

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

A DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST SIGN THAT NEW York City would be special was the zebra. It pushed through the shrubbery and onto the sun-flooded interstate no more than thirty feet from Lynn. Its hooves clicked on the cracked asphalt as it weaved its way leisurely through the thick throng of rusted car skeletons.

Lynn stopped.

Skeever, at her heels, did too.

At least for now, the zebra didn't notice them. It plucked at a tuft of grass with nimble lips.

Lynn blinked consciously, wondering if the animal would go away if she did. It didn't. If this animal was what she thought it was, she was staring at an Old-World relic. The striped horses had been kept in carefully constructed habitats in the hearts of cities. Lynn realized she should probably have felt awed by the experience, but her only thought was *dinner*. She quietly reached down to her belt and undid the leather strap that held her tomahawk in place.

Skeever growled. His ears had turned back, and he bared his teeth.

Shit. Lynn hurried to reach down and muzzle him, but it was too late.

The zebra's ears twitched. Its head shot up and swung toward the source of the sound. A shudder ran through its compact body as it spotted her.

Lynn met its eyes.

The zebra shied to the side. A single blade of grass dangled forgotten from between its lips. Keen animal intelligence underlay its gaze, sizing her up.

Don't you go anywhere, now. She reached for her weapon as quickly as she dared. Thirty feet away, wind from the side. She would have to get

closer for a clean throw or risk only injuring it and tracking it until it succumbed to blood loss. She tensed and sped forward.

Instantly, the zebra's eyes widened, and it threw its head back. It rushed off, bleating in panic.

At the very last moment, Lynn stopped her axe from leaving her hand. "Dammit." She let her momentum fall away.

Skeever excitedly caught up with her.

Just as she reached down to pet him, a group of the striped animals broke through the vegetation onto the road and streamed around the car wrecks. Their hooves hitting asphalt and their bleating cries caused such a cacophony that she froze from the sheer unfamiliarity of it. Lynn spent her life being quiet, among people who spent their lives being quiet. This was glorious and frightening, and Lynn could only watch the procession pass.

Skeever barked and ran after the unexpected newcomers. But when the last of them disappeared into the shrubbery, he retreated, tail between his hind legs. He pressed his bulk against her.

"Wow." Lynn took a deep, steadying breath. For a moment, she had forgotten that was dinner, running off. She regrettably tracked the herd's departure by ear and considered her options. She *could* try to hunt them down, but the odds of catching up before nightfall were nil. Besides, they were going the wrong way.

"Look behind you only to make sure there is nothing there that might kill you," her father used to say. Lynn had adopted that creed, and it had kept her alive so far. Today was not the day to go against it.

She glanced one more time at the wall of green into which the zebras had disappeared and shook her head. *It's a damn weird day.* "Come on, Skeever. We'll find something to eat in there." With only a small pang of regret, Lynn walked away from the herd.

Ahead, past the remnants of cars and a precarious-looking bridge, lay New York City. Lynn had puzzled its name together from the rusty signs overhead. It sounded vaguely familiar. Perhaps she'd heard about it from the odd traveler she'd met on her meandering journey, or perhaps her parents had told her stories before they had died. If someone *had* told her about the city, she'd forgotten the details. All she'd learned about it during the approach was that it was big. Really big.

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New York City was most likely the biggest Old-World city she had ever encountered. It stretched out for miles, bordered by water, and boasted a host of towering concrete giants. The massive towers gleamed in patches—glass and metal reflecting in the midafternoon sun—and Lynn could almost picture them in their full glory, standing proud as pinnacles of human ability. Now they were shadows of their former selves, crumbling and weighed down by history, just like the human race.

It was a depressing thought for a beautiful late-summer afternoon, inspired by the failed hunt. They were running out of food, and Lynn worried. If she hadn't been worried, she would never have taken on a city like New York straight on.

Skeever trotted ahead with wagging tail, sniffing at the bones of drivers and passengers in the mess of cars. Some sat propped up against the faded interior like gristly puppets; others lay piled on seats and nearly rusted-through floors as heaps of bones and rags.

She had asked her father once why they buried the bones of recently deceased strangers but not the bones of the pre-war people littering the world.

"Lynn," he had told her six-year-old self. "Everything that lives has a spark in them. It's what makes us alive instead of dead. It's in that sparrow over there and even in the grass we sit on. That's why we always thank our kills for giving up their life so we can eat and stay strong. Do you understand?"

She *had* understood. Things that moved, things that grew bigger, they were different from things that were dead. She had seen enough dead things—trees, hunted game, people—to understand the difference. "But why do we bury *people* and not bones?"

"We bury people because that way, we give back what we took to stay alive. When we bury people, their bodies feed the grass and the bushes and the trees so they can grow bigger. The animals eat the grass and fruit and vegetables. We eat the animals and the fruit and vegetables as well. This way, nothing is lost, and everyone gets to eat. We don't bury the bones, because they don't have anything to give back anymore."

She had carefully pondered the difference between a person who had just died and a person who had died during the war. It had sparked another question. "Why don't we bury the bad people?"

He had paused then. Her father never spoke without thinking about it carefully first. It had made her impatient as a child, but as an adult she admired it. As much as Lynn would have liked to be as thoughtful as her father, she was too impulsive to do his spirit justice.

“Some people do things that we don’t want others to ever do again. We don’t want their spark to live on, so we leave them for the predators we’ll never eat ourselves. That way their evil disappears, and the world becomes a little better.”

This discussion was one of her most vivid memories of her father. He’d put it so black-and-white that the distinction between honorable and dishonorable had made sense to her young mind. She had discovered that nothing in this world—except for zebras—was ever black-and-white, especially not when it came to honor.

Lynn frowned. Her mind had wandered. She stopped to check her surroundings for danger.

Skeever looked up at her questioningly. He whined and took a step forward, urging her on. He obviously didn’t think there was anything to worry about.

His behavior settled Lynn, but it had still been stupid to let her mind wander in the Wilds. She smiled wryly when she pictured how her father would have reacted to her lapse in attention. “Distracted, then dead,” he used to say. It was hard to argue with that.

“Sorry, boy.” She started to walk again. An exit came up just after the surprisingly sturdy bridge, and she went down it, crawling over cars to do so.

Skeever planned his own route. Once down, he darted ahead, although he checked on her every few seconds.

They were quickly swallowed by New York City’s maze of buildings. They surrounded her, intact, crumbled, and everywhere in between. A brick building towered over her to the left. Tree branches emerged from its shattered windows. The row of houses to her right was in ruins and completely overgrown by an assortment of tall grasses, low bushes, and large oak trees.

A group of small monkeys with big brown eyes regarded her from the canopy of the oaks and yipped. They tilted their little heads to the side as she passed and shook a branch here and there, but monkeys this size weren’t

dangerous. They were also hard to turn into food. Monkeys were another remnant of the ancient zoos, but unlike zebras, Lynn had seen them before. She had discovered they were too quick to kill with a throwing axe, so she let them be.

A glance at the sky told her she wasn't going to be making any more miles today. Already, the sun lowered toward New York City's crumbled skyline. Braving the night without shelter would be suicide-by-predator. "I think it's time we find a place to hole up for the night, whatcha say, boy?" It would be a hungry night, but at least there would be another day to search for food afterward.

Skeever's head lifted at the sound of her voice. He wagged his tail.

She smiled. *I can't believe I almost left you behind.* How could it be that only three days had passed since she'd found him? It felt as if he'd been with her forever. She scratched the underside of his jaw with her free hand. The nametag on his collar jiggled. "What did you do before you met me, hm? Who was the man you were with? Who named you Skeever?"

Skeever tilted his head to the side and gave her better access to the underside of his muzzle.

"Too bad you can't talk. Maybe then you'd have some answers for me." She considered that. "Well, maybe it's for the best. You already make enough noise as it is." She patted his flank, then straightened up again. Yeah, it was good not to be alone. She'd been alone for so long, she had forgotten how good it felt to have someone to talk to, to rely on—even if it was a dog.

Looking about, she wondered what the wisest course of action was. There were undoubtedly familiar and unfamiliar animals in the city that used the buildings around her for shelter. At least a portion of those would happily make a meal out of her. She needed a place she could secure—someplace with a heavy door and not too many holes in the walls. There was no place like that around here; the area had been too heavily bombed during the war. She would have to keep moving.

The second she stepped forward, a loud noise echoed through the streets. Instinctively, she dropped into a battle stance. For a split second, she thought her foot had activated some kind of trap, but then the sound rose again. *What the hell is that?* Adrenaline-induced sweat made her fumble as she grabbed for her tomahawk.

Skeever yelped and turned to the source of the sound—somewhere ahead, to the right. Ears flat, he growled and tensed to the point where he seemed to vibrate.

It sounded again.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. *Animal. It has to be an animal.* Dread settled coldly in her gut. “Shit, I’m going to have to check.” If she didn’t, she would never be able to sleep tonight. She reached down with her free hand to stroke Skeever’s rough-haired back. “You be quiet, understood?”

Skeever looked up.

Lynn took a deep, steadying breath. “Yeah, I know. This sucks.” Staying low, she moved toward the sound. “I don’t like it either.”

He caught up after a few steps, then passed her and sniffed the ground ahead.

“We just have to know.” She gripped her tomahawk tighter. Time to discover what monsters the streets of New York City housed.

* * *

Lynn ducked low and parted the grass in front of her. Another deafening cry came from the bottom of the hill. An enormous gray animal lashed its elongated snout at a group of eight or nine hunters.

An elephant! Surely it couldn’t be anything else.

It threw its trunk up and trumpeted its despair as another spear pierced its weathered gray skin. The weapon stuck to it until the monstrous animal threw itself against a building that promptly lost its façade. The spear snapped like a twig, and the man who had thrown it sprang away just in time to avoid both the elephant’s stomping feet and falling debris.

“Cody!” a red-haired woman screamed. She tried to get to him, but the age-worn tusks blocked her way, so she jumped back.

Another woman waved a machete in the air the front of the animal to draw its ire. “Look over here, you! Dammit, Dani! Kill this thing!”

