

She finally spoke, “I’m not staying here. I can’t.”

Ben studied her face with soft eyes, “Make some deliveries with me then.” Leah scoffed. “No really, think of it as a job offer. You ride the bike well. You could use the supplies from the house. I need some help, the mail is starting to pile up. We could start your training tomorrow on the way to Eastern Cloud.” Leah started to refute his offer, but he cut her off, “It’s not like you have any other commitments right now do you?”

Leah paused, trying to see if Ben was honest. She has seen him be friendly this whole time except when Phil and her bickered. Hell, he sings *The Sound of Music* when he rides his bike. *He could be a killer. You’re gonna die anyway. It’s not like I have a schedule.* Leah sat there mulling over Ben’s offer.

“I want a wagon.” She stated.

Ben’s lips cracked into a toothed smile “That’s the sign on bonus. But after training, we are about two days from the house.”

“Deal.”