The elephant turned away from the redhead and focused its lashing tusks and trunk on the machete-wielder.

“Keep it busy!” Another hunter rushed up to the animal’s now-exposed side, her long hair trailing behind her as she fearlessly hurled her spear. The weapon hit its target.

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The elephant threw back its head and lifted its trunk. It trumpeted the sound that had drawn Lynn here.

Skeever barked and tried to pull free from the hold Lynn had on his collar.

She yanked on the thick leather. "Shut up!"

A shot rang out.

Lynn gasped. This was only the second time in her life she'd heard a gunshot.

Skeever struggled and whined.

She lifted her head higher to locate the gun that had been fired—and its wielder.

A black man knelt down just outside the flurry of activity to fiddle with a pistol, either to repair or reload it; Lynn couldn't tell.

The elephant whined and drew Lynn's attention. Another streak ran down its hide, adding to the look of morbid camouflage in an increasingly reddening area of battle.

Lynn could taste the blood in the air.

Cody had gotten up and shouted for the animal's attention. He waved his empty hands and feigned forward with another loud cry.

The frenzied animal stepped back and threw up its trunk skittishly. Its small brain seemed too overloaded with sensations and emotions to choose a course of action.

Something gleaming caught the light before it lodged deeply into the animal's neck.

The elephant trumpeted again, then stumbled.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the machete-wielder emerged at its rear and slashed across the back of a leg.

Blood gushed.

The elephant let out a chilling cry of pain and sagged through the leg. Its flanks heaved with each breath.

Skeever squirmed in his position half under her body, fighting the hand around his collar.

The swarm of people descended on the elephant like a chaotic but hell-bent swarm of lethal locusts. More spears pierced its sides; blades slashed.

Death by a thousand cuts. The words bubbled up from the depth of her mind without a solid memory attached to it.

Skeever contorted.

She flattened him to the ground more, wrestling him down.

The elephant fell with a dull thud that was not celebrated.

Was it dead? Eager to confirm the group's victory, Lynn pushed up to see over the tall grass.

The second her attention drifted away from him, Skeever yanked away and raced across the street, barking like mad before fastening his teeth to the elephant's waving trunk.

The group was thrown into chaos, caught between surprise and the last vestiges of the hunt.

"Skeever!" She forgot about the danger and gripped her tomahawk as she jumped up and sprinted forward, toward the circle of people and the animal in the last throes of its death struggle.

One of the hunters either did not see or did not pay attention to Skeever as she jumped atop the fallen animal and sank a spear deep into its neck. The machete-wielder, however, stopped dead in her tracks. The man named Cody managed to yank her back just in time to avoid a lashing of the animal's trunk as it flew past, lifting Skeever off his legs.

The dog growled and bit down harder on the trunk, refusing to be dislodged.

Lynn shouldered past a slender man and struck at the elephant's head once as she dodged past its wicked-looking tusks. The blow connected and scraped across strong bone before cutting deep into the cheek.

The elephant thrashed and threw off the hunter, who then disappeared behind its back, out of Lynn's view.

Lynn wrapped her arm around Skeever's writhing bulk and pulled. "Let go!"

To her great surprise, he did.

Lynn fell, but her backpack cushioned most of the impact. Something crunched to bits inside. She scrambled, arm still locked around Skeever, and got out of the way just before a tusk landed heavily on the spot she'd occupied a second earlier. She rolled out of the way and curled into a ball around the twisting dog, gaze on the elephant and its attackers.

The hunter the machete-wielder had called Dani clambered up the animal's back. She was young, covered in blood. Her face was stilled in concentration, and she didn't look Lynn's way even once. She gripped and

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leveraged one of the spears stuck in the elephant's back, and the animal shuddered once; then a crack loud enough to reach Lynn's ears indicated that either the spear or the animal's vertebrae had given way.

The elephant went slack.

Dani slipped and tumbled off the animal, spear and all.

The other hunters backed off. They watched. They waited.

Lynn swallowed heavily. She still struggled with Skeever, who fought against her grip.

Silence fell.

The elephant's breathing slowed and then, anti-climactically, ceased.

Lynn exhaled along with it, then inhaled deeply. She was very aware the elephant's chest didn't rise with hers.

When she released Skeever, he jumped away like a bucking bull, released from the barn come spring. For a second, Lynn forgot she was probably in trouble and smiled.

Then chaos returned.

"You!" A young man, barely more than a boy, reacted before anyone else could. Mere seconds after the elephant had gone down, he lunged at her with a bloodied knife, his face contorted in anger so deep that it almost froze Lynn in place. Almost. If it had, she would have died then and there. Adrenaline pushed its way through her system, and she rolled out of the way of the first attack, crushing more items in her backpack.

Metal hit asphalt.

The boy's momentum caused him to fall, but he lashed out again even as he sprawled.

Lynn pulled up her legs to get clear of the knife, then kicked. She hit him in the face hard enough to make him drop the knife—it was a lucky shot, and she knew it. She wouldn't get another.

The boy groaned, but his bloodied—probably broken—nose didn't deter him even a little. He scrambled over her, pulling at her leg and clothes for leverage, then grabbed for her hair. He yanked—hard.

She cried out and instinctively covered his hand with her own. His weight prevented her from filling her lungs. Panic surged. Her heart galloped to the point of bursting. *Air!* She remembered her training and blindly clawed at her attacker's face, going for the eyes in animalistic instinct.

He turned his head to the side to avoid her nails and punched her in the face. Then he closed his hands around her windpipe and squeezed.

She pounded at his arms. She tried to fight. She tried to defend herself, but her strength wore down fast. Her heartbeat pounded inside her skull, drowning out any other sound. Her vision became blurry. Her world distilled to gray eyes filled with tears. His mouth moved, but Lynn couldn't focus long enough to understand what he was saying.

In the distance she could hear more yelling and barking, but neither fully registered. His weight pushed her down onto something sharp in her pack.

His grip lessened just enough for her to gasp for breath as he punched her again.

Pain exploded across her cheek. She wheezed, and the oxygen tasted like copper.

He lifted his fist again.

She tilted her head to the side as much as she could to protect it, but the blow never came.

The pressure lifted, first from her neck, then from her chest. Instinctively, she gasped for air, which tore up her throat on its way down. She breathed blood and nearly choked on it. Coughing, she rolled onto her side and tried to get up. Like a newborn lamb, she struck out with her legs and found them incapable of carrying weight. She sank to the ground again and sucked in sand with her oxygen. Damn, that hurt. But she couldn't rest. She tried to slither away.

People were fighting around her. The noise of their brawling just barely topped the pounding of her heart. She scooted forward, away. The other foot, another few inches. *Repeat.* She reached out to plant her fingers in the dirt and placed her hand upon the sticky handle of a knife by accident. Her shaking hand closed around it almost without conscious thought. She took strength from it: now she could defend herself, at least.

Skeever barked, and someone was shouting, but it was all far away.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Every breath burned her lungs and throat. She opened her eyes to see, but her left eye had swollen shut and the other was watery with tears. They did her no good.

Someone grabbed her and pulled her over with a heave, causing her to flounder like a turtle on its back because of the backpack.

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In a blind panic, Lynn tried to fight them off. She swung the knife up, but it was knocked from her hand instantly. When she kicked and twisted around to bite, her attacker locked their arms under Lynn's armpits and pressed her into their body to control her movements. Her back arched awkwardly, and she couldn't use her legs anymore or risk tipping them both over and relinquishing even more control. "Le—" Her voice broke as agony seared up her throat. She coughed again, which caused even more pain.

"Stop struggling!" The command was a breathless one.

At least she was giving her attacker something of a fight. Lynn squirmed even harder, invigorated by this tiny perceived victory.

"Dammit!" The grip fell away.

Lynn scrambled again but didn't get far. The struggle had sapped the last of her energy, and she fell face forward as she tried to clamber up.

They let her; the hands didn't return.

The next one to touch her was Skeever as he nuzzled the back of her head. He sniffed at her hair and whimpered. The familiarity of it almost had her break down in tears. "Sk—" Her voice came out in a rasp, and it hurt, so she stopped herself. She reached out and limply wrapped her arm around him. Using his sturdy bulk as a leverage point, she sat up shakily.

A few feet away, the woman named Dani sat on her haunches, inspecting her.

Lynn jumped.

Dani raised her hands, showing her palms. "I'm not here to hurt you."

Yeah, right. She was hotly aware they were all looking at her and that most brandished weapons.

They had dragged the boy who had attacked her away. While he struggled against the grip of Cody and another male, he seemed calmer. He clutched his forearm and glared at her, angry but not like someone who had only just been thwarted in a second attempt on her life.

Lynn frowned. Had it been Dani who'd grabbed her the second time? Now she had a moment to think, she remembered the voice *had* sounded female. She looked back at Dani. If she had been the one to grab her, she hadn't hurt Lynn.

Dani lowered her hands and stayed squatted, watching her.

They looked like a pack of wolves to her, ready to pounce.

Slowly, she slid off her pack. This time she wouldn't be encumbered by it if they attacked her again.

Skeever circled her.

The black man with the pistol stood a few steps apart, arms folded across his chest as he glanced around the square that had served as a hunting ground. He didn't seem interested in current affairs. The pistol gleamed in his holster, definitely on display. There were others, but the machete-wielder whistled sharply, and Lynn's attention jerked back to her before she could take them in.

Skeever whined. He glanced at her with his trusting eyes and then to the machete-wielder. Slowly, he pulled away from her and trotted over to the stranger, tail between his legs. He pressed against her submissively.

As Lynn adjusted her balance, something stung in her back. Great. Another injury. She ignored it; she needed what little reason was left in her adrenaline-sodden brain to figure out Skeever's odd behavior. It hit her like the boy's punch: Skeever *knew* these people.

The machete-wielder didn't reach down to pet him; her one hand still held the bloody blade, and the sleeve on the other side of her body was bunched up near the shoulder, made redundant by the lack of a right arm. "Can you talk?" Her voice was cold and hard.

To spare her throat, Lynn should have shook her head, but she nodded instead. With the strength of the bold and proud, she stood.

When she wobbled, Dani shot up and took her arm.

Lynn shook her off and gave her a death glare.

She backed off with a shrug. "Suit yourself."

"Did you kill him?" the machete-wielder cut in.

"W-Who?" Pain flared again, but she clenched her fist and refused to back off. Gauntlets were obviously being thrown, and she'd just had to fight for her life. She'd be damned if she showed weakness now. Besides, she was finally getting answers to questions she hadn't even had time to formulate, such as why the boy had attacked her. Surely it had nothing to do with the elephant.

"The man who owned the dog. Did you kill him?"

Realization hit like a bucket of ice water. "N-No." She cleared her throat in the hopes of getting out more than a rasp and winced. *Ouch*. "I found him dead."

The severe woman searched her features through narrowed eyes. Seconds passed. She was, perhaps, in her forties. Her short hair was graying at the temples, but most of it was a dirty blonde that was now splattered red. Her angular jaw was set, and, along with cold gray eyes and a hooked nose, it made her look avian. “What did he look like?”

Lynn steeled herself for a full sentence. The more she spoke, the worse her throat felt. “Mid-forties, maybe? Brown hair.” *That could be anyone. Shit.* She racked her brain for something that had stood out, but she hadn’t exactly lingered. Then she remembered something she’d puzzled on at the time. “He had a cord on his belt with a bird skull and a small metal tag with the letter R on it.”

That was enough. The bird-skull memento obviously registered. Machete-wielder’s eyes watered, and her lips set into a thin line. She did not cry. Instead, she holstered her machete and held out her one hand to her son. He *had* to be her son, Lynn thought. The resemblance was too striking even though his hair was darker. And he would have cause to attack her if he thought she’d killed his father.

Which I didn’t.

The boy broke free angrily now that the men restraining him lessened their hold. He stepped forward and flung his arms around the machete-wielder’s torso in a way only a teenage boy could: too proud for a gentle hug, too young to go without comfort altogether.

The machete-wielder whispered something to him and wrapped her arm across his shoulders.

Lynn glanced away out of a vague sense of intruding and found Dani looking at her. Lynn stared right back. The brunette was about her age, Lynn guessed, maybe twenty-seven or twenty-eight. She was covered nearly head to toe in blood, but it didn’t all belong to the elephant. Near her left temple ran a small but angry-looking gash, and a trickle of blood soaked her cured leather top.

“Take her to the Homestead.”

Lynn looked up sharply.

“—and take those weapons off her.”

Dani nodded at the machete-wielder. “I will.”

Lynn was fairly certain she would not get a say in the matter. A glance at the faces around her confirmed her suspicion. Still, not all of them were

looking at her with murder in their eyes; that was just the boy. The rest of the expressions ran the gamut between disinterest and curiosity. Only two refused to meet her gaze when she looked at them.

“Skeever, come!” The machete-wielder turned on her heel and strode off.

Skeever glanced at Lynn but then jogged away.

Lynn’s heart sank.

After a few seconds, Dani turned to her and sighed. “His name was Richard, and he was Kate’s partner. Dean, the guy who attacked you, was his son.”

“I figured.” Her voice sounded oddly flat in her own ears, a combination of a lower tone to spare her voice and her conflicting emotions. She felt sympathy for the group in losing one of their own, but she was also angry. No, not angry—indignant. She hadn’t done a damn thing wrong, and yet this guy, Dean, had gone off on her so ferociously that she could have ended up dead. She brought her hand to her throat and rubbed carefully. It felt swollen and hot.

Dani ignored her tone and extended her hand. “I’m Dani.”

Lynn regarded the dirty appendage for a few moments, then took it. “Yeah, I got that.” They shook. How long had it been since she had last touched a human being? In a friendly matter, that was. Well, friendly-ish. “Lynn.” She tried not to sound too pissed off. It wasn’t Dani’s fault Dean had lost it.

Dani scanned her with a slight squint.

Lynn didn’t like to be examined. “It’s not going to get prettier.” How bad was the damage to her face anyway? Her left eye was still swollen shut, but her right had cleared up considerably. She resisted the urge to feel at her face even when Dani released her and stuffed both hands into her coat pockets instead.

“I di—”

“Dani! Kate didn’t say to babysit her. C’mere and pull your weight, will you?” Cody stood bare-chested and bloody atop the carcass. He glowered at Dani and completely ignored Lynn.

While they’d talked, the rest of the group had begun to dismantle the elephant. Initial cuts to the skin had been made already.

“Coming.” Dani’s voice did not show the annoyance Lynn’s would have. Or maybe it did, in its metered neutrality. She glanced at Lynn. “Are you going to run off the moment I turn around?”

Lynn considered it. “Probably not.” She wanted to, but that Kate woman had taken Skeever away, and she wanted him back.

Dani inspected her again. “Then why not make yourself useful while you’re with us, hm?”

“Let’s not pretend it’s a voluntary stay.” The painful rasp made the statement sound reproachful, to say the least, and she didn’t try to bend it into anything else.

Dani just shrugged. “Do what you want, but we like people who pull their weight much better than people who watch others work. We might be more inclined to believe hard workers too.”

Lynn searched Dani’s eyes. The implications were clear: they didn’t trust her, nor her story. Lynn probably wouldn’t have trusted her story either, but it still pissed her off. She nodded. “Fine. I’ll help.”

“Good choice, Wilder.” Dani extended her hand, palm up. “Your weapons?”

“What exactly did you want me to cut with if I gave you those?” She pointedly arched her brow. No way was she handing her weapons over without a fight while everyone else was armed to the teeth.

Dani seemed to ponder that. “Right. Afterward, then.”

Lynn didn’t grace that with a reply. When she shrugged off her jacket and set aside her boots, everyone watched her, some more obvious than others. The redhead stared openly as she exchanged words with a muscular but lanky man. He was carving out one of the animal’s destructive tusks but managed to glance at Lynn every few seconds. Whether it was in distrust or curiosity, Lynn couldn’t tell.

Cody definitely eyed her in distrust. When she stepped up, confidently brandishing a knife, he watched her every step of the way, as if she were going to throw the knife into his back if he didn’t.

She ignored him. Getting used to the feeling of stepping barefooted through a mixture of sand and coagulating blood took all of her brain power. It was like stepping on a field of gritty snails. She shivered. *Time to get to work.*

The setting sun cast a red glow on the grass Lynn sank down onto. They had worked hard, and her limbs were sore. Her back was killing her. At least the throbbing in her throat had lessened some.

The ragged remains of the carcass drew flies downwind. Three loaded-up stretchers made from straight poles and braided vines lay in front of Lynn's stretched-out legs to be taken to the Homestead.

Lynn had been assigned to watch the stretchers while Cody and a small man everyone called Eduardo hauled the animal's tusks and sacks of bones up to the second story of a nearby building to be collected another day. Dani knelt at a puddle, busily washing the worst of the gore off her hands, arms, and face. Lynn had tried to do the same yet still felt disgusting. Every time she moved, her blood-crusts tore away from her skin. It was everywhere. She shuddered.

The redhead woman, Ren, lowered herself down next to her with a groan. She seemed to be in her thirties and, like all of them, was covered in gore from head to toe. "Stick a fork in me, I am done." She leaned back on her hands, then let herself fall into the grass all the way. Her impressive chest heaved. "I think we did well, though."

Ren's proximity made her nervous, but she didn't radiate enough of a threat for Lynn to move her aching body. She nodded and gave the area a once-over. They'd been making enough ruckus to keep the scavengers away, but now that the work was winding down, the clearing would soon become the site of a feeding frenzy.

"Now Cody and Eduardo just need to hurry up and get here, and I'll be happy. Don't you have the feeling we're being watched by all sorts?"

Lynn glanced at her sidelong. *Why are you suddenly talking to me? You've all been silently side-eying me for hours.* She gave a noncommittal hum. Her knife and tomahawk pressed against the underside of her legs. It was a reminder she wasn't defenseless—yet. The hard work seemed to have made the group forgetful, and she refused to tempt fate by keeping her weapons in plain sight. "How far away is the Homestead anyway?"

"Not far. Half of an hour at most." She glanced at the stretchers. "With all of *that* anyway."

Having grown up in settlements, Lynn was familiar with the division of a day into twenty-four segments called *hours*. She'd spent most of her life

without access to a sundial, however, and she couldn't envision the length of time Ren indicated in relation to distance.

Dani plopped down next to Lynn, stretched out her legs, and shook out her hair. Most of it remained stuck to her skull because of the blood and water, but a small braid on the side of her head with a little dark bead on it was heavy enough to overcome the stickiness. It swung wildly and drew Lynn's attention.

Lynn scooted backward a little so she wouldn't be flanked by the two women anymore. Her weapons dug into her flesh as she dragged them along.

"I'm ready to go." Dani glanced back at her, then focused on Ren. "Where are the boys?"

Ren shrugged. "They'll be here."

"If they don't hurry up, we'll be lion food soon." Dani's gaze darted around. Her hand lay on the spear by her side, then she drew the shaft onto her lap.

Lynn assumed lions here were like wolves on the open road: the top dog of the predator hierarchy. She had no desire to run into one; she'd come face-to-face with enough entirely foreign animals today. *Speaking of which...* "Where's the guy with the gun?"

Ren sat up and looked around as if she only now realized they were a man short. "Yeah, where *is* Flint?"

Flint? Lynn frowned at the odd-sounding name.

"Over there." Dani pointed with the tip of her spear. The shaft was made of some sort of metal, Lynn noticed now, not wood.

Flint sat on his haunches by the carcass, his back to them.

Ren hummed and settled onto the grass again.

"That's not his name, by the way," Dani said. She must have spotted Lynn's confused look. "But we call him that because—" She paused to look at Ren. "Do you know his birth name?"

Ren shook her head and got even more debris in her hair as it brushed along the ground. "No. He's always just been Flint. I bet Kate knows, though."

"How many more are there?"

"That's it," Ren said. "Oh, and Tobias, Kate's younger son."

Damn, another kid growing up without a dad. That caused a pang of misery in Lynn. She kept it out of her voice, though. “Another kid, huh.”

Ren nodded with a grim expression. “Yeah.”

“Such a mess.” Dani sighed.

Lynn didn’t respond to that, but she knew very well what it was like to grow up without a father, and she didn’t wish it on anyone—not even Dean and most certainly not his kid brother. “How old is he?”

“He’s what? Six now?” Ren checked the statement with Dani.

Dani nodded. “Should be.”

“And you left him alone?” The words slipped out before she could press her lips together.

“He’s six, not two.” Dani shrugged. “You haven’t seen the Homestead.”

Lynn hummed, unconvinced of the wisdom of leaving a child alone anywhere in the Wilds, even if it was in a building. She didn’t get time to ponder it.

“They’re back.” Dani pointed the spear and got up.

Lynn looked up.

Cody and Eduardo talked animatedly as they stepped out of the building, although both looked around for danger as soon as they were clear of the doorframe.

Lynn stood and brushed sand and grass off her clothing—or tried to. A lot of it stuck to the drying blood. She plucked at the husks until the men came closer, then straightened. She didn’t want to appear anything but strong and confident around Cody. He looked down on her enough as it was.

“Hey, babe.” Cody helped Ren up and kissed her before she could reply.

Lynn looked away from the intimate moment.

“We should go.”

The dark, low voice made her jump and whirl around.

Flint stood behind her. His slightly yellowish eyes studied her. She tried to divine what he thought of her, but his face was completely unreadable.

Lynn realized they hadn’t been properly introduced yet. The chance to do so passed when Dani nudged her.

“You’re about my height, right?”

Lynn nodded, attention diverted.

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“Good, then you’re with me. Cody and Flint will take the second stretcher, and Ren and Eduardo take the last.”

Lynn gathered her pack and stuffed her clean jacket into it as everyone else answered in the affirmative. After a glance over her shoulder, she slipped her tomahawk into the depths of her backpack and closed it. She hated to stick her dirty feet into her boots, but she did so anyway so she could slip her knife into it.

After a minute, Dani was back and loomed over her.

Lynn swallowed and slowly tilted her head up. Had Dani seen her? Did she remember she was supposed to take Lynn’s weapons?

“Front or back?”

“Huh?” Lynn groaned internally. *Very eloquent, Tanner.*

“The stretcher. Front or back?”

“Back.”

“Fine with me.” Dani twirled her spear, then pressed something on the shaft. Instantly, the compartments of the metal tube folded in on themselves, and the spear shortened to half its original size.

Lynn raised an eyebrow.

Dani either didn’t notice or ignored it. From her pocket she produced a piece of rope with a loop on one end and a little pouch on the other. She slid the loop over the tip of the spear and pulled it tight, then settled the bud of the weapon into the pouch as if she had done it so often it’d become routine. It probably had. She hung the spear across her torso like a shoulder bag, then nodded at her backpack. “If you’re so adamant about keeping your weapons, keep one of ’em at the ready. If we get attacked, you’re not my priority.”

Lynn’s heart skipped a beat as she realized she’d been found out, but she set her jaw and looked up with defiance. “I can take care of myself, *Settler.*” She stood and hoisted her heavy backpack onto her protesting shoulders.

“Whatever you say.” Dani turned and walked over to the stretchers. The bloody tip of her spear bobbed over her shoulder.

“Bitch,” Lynn muttered under her breath. She followed and took her place opposite Dani between the two poles.

Dani bent down with her, and they lifted together.

Every single one of her muscles protested as she bore the stretcher’s considerable weight. “Damn.”

Dani's shoulders squared. "Don't you dare drop it."

"Not going to." Lynn adjusted her grip so the weight was more evenly distributed.

The muscles in Dani's arms stood out under the skin. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure." She wasn't, but she would be damned if she was going to admit weakness.

Next to them, the others got ready as well.

"Everyone set?" Cody checked on the group, but his gaze slid over Lynn as if she didn't exist.

Asshole.

"Set," Dani and Ren said in unison.

"Let's go home."

CHAPTER 2

THE HOMESTEAD ROSE UP ABOVE Lynn like the last behemoth of the Old World. In an otherwise leveled city block, it stood as the sole reminder of civilization-that-was. Nature had left her trace; the marble façade had lost its shine, and of the letters above the entrance only two remained, one a C and one an R. They were specked with imperfection now, but Lynn could picture how they would have gleamed proudly in the sunlight when people had still come here to work. Would they have noticed, she wondered? Would the letters have given them a sense of pride? Of belonging? Did they now? She took in the small group of people around her. It must be nice to have a home.

To her, the Homestead felt like a lion's den she was about to walk into. Lynn understood now why the group had felt comfortable leaving Kate's youngest alone: the place was a fortress. The windows on the first and second story of the building had been fortified with wooden planks and metal plates. They had even hoisted some stripped car doors in front of them, nailed to the boards with strips of metal and leather or held in place with chains extended from the windows above. Each chain was secured to the ground by rocks. The building's doors had been fortified with wood and metal as well, but Lynn was more impressed by the barbed-wire-wrapped piece of metal fence installed in front of the doors like a swing gate. It was a menacing deterrent for anyone and anything foolish enough to come close.

"Is this all yours?" she asked.

Dani shook her head. "No, just the fifth floor and the roof. We don't use the rest. Well, we use *that* as a lookout point." She inclined her head

toward a rig that hung in front of a shattered or removed window on the third floor.

Not even knowing most of the building was deserted could lessen Lynn's anxiety over entering it. *Is Skeever really worth this?* A sharp pain in her chest reminded her he was.

"Flint, put it down for a second." Cody and the black man lowered their stretcher. He undid the wiring that held the panel in place and swung it out, then pushed one of the fortified doors open. The doorway revealed nothing but darkness. "Go first."

Ren and Eduardo carried their load up the three steps to the door and disappeared inside.

Lynn looked up at the building again. Once inside, she would be completely at their mercy. She dared a glance to the side. How far would she get if she ran now? She still had her backpack and her weapons. They knew this area much better than she did, but maybe if she ran fast enough, she could find a place to hide.

I'm so tired. Just the thought of running made her limbs ache. She looked up again. *And Skeever is in there.* It was ridiculous to risk her life on something like that, but there wasn't much more to her life than that dog.

Dani stepped forward.

Lynn tensed. Dani's momentum pulled her toward the entrance. She leaned into the pull so she wouldn't have to move her feet and could delay the inevitable, but the stretcher was too heavy. She took a step to avoid falling over. Then she took another. Her throat tightened as she passed Cody and stepped into the building.

The swing gate crashed against the stone of the building with a thunderous rattle. Lynn jumped. The noise echoed horribly in the building's cavernous lobby until it died and left behind an oppressive silence.

She craned her neck to look behind her and watched Cody push the door shut.

Her fate had been sealed—at least for now.

She couldn't linger on her fear long. The red light of the setting sun, projected from cracks between the boards covering the windows, didn't illuminate much of the dirt-caked marble flooring, and she stumbled when Dani's momentum caught up with her. Tufts of grass struggled for foothold in various larger and smaller cracks. Stepping on them upset her balance as

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Dani forced her along; just staying upright required all of her balance and brainpower. Their motions threw up dust and pollen, making it even harder to see. She blinked to help her eyes adjust. If she wanted to plan her escape, she needed to soak in every detail of her surroundings.

Once she could see again, she realized sunlight wasn't the only illumination after all. Jars with crude, lit wicks in them had been placed on the floor, interspersed along the walls. They gave off just enough light so the group could make their way to the end of the hall. The thick smoke that curled up from them carried the heavy scent of animal fat into the air and made her eyes water. She tried and failed to wipe them on her shoulder and jumped when Cody and Flint pushed past her. They disappeared into a hallway off the entry hall.

Dani guided them deftly past a chunky receptionist station and several interlinked seats.

After a glance back at Ren, who fell in line behind her, Lynn underwent the torture of walking up five flights of stairs with limbs and a brain that had gone numb with the strain of the day, not knowing what would await her once she made it upstairs.

* * *

"Kate? It's us!" Cody and Flint lowered their stretcher.

Eduardo and Ren followed their example, then sagged to the floor.

Dani guided Lynn past them and set down the stretcher.

Lynn gratefully complied. Her shoulders stung; her lower back felt compressed, and her feet were sore. Her arms were too numb to ache. Sweat ran down her neck and spine. Forcing her to carry the heavy stretcher with its unstable load had been the most diabolical and effective way to trap her: she had rarely been this physically exhausted, and her fighting spirit had been dampened considerably. She took off her heavy backpack and leaned against the wall for support.

"Kate?" Cody took a step down the hallway and listened.

Still no answer.

Lynn took in what she could see of the Homestead. The hallway was like any other she had raided in her life: dusty carpets and doors leading into boardrooms. She supposed they were no longer boardrooms now, if the

group lived here. They would be bedrooms now, living rooms, storerooms, and whatever else they needed.

“Do you think they...?” Ren didn’t finish her sentence.

Lynn glanced from her to Cody.

“I dunno.” Cody stared down the hallway intently. “I’ll go check. Take care of this stuff, will you?”

Lynn bit back a groan, but Ren got to her feet instantly.

“All right, final effort.” Ren actually smiled.

Only Eduardo echoed it. Dani was too busy scrambling to her feet to smile, and Flint, it seemed, didn’t smile at all. He stood stoically by and nodded at her when she glanced up at him.

Lynn looked away, then forced herself upright. “Where does it go?”

“The kitchen.” Ren took charge.

“I’ll go blow out the candles downstairs.” Eduardo got up with an agility and ease that made Lynn jealous. He disappeared through the door again.

Lifting the stretcher for a second time was murder on her arms and back, but she managed. Step by grueling step, she followed Dani down the hallway and into a fairly spacious room. The term *kitchen* was deceiving. Kitchens had a stove or a fireplace, something to cook on. The Homestead’s kitchen was more of a breakroom—she’d seen them before in office buildings, complete with machines to make drinks and others that used to hold packaged food. There were none of those machines in the Homestead’s kitchen. Instead, barrels and boxes were stacked along the walls. Thick wooden planks and Old-World desks served as spaces for meal preparation. Tables dominated much of the room, creating space for indoor meals and now, Lynn supposed, for sorting meat from fat and bones.

“On the tables, please.”

Lynn grunted in accord. With the last of her strength, she lifted her load onto the table, set it down, and then stumbled to the side, out of the way of the others. Completely wiped, she slid down the wall. “Damn.”

“Double damn.” Dani lowered herself down next to her, then leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. Beads of sweat slid down her neck and forehead.

Lynn pulled her legs in to avoid getting stepped on. Next to her hand lay a carved wooden animal, probably a horse. She picked it up and turned the crudely carved animal around in her hands. There were a variety of toys

strewn about, Lynn now realized. Drawings—drawn straight on—littered the walls. *Kids' stuff. How rare was that these days?*

When she looked up again, she found that Flint was the only one who had remained standing. He leaned against the window, looking out into the falling darkness. The others had taken seats around the tables.

“What a day.” Ren sighed. She dragged the sleeve of her loose woolen sweater over her forehead. Her face was red, and although she was still smiling, she looked just about done.

Lynn could relate.

“I should get the smokehouse ready.” Ren’s voice was filled with an intense unwillingness to move.

“I’ll help you, Ren.” Eduardo didn’t get up either. “Do you think they are okay?”

“Kate and Dean? Sure.” She didn’t sound very sure, though. “Well, I’m sure they made it home safe. I’m sure they’re not, you know, *okay*.”

Eduardo reached over to rub Ren’s arm.

Flint sighed deeply enough for Lynn to notice.

“Come on.” Dani stood and held out her hand for Lynn to take.

Lynn hesitated. She stared suspiciously at the extremity. “Where are we going?”

“To the roof. To work.” Dani wiggled her fingers. “Come on.”

Lynn considered getting up without help, but antagonizing Dani wouldn’t do her any good. She took Dani’s hand, which was calloused and warm, and stood. The second she had her balance, she let go.

“We’ll be right there,” Ren said.

“Take your time.” Dani picked up a slab of meat and strode out.

Lynn dug her fingers into the yielding, bloody flesh as well and lifted a large slab that instantly made her arms tremble. She hoisted it onto her shoulder for relief and strode out without looking at any of the others.

Dani had waited for her just a few paces around the corner.

Lynn almost bumped into her.

“I didn’t think you had it in you.” Dani smirked ever so slightly. The blood from the meat soaked through her leather jacket, but because it was already a dark crimson, it didn’t matter anymore. All of them were covered in blood.

Lynn watched it trickle down. “I’m tougher than I look.”

“Good to know.”

It seemed as if she had gained some of Dani’s respect. Not that she needed it. Lynn arched a brow. “Can we go now?”

“Sure.” Dani watched her a few seconds longer, then turned away and strode down the narrow hallway.

Lynn followed along and took in every little detail. At equal intervals, both sides revealed a door and a tall, narrow window next to it. Almost all of them had been covered by curtains; the others were dark.

Living quarters? Storerooms? She peered into the darkness of an uncovered window but saw nothing. *Is Dean hiding in one of these?* The thought made her tense. “Is one of these yours?” If Lynn got Dani talking, maybe she’d tell her more about the layout of the floor and where its residents resided.

“No.” Dani didn’t even turn her head.

She tried again. “It’s a nice setup you have here.”

Now Dani looked about. “Thanks. You know, I’ve gotten so used to it, I hardly notice anymore.”

The words reminded her of the camps she’d lived in as a child. “I remember.” When it became apparent Dani wasn’t going to say anything else, Lynn fed her another question to keep her talking. “Have you been with these people long?”

“Almost two years. Back then Cody, Eduardo, and Ren weren’t there yet. Some other guy died from an infected wound a few days after I arrived.”

“Sucks.”

Dani shrugged.

What more could you say? An infected wound was a death sentence unless you managed to make it through on bed rest, herbal remedies, and first aid alone. Lynn had seen plenty of good people die over nothing but a cold or diarrhea. There was no medication, and the big machines Lynn had once seen in a hospital she had raided had all been fried in the war. Besides, there was no one who could have operated the equipment even if it had survived, nor power to run it.

“Through here.” Dani directed her through a door and then up a smaller staircase. When she put her weight against a heavy door, it gave way with a high-pitched creak. She held it open for Lynn with her ass, hands occupied with the heavy slab of meat.

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Lynn slipped past and forgot all about planning her escape. She didn't even feel her sore limbs and still slightly hot features anymore. When she uttered an appreciative "wow," she barely noticed her sore throat. Before her was paradise. Half of the rooftop was taken up by a garden, partly domed by a greenhouse made of sheets of glass set in a wooden frame. Lynn recognized beans, squashes, lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, and a variety of herbs in low beds. Potato plants grew in barrels.

The other half of the rooftop was covered with an assortment of sheds and roofed areas, including a seating area, several small workshops—metal and wood by the looks of it—and a shed for what Lynn assumed would be gardening tools. A water tank towered over the concrete structure that housed the staircase. The center feature of the roof was a wide circle of stones on a bed of sand and tiles in which a fire had burned to coals. The dim glow cast shadows across four benches set around it in a square.

The same fat-burning candles as well as several torches illuminated the terrace and workstations.

"Pretty good, right?" Dani asked.

Lynn slowly dragged her gaze over to her dark-haired companion and nodded, awestruck. "Brilliant," she said. "Absolutely brilliant."

It was. It was secure from predators and the very few people who would ever wander into the area, provided an excellent lookout, and, above all, made the group largely self-sufficient.

As if Dani could read her mind, she pointed to the garden. "What we can't eat or store, we trade for wool or food we don't produce ourselves. To the south is another small settlement with sheep and goats, for example." Dani stepped out onto the roof and the door fell shut.

The sound brought Lynn back to reality. This was still enemy territory. She took it all in. "What do you make yourselves?"

"Cody is a metalworker; Flint works mostly with bone and ivory, and Eduardo and Dean are our resident woodworkers. Ren and Eduardo tend the garden." Dani pushed forward, straight across the roof.

Lynn followed and listened, soaking up the information like a sponge. Information was power: the more she knew about the group, the better she could protect herself against them. "How about Kate?"

"Kate is in charge, pretty much; she's our spokesperson and is in charge of inventory and trade. Richard was our scout."

“And you?”

Dani stood a little straighter. “I hunt, help where I can, and do the leatherworking. Ren tried to teach me to knit once, but I almost stabbed her with a needle out of frustration, so we gave up on that.” She grinned.

Lynn smiled despite her tumbling thoughts. It was all so...well organized. Everyone had defined roles and skills to contribute, and they seemed to get along. The group was large enough to cover all bases but small enough to depend on each other for survival, which must help keep the peace between them. Lynn had been in groups too small to function properly, which led to famine and infighting, and groups too large, which made people complacent and greedy. Both had splintered. This group actually had a shot of making it—if they managed to survive the loss of one of their own. She decided not to put focus on that. “You guys have one of the best setups of any group I’ve encountered so far.”

“Thanks.” Dani took in the rooftop again. “Kate and Richard started it all, including the garden. Kate’s decent at gardening too, but with the one arm, she tends to get frustrated with it.”

“What’s up with that, anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, the arm? Born that way. No story.” Dani turned to her, walking backward a few paces. “Trust me, in a few days, you won’t even notice it anymore.”

“I guess.” She wasn’t planning on being around long enough to get used to anything.

Without another word, Dani guided her to a workbench in the shed she had previously pointed to when she had spoken of her own activities. She dumped the slab of meat on a heavily stained workbench. Wood cuttings and dried grass covered the floor, probably to absorb the blood that came off her kills. It was a small workstation that they barely fitted into together, but it was well stocked with knives of various sizes and other tools of the trade.

Lynn disposed of her share of the meat and straightened with a groan. Her wet shirt stuck to her skin. Lynn hoped she would soon be able to wash properly. After the work was done.

“We’ll smoke most of the meat so we can store it longer and trade it with other settlements. Ren and the others will poke up the fire and set up the smokehouse. Do you know how to butcher?”

“Not formally or anything, but I can cut meat into strips. Just tell me what size, and I’ll be good.”

“Where’s your axe?” Dani’s tone was casual, but it was a clear reminder that she knew Lynn was still armed.

“It’s a tomahawk. And it’s in my pack.” Lynn met her eyes defiantly.

Dani examined her a few moments longer and then pulled a knife off a rack: a long blade with a wicked edge. She turned over the jagged slab in front of her, cut off a thin but long strip, and held it up for Lynn to see.

“No problem.”

Dani hesitated, then tossed the blade in the air in a display of showmanship and caught it by the sharp end by pinching it between her fingers before the cutting edge could cut into the palm. It was a well-practiced and impressive trick, a way to show she knew how to handle a blade without coming right out and saying it.

Lynn caught the warning that underlay the gesture loud and clear.

Dani offered the handle to Lynn, leveling the tip of the blade with her own belly in the process. “Then I guess you get to borrow a knife of mine.”

Their gazes met and held.

A test? Lynn inhaled slowly, then took the knife. She tried to emote that she wouldn’t run Dani through the second she let go. She might have if it would have given her an advantage, but without knowing where Skeever was, she couldn’t make her escape.

After a few moments, Dani released her grip and did not look down at the blade.

Lynn lowered it.

Dani swallowed heavily, and Lynn’s attention was drawn to her throat. She pulled her gaze away instantly as she realized staring at the neck of someone who was worried you’d kill them with their own blade was a bad idea. As casually as she could, she took Dani’s place. She silently pulled the slab of meat over, cut along the sinew, pulled it out, and set it aside.

Dani watched her—not just her hands but her face. “You seem to have it handled, Wilder. I need to go help Ren, but I’ll get you a few new chunks soon, okay?” Dani’s tone was casual, but there was a touch of tension underneath. Maybe she was reconsidering leaving a stranger alone with a wall of knives.

“See you soon.” Lynn forced a little smile, which she hoped would steady Dani’s nerves.

After a few moments of inspection, Dani turned and walked away without another word.

Lynn watched her go, and the knots in her stomach loosened more with every step Dani took. Being left alone gave her a chance to take stock of her situation and make a plan. It was fairly simple: she needed to find Skeever and then make a break for it. For now, she would cooperate and learn all she could. If they wanted her to do chores, then that was what she would do—right until she made her move.

* * *

The chunk of meat fell heavily on the cutting block. Lynn had seen Dani coming so she wasn’t caught by surprise, but she still had to keep herself from jumping at the suddenness of it all. That first day when she’d had Skeever, she had jumped skittishly at everything he had done as well. In her world, sudden movement usually meant sudden death.

“More to cut up. I’m going to help Ren and Eduardo set up the smokehouse.” Dani left without waiting for an answer.

Lynn watched her go again, then let her gaze veer out over the rooftop for Dean, but he wasn’t there. She’d spent most of her time at the cutting block assessing the group and its dynamic. Lynn observed them the way she would a herd of animals or stalking predators: with the razor-sharp focus of one trying to stay alive. If she understood the mechanics of their hierarchy, she would be able to use it against them—at least that’s what she hoped.

Of those whose physical strength and power over the group she respected the most, only Cody was within sight. He worked the main fire into a frenzy before allowing it to dim down to blazing coals that warped the sky above them with their heat. He and Kate seemed to be the group’s alphas.

As her gaze landed on him, he looked up.

She glanced away and watched Ren, Eduardo, and Dani drag wooden panels to the fireplace instead.

Lynn didn’t fear Eduardo’s strength, but she was quite sure both he and Ren would go along with the wishes of the pack when push came to shove,

and that made them dangerous to her in their own right. She wasn't sure what Dani would do, which made her a liability.

Ren and Dani set up the outer panels around the fire and laid more paneling over the tops of them to create a roof. Eduardo and Cody installed support beams and racks into the created chamber. Both came out sweaty and coughing even though they'd tied strips of fabric around their heads to cover their mouths and noses.

Cody and Ren were obviously involved, as the kiss had made clear before, and they definitely behaved like a couple: he helped her lift the heavy things; she berated him for doing it, and once it was done, she kissed him as a way of saying thanks.

Lynn was also starting to suspect that Eduardo was romantically involved with Cody. The two men shared intimate moments such as wiping soot off each other's cheeks or exchanging a kiss here and there—while Ren and Eduardo seemed to be friends or at least not overtly romantic.

Whatever their relationship was, Ren, Cody, and Eduardo seemed to form a unit of which Eduardo was at the bottom. Not far behind the others, but either his subdued personality or Cody's and Ren's outspoken ones had pushed him somewhat to the periphery. He dipped his head more often and was sent off for retrieval of materials and tools by the others. Lynn wondered if the three even realized they were doing it.

Her gaze slid to Dani, who most definitely was not part of that unit. They all reacted differently to her, less intimate. Lynn could easily establish where Dani fit into the general hierarchy of the four: on par with Cody or just a fraction below him, but well above Ren and Eduardo. Dani allowed Ren's hand on her shoulder a moment, for example, but she avoided Cody's touch if she could.

It struck her how closely groups of people resembled groups of monkeys.

Lynn almost cut into her thumb as she twisted her head about to track Flint's progress across the roof. Flint was a bit of a mystery to her. His movements and facial expressions were completely controlled. No one reached out to Flint, which could mean they were either afraid of him or he was above all of them in standing. Maybe he had just found a way to avoid the hierarchy altogether. Not being able to slot him into the equation she was building in her head frustrated Lynn, but there was nothing she could do about it but keep observing. That was made harder by the fact that Flint

seemed to have eyes in the back of his head; whenever she looked at him, he stared her down. It was unnerving.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Dani, who joined her with more meat. "Let me help."

Lynn stepped aside, making room. "Is the, uh, hut ready?"

"The smokehouse? Yeah. We'll hang these to dry soon." Dani took another knife from the rack, tested its sharpness on the meat, and began to cut when the blade proved sharp enough.

Lynn watched her hands, then her profile, and reminded herself to get back to work.

Dani didn't talk. They stood close together in the cramped space, and although Lynn tried to keep herself away enough not to, their shoulders and arms brushed on occasion.

Tensely, Lynn allowed her to invade her personal space.

"Dean and Kate are in their rooms." Dani kept working with her head down.

"Hm?" Lynn looked up from the meat.

"Kate. The boys." Dani shrugged. "They won't open the door for Cody or talk to him. He's worried."

Lynn frowned. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Dunno."

Then Lynn caught on to the stiffness in her shoulders and her set jaw. *Cody is not the only one worried.* Lynn needed to find out how close everyone was to each other and who might be willing to go against Kate and Dean. Dani would be strong enough to, but now that Lynn recognized the worry in her tone, she wondered how willing she would be to defy them. Of course she couldn't come right out and ask. She had to go the long way 'round. "Are they close, Cody and Kate?"

Dani regarded her. "You know, just because he has two partners doesn't mean he sleeps with everything that moves." Her voice was sharp all of a sudden.

Lynn's face heated. "That is...not even close to what I meant," she managed. *Shit.* "Why should I care that he has two partners? I've seen weirder things, trust me." She groaned inwardly. "That's also not what I meant." She took a deep breath.

Dani scowled at her. "What *did* you mean?"

“I meant—” She inhaled to steady her frayed emotions and collect her tumbling thoughts. “That I have no idea what I’m talking about and I should just keep my trap shut.”

Dani remained focused on her a few seconds longer, face unreadable as she examined Lynn’s features. Then the tension in her shoulders and face ebbed away. “Damn right you do.” A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she got back to work.

Lynn exhaled as silently as she could. Crisis averted. She watched her a few moments, but when Dani didn’t acknowledge her further, she shook her head and got back to work. Keeping her mouth shut for now would most likely gain her the most in the long run, but she wasn’t happy with it. She felt the pressure of time ticking away as the pile of slabs got smaller and the baskets of strips became fuller.

“Cody cares about Kate and the other way around too.” Dani broke the silence after several minutes. “Richard was hardly here when he was still alive. Cody helps out with Dean. Toby is all but glued to Eduardo, but Cody is the only one who can handle Dean when he’s in a mood. Cody cares about Dean, and caring about Kate came easy, I guess. There is nothing between them, though. Not as far as I’m aware.”

“Wouldn’t be any of my business, anyway,” Lynn interjected.

“True. Same for me.”

Lynn hesitated, then said carefully, “I really didn’t mean anything by it.”

Dani shrugged and kept her head down. “You never know. People are assholes.”

Lynn chuckled despite herself and nodded. “Yeah, that they are. Most of them, anyway.” Now that the tension had lessened some, she resumed her questioning. “What about Flint?” She looked past Dani and found him near a torch, scraping tissue from what seemed to be one of the elephant’s molars. He seemed unaware of anything around him, but Lynn very much doubted that was the case.

Ren crossed her field of vision before disappearing through the door to the staircase.

“Flint is...Flint.” Dani shrugged as she rubbed her cheek on her shoulder. The motion left behind a streak of red that made her look like one

of those tribal warrior types who had succumbed to the craziness of life in the Wilds and now worshipped a log in the shape of a duck or something.

“Tired?”

The question shook Lynn from her musings. It took her a moment to realize Dani had caught her staring. *Damn it.* “No, I was just—” She let the words hang in the minimal space between them, unsure of how to end the sentence without running the risk of upsetting Dani again, just when she was finally getting some answers out of her. She shrugged as she cast a sideways glance at Dani. “Nothing. Forget it. I probably am tired.”

Dani cracked her neck and arched her back. “Yeah, same. I’m so done for today.”

“How much longer?” Lynn turned another slab over in her hands and cut into it.

“Finish these cuts, hang ’em up, get clean, make dinner... I dunno, half the night?” Dani glanced at her with a shrug that seemed almost apologetic.

Lynn stifled a groan. “Great.” She licked her lips and tasted blood. *Yuck.* “Um, and what happens after dinner? To me?”

Dani’s hands faltered before she resumed working. “I don’t know, Wilder. Wrong person to ask. I’m just here to keep an eye on you. Kate or Cody will figure out what to do with you for the night.” Her tone had turned gruff again. “Just cut and you’ll get dinner.”

A mixture of annoyance and fear pumped through Lynn’s veins. She gritted her teeth and forced the blade through the meat. “Yes, ma’am.” *At least now I know where your place is in the group.*

CHAPTER 3

REN STOOD BY THE TABLE, cutting bits of flesh away from large globs of fatty tissue.

Lynn halted just short of the threshold. “Ren?”

The redhead looked up from her work and gave her the once-over. “What can I do for you, Lynn?” She looked tired, but she tried to hide it behind a smile.

Lynn took a small step forward, into the kitchen. “Dani told me to come see you for a checkup now we’re done with the meat.”

Ren sighed, but nodded. “Sure.” She wiped her hands thoroughly clean on a rag. “Take a seat.”

She did.

Ren placed a bowl of water in front of Lynn and handed her a few large handfuls of soft wool. “Wash up.”

Lynn began the careful and painful scrubbing. She watched the water turn redder and redder as coagulated blood softened and was absorbed into the wool, then squeezed out into the bowl with the water. How much of the blood was hers, and how much of it belonged to the elephant?

Ren inspected her out of the corner of her eye as she cleared, then cleaned the table. She tossed a bloody rag into a barrel in the corner, then pulled a clean one from a cupboard. She wetted it and returned to scrubbing. Again, the rag ended up in the barrel.

Lynn dropped the wool into the water and watched the wad disappear into the swirling red.

“Are you done?” Ren pulled up a chair and sat.

Lynn nodded.

“Okay, let’s see what we have here.” Ren took a soft hold of her jaw and tipped her face toward her as she ran her gaze appraisingly over Lynn’s skin.

Ren had the greenest eyes Lynn had ever seen—including her own. She looked away from them, to a charcoal drawing of a flower on the wall. She didn’t like to be touched—really didn’t like to be touched—but when Ren’s cool and calloused fingers touched her stinging skin, she forced herself not to flinch away.

“How did you end up here today?” Ren’s voice was soft.

“You guys made me come.”

Ren didn’t take it as a joke, which was good, because Lynn hadn’t intended it as one. “I meant in New York City. Are you local?”

Lynn considered the harm in telling Ren and found none but her own discomfort. “No, I spent last winter up north, in a camp near what used to be Ottawa. Nearly froze my ass off. When everyone dispersed in the spring, I decided that I was going to be somewhere warm next winter. So that’s why I’m heading south.”

“All alone?”

Lynn tensed. Then she realized Ren’s tone wasn’t interrogatory but concerned. “Yeah.” She had to force herself to share more. “I’m usually on my own.” It was a vague response, but even that small addition dredged up a lot of memories. She instinctively pulled the layers of armor a little tighter around herself.

“That’s hard on a person.” Ren’s voice was void of judgment. Her fingers slid lower, to Lynn’s throat.

Lynn shrugged, then tilted her head at Ren’s gentle guidance. “Practical, I would say.”

“Practical?”

When Ren’s fingers probed especially sensitive skin, Lynn hissed.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Lynn licked her lips.

“You said it was practical to stay alone?”

The touch hurt, and she felt very vulnerable letting Ren inspect her neck, so she allowed herself to talk, hoping to distract them both. “When you’re alone, at least you have nothing to lose.”

Ren’s gaze drifted to Lynn’s eyes before she continued the inspection. “Perhaps. But you miss out on a lot that way—people to rely on, to love.”

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

Here was an opening she wasn't going to pass up. "Like you and Cody and Eduardo?" She kept her voice carefully neutral.

"Like us." She tugged at Lynn's chin until her head turned to the side.

Lynn's view of the flower was replaced with the dark of the outside world. When Ren didn't volunteer more, Lynn asked, "How long have you been together?"

Ren's gaze lifted to hers and held it.

A shiver of warning slid up her spine. *Damn, did I push it too far?* Ren spoke before she could backtrack.

"Cody and I have been together for years, almost seventeen now. Eduardo joined us eleven years ago." Ren's voice was pitched to a chipper lilt that didn't resonate with the guardedness in her eyes.

Lynn inspected her. *You don't like sharing either, do you?*

Ren looked away so she could pick up a clean bit of wool, wet it, and apply it to Lynn's temple.

It stung, and Lynn hissed. There was definitely something there. *A cut or a bruise?*

Ren leaned back, then wiped her hands on her pants and stood. "You have a shallow cut on your temple, a split lip, and your eye is swollen and bruised. I don't think anything is broken, but even if it was, there is nothing we can do." Ren strode to one of the mounted cupboards and opened a door.

Lynn touched her right eye and winced. Definitely swollen. Definitely bruised. The taut skin felt alien under her fingers.

"Your throat is bruised as well, but I don't think there will be permanent damage."

Lynn huffed. "That's something, at least."

Ren took something from the cupboard and closed the door. "I know you're angry—"

"Yeah, I am." Lynn set her jaw, then unclenched it as pain shot up the right side of her face. "He could have strangled me."

"He didn't."

"Maybe not, but he tenderized the side of my face pretty well."

Ren sighed as she sat down next to her again and unscrewed the cap of the Old-World tin container. Once, it had probably been blue with strong,

white lettering, but the colors had mostly faded now. “We were all in shock, I guess.”

Lynn dragged her gaze back up from the tin. “Is that supposed to be an apology?”

Ren reached up and tilted Lynn’s head to the side. “That depends.”

Whatever was in the tin stung when Ren applied it to her cut. She flinched. “On what?”

“On if you really didn’t kill Richard.”

Lynn jerked her face free so she could glare at her. “I didn’t. I told you.”

A few seconds passed as Ren examined her eyes. “People say a lot of things.”

Lynn set her jaw and broke the staring contest.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened, hm? Maybe more details will convince me.” Ren renewed her hold on her chin and continued to rub the stinging concoction onto the worst of the cuts and bruises.

“Not much to tell. I needed a place to sleep, so I went into this Old-World shop for cars. One of the doors inside was locked. As soon as I tried to open it, I heard barking. I wanted to head out then, but if there was a guard dog, maybe there was something to guard, you know?”

“You were looking to steal someone else’s things?” Ren’s voice was neutral.

Lynn tensed. “Only if there was something useful.”

“Right.”

Lynn tried to turn her head to gauge Ren’s mood, but her grip was too strong. She decided to just push on. *I’ll be out of here soon anyway. Who cares what she thinks.* “Anyway, I was going to let the dog grab my arm, then kill him, but he didn’t attack me. He stood over—” A second passed as she fumbled for the dead man’s name. “Richard’s body and threatened to attack, but he didn’t come closer. He just growled at me. He was definitely not rabid, so I figured it might be worth it to see if he could be handled.”

Ren hummed. Her fingers didn’t stop dabbing.

The ointment no longer stung.

“When he finally let me in and I could examine Richard, he was long gone. He’d been bitten by a snake. Skeever mauled it, but I guess the damage was done.” She paused again.

“Then what happened?”

Lynn tried to look at her, but again Ren's hold on her jaw tightened.

"Almost done."

Lynn settled with difficulty. She didn't like to sit for extended periods of time. "I buried him and took Skeeve. Couldn't let him die there as well, could I?"

Ren finally let her chin go. "If that's the truth, then thank you for taking care of Richard."

Lynn checked her expression. It didn't look as if Ren believed her. *Whatever*. "I just did what any decent human being would do." Truthfully, she had only buried Richard because of the conversation her six-year-old self had had with her father; no one dug a grave for the fun of it.

"Right." Ren sighed and sat up. "About Dean..."

"If you are going to tell me to forgive him, I can spare you the lecture." She stubbornly met Ren's marvelously green eyes.

"I was going to ask you if I have to worry about you getting revenge for that cut." Ren's voice wasn't accusatory. She was simply asking, probably so she could deal with things accordingly—including locking Lynn away until Kate had gotten from her what she needed, Lynn suspected.

Lynn had to admit she had considered taking some kind of revenge. But Dean hadn't seriously injured her, and he *had* just lost his father. "If you keep him off my back while I'm here, he has nothing to fear. I won't be here long anyway, just a bed for the night." A reminder—a warning. At least that was how it was intended. She hoped it didn't come across as a plea. To enforce her words, she stood and briskly pushed past Ren's legs.

Ren had to twist to get her legs out of the way or risk injury.

As Lynn walked to the window and looked out into the darkness, she felt Ren's gaze prickling on her back. The sensation reminded her that something in her pack had broken during the struggle with Dean, and with the memory, the experience of being choked returned as well. She shuddered and willed her anger to wash away her fear. "If he comes at me again, though, I'll be ready for him."

Ren hesitated. "That's fair. Thank you." She stood with a groan and put the ointment away in the overhead cupboard. "I should go help the boys. Could you take that?" She pointed to a pot, which contained the fatty tissue she'd been working on when Lynn had come in. The underlying

message that Lynn was expected to come up with her was crystal clear, and Lynn resigned herself to the inevitable.

* * *

“A good hunter is someone who doesn’t just see their prey but also knows at every moment that they will not become prey themselves.” Her father had taught her that, just like he had taught her how to cast a sweeping glance over an area and analyze it in an instant. She noted the location of every fire, torch, and fat-burning lamp on the rooftop as she came up to make sure no one was hiding in their shadows.

The air was saturated with the scent of smoke and drying meat, which meant everyone was working and not busy plotting her death. Ren walked ahead of her to a makeshift table by one of the fires. Flint sat nearby, busily carving something. Eduardo disappeared into the smoke shed. Dani processed meat in her workstation. Cody, Kate, and the kids were nowhere to be seen.

Is that everyone?

She racked her brain to make sure she had them all accounted for: Kate, Dean, Tobias, Cody, Ren, Eduardo, Flint, Dani. She checked their positions again—of those in view, anyway—and relaxed a bit. Balancing the pot on her knee, she closed the door behind her before she caught up to Ren. As long as she kept them all in sight, she’d be okay.

The birds had fallen silent, but monkeys and other nighttime critters had filled the silence left after their songs had ended. Bats danced overhead. She marked the shape of their shadows so she wouldn’t jump any time one swept by. Time to free her hands.

As she crossed the roof to join Ren at the table, she felt exposed. All eyes seemed to be on her, but when she looked up, no one was looking—not even Dani.

Ren gestured at the table. “Right there will be fine.”

Lynn put the pot down. She lingered.

“Why don’t you cut up the carrots, hm?” Ren suggested.

Stoically, Lynn took up one of the knives on the table and went to work. She ignored the way Ren stared at her now weapon-filled hand before returning to peeling potatoes without comment.

After a few minutes, Ren cleared her throat. “Were you born in Canada?”

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

Lynn blinked. Canada? She tried to remember what she'd told Ren before, why she would bring up Canada, but her frayed mind refused to recall.

"You mentioned a camp in Ottawa."

"Oh. No. I uh... I was born near what used to be Detroit. But my parents traveled a lot."

Ren glanced at her. "I suppose they are...?"

"Dead? Yeah. Long ago." Lynn didn't like to talk about it. She didn't like talking about herself at all.

"I'm sorry." Ren seemed genuinely sympathetic.

Lynn shrugged. "It happens." She kept her gaze down. She was so tired that her emotions lay close to the surface, and she refused to cry over her dead parents in front of Ren. It had been twenty years since her father had passed away and even longer since she'd lost her mother. She'd managed without them. She needed to steer the conversation away from her own life because talking about her sorry past wasn't doing anyone any good.

"Ren, can I talk to you?"

At the sound of Cody's voice so close by, Lynn whirled around and instinctively leveled the little knife in her hand with Cody's chest. Her heart skipped, then sped to a gallop.

Ren froze next to her.

Cody's eyes widened. His hands went up. Then he smirked. "Careful now, girlie. I came to talk to my wife."

Lynn realized her mistake—Cody wasn't going to hurt her—and lowered the knife. Her hand trembled, and she pressed it and the blade against her thigh. She turned away. "S-Sorry."

"That's what happens when you bring in Wilders," Cody said. "Ren? Can we talk? Privately?"

Her attention still on Lynn, Ren followed him a small distance out onto the roof. She only turned her head away once Cody started talking.

They were looking at her. Lynn could feel their gazes like pinpricks on her skin. It wasn't just Cody and Ren; the others were watching her too: Eduardo from the opening of the smoke house, Dani from her work shed, and Flint from across the rooftop as he carved. Were they mocking her? Were they afraid of the crazy girl? The Wilder, as this group seemed to call outsiders? Maybe they should be. Years on the road had made her jumpy.

Being here, unsure of what was going to happen to her, playing games and desperately scheming to secure any advantage wore on her.

She was so hungry and so tired—now that the adrenaline had worn off again, she could feel just how hungry and tired she was—that she wasn't thinking straight. Still, life was pretty messed up if your first reaction to being spooked was to plant a knife into someone's chest. She shook her head as she straightened and tightened her grip on the blade. It felt foreign in her hand now, as if it had betrayed her. Her hand shook slightly.

Once she started chopping again, head down, the gazes lifted one by one until the pinpricks disappeared altogether. Lynn tried to listen in on Cody and Ren's conversation, but their words were drowned out by the noises of the night. The merry sputtering of the fires around her, the sounds of people working, and loud animal howls, yips, and cries all covered the softly spoken words.

She focused on chopping vegetables.

Several minutes later, Ren approached cautiously and with enough noise to warn Lynn of her approach.

She glanced up, then back to her carrots.

"Feeling better?"

Lynn shrugged. "I guess. Was that about me?"

Ren stepped up to the table and glanced at the knife. She picked up her own again and resumed peeling. "Not exactly. Kate came out of her room. They're just dealing with the loss right now. I—"

"Hey, you!"

Lynn almost dropped the knife but rushed to grip it instead as she whirled. She had been sure her adrenaline had been exhausted, but her body found a hidden reserve. Her heart rate spiked again, and cold sweat promptly ran down her spine. Any other time she would have scolded herself for jumping at ghosts *again*, but this time the reaction was justified. She would recognize that voice anywhere.

Dean stood a few feet away, backpack around his shoulders. A wicked-looking knife—about twice the size of hers—gleamed in his clenched fist. The anger was still in his eyes.

Lynn swallowed. She relaxed her muscles so she wouldn't lock up when he came at her. This time it would be a fair fight—as fair as could be with the size difference in the blades at their disposal. She mentally rehearsed

the moves: *sidestep, upswing for the throat, feint left, get behind him, gut stab.* Lethal force. She knew that look: if she didn't end it, he would.

Ren turned slowly.

"You know where he is, right? My dad? Take me to him." Dean pushed forward.

The cocking of a gun echoed through the darkness to her right, and to her left Ren took a step forward. She spotted Dani as she came out of her workstation, spear extended and leveled. Apparently, no one trusted this to go well, although Lynn wondered who they were protecting: her or Dean. *Time to make a last stand, Tanner, but don't you dare lash out first. They'll kill you deader than dead in an instant.*

"Take me to him!"

She took a deep breath. "No."

He stepped forward again. "Take me to him!" he emphasized every word this time.

"Dean..." Ren's soothing voice barely made it over the echo of his bellow.

Lynn held Dean's gaze. Sweat prickled icily on her back. Her mind struggled to catch up to this turn of events. "You tried to kill me."

"But I didn't. Take me to him!"

"It's dark." The thought of being out there, with Dean, in the dark nearly paralyzed her with fear.

He squinted but didn't advance. "We'll take torches."

"Dean, I need you to dro—"

"And walk around like targets for predators? No way!" Lynn twisted the knife to get a better grip. "And even if it wasn't dark, there is no way I am going anywhere with you."

Dean's eyes narrowed dangerously, and he stepped forward.

Ren took up position in front of Lynn. "Dee, think ab—"

Dean slid to the side to restore his line of vision.

Ren's body obscured Lynn's view of the knife, so she sidestepped too, to make sure he couldn't trap her against the table should he lunge around Ren.

"I'm not leaving my dad out there another night, and *you* know where he is! So you are going to shut u—"

Lynn bristled and pushed forward, urged on by her anger. “Hey, asshat, read my lips: no! It’s a two-day journey at least, three if I can’t find my way back right away. Besides, he was buried with proper honors! I know you’re hurting, but—”

He uttered a broken warrior’s cry—the cry of a man knowing he was committing suicide but doing it anyway—and lunged.

Ren jumped aside with a small yelp of fear.

The storm that had been raging inside Lynn’s skull settled in an instant. Calmly, she brought up the knife and sidestepped as planned. There was something about the possibility of imminent death that was very soothing.

Before Dean could reach her, someone burst into her field of vision from the left and smashed into him. The force knocked both over into a tangled heap of legs, arms, and grunts. They fought for control of the knife.

Cody. Lynn sucked in a breath. It was Cody who had come to her rescue—or maybe Dean’s, depending on how he judged their odds.

Ren rushed forward to help but ended up on the periphery, bouncing from one foot to the other, yelling.

Taken by surprise by the sudden turn of events, Lynn watched the ensuing struggle as if she were miles away.

Ren yelled, but the meaning of the words didn’t sink in.

She spotted Flint now, his face grim and his gun raised in one hand as he watched. Dani gripped her spear, waiting. Eduardo had held up a hand uselessly near the smokehouse, in a quiet and completely ignored stop sign.

“Dean! Pipe down!”

Cody’s voice snapped her attention back to the struggle. He had Dean pinned down, but the boy bucked and contorted, still struggling. Cody was out of breath, but he was a strong man with a level head. He spent only the energy he had to while Dean was wasting his with his thrashing. This fight was over, even if Dean hadn’t realized it yet.

She straightened and relaxed her tense and sore muscles. The adrenaline drained from her and left her dizzy and unbalanced. She gripped the table for support and felt the handle of the knife dig into her palm.

The movement seemed to catch Ren’s attention, and her gaze settled on Lynn.

Why does she look so afraid? Then Lynn remembered the promise she had made, that if Dean came after her again, she would kill him.

Dean began to cry in ragged sobs.

She glanced down at him. Snot and spit left streaks on the boy's face. Despite what she'd said—and thought—earlier, she didn't need petty revenge. To show they needn't worry about her, Lynn placed the knife on the table and pushed it away. She stepped back on unsteady legs.

Dean caught his second wind and pushed hard enough to almost tip Cody over.

Cody scrambled to solidify his hold.

"No! Dad is out there! Who knows if he's being eaten right now or—or—" His voice broke.

Lynn shuddered. She shouldn't be watching this. It was too embarrassing to see someone so utterly stripped of their walls. To busy her eyes, she looked over at Dani, who stood in the same spot but had lowered her spear. She wasn't watching the fight; she stared at Lynn with an unreadable expression.

Why was she looking at her like that? She managed to hold the gaze a few seconds but then had to look away. She couldn't deal with Dani right now—or her own emotions.

Cody embraced Dean, and Dean buried his face in Cody's sweater. He cried openly now that the fight had drained out of him.

Lynn licked her lips. "I meant what I said."

Ren tensed.

"I'm not going anywhere with him."

Ren deflated. She turned back and watched her husband console the grieving youth. "I don't blame you." Her voice only just carried over all the nighttime noises.

Lynn resumed her staring as well, as painful as it was. She finally had time to process this attack, this plea. Why did Dean want to collect his father's body? She'd buried him, all good and proper. There were big stones on his grave. Only the most determined of animals would manage to get down to him in the deep hole she'd spent an entire morning digging. He was safe, buried, gone.

When she looked up, Dani was still watching, but now her gaze alternated between her and Dean.

Dani met and held her gaze for a second before she turned and disappeared into the shadows of the workshop.

With a pang of unease, Lynn returned her gaze to the two men embracing on the floor, one stoic and supportive, the other small and broken.

There was no need to get Richard's body. None at all. But the threat of it loomed over her now. It might have been Dean's idea, but it was one of those ideas that could—would—spread until they all became convinced their loved one needed to be with them. She'd seen it before, this mob mentality. Another chill went down her spine. Her imprisonment and the subsequent punishment for the crime of being at the wrong place at the wrong time were solidifying, and there was nothing she could do about it.

* * *

Kate made her first appearance of the night once dinner was served around the fireplace. A young carbon copy of his brother clung to her hand. Dean didn't come up to the roof with them, and neither did Skeever. The quiet conversation between the members of the group—which had not involved Lynn in any way, shape, or form pretty much since the confrontation with Dean—died down as Kate and the boy came to a halt beside the benches.

Lynn tensed and surreptitiously glanced up from her food.

Kate looked like shit, pale and numb. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face void of expression. The hairdo that not even killing an elephant had managed to dishevel had largely escaped from the bun on the back of her head.

This can't be good. Lynn looked away. Perhaps avoiding eye contact could delay the inevitable. Not keeping an eye on Kate made her uncomfortable, so she glanced back as she took another bite.

"Would you like some elephant stew, Katherine?" Cody asked.

Kate shook her head.

The young boy Lynn presumed to be Toby clung to her leg. When Kate tried to pass him off to Ren, he started crying and pressed his face more tightly against her.

Kate sighed and—with the dignity of a woman too proud to collapse in front of others—laid her hand on the boy's head and kept him close.

Another candid glance told Lynn that everyone but Cody studied their food with acute attention. The atmosphere was charged.

Lynn took another spoonful of meat, potato, and vegetable pulp. She was quite content staying out of this mess. Her thoughts had turned inward the more the group had ignored her as the night went on. They had watched her, but without chores to dole out—ones they trusted her with, anyway—they had let her be as long as she stayed seated. The food had made her sleepy, and it had become impossible to remain on guard at all times. None of them had moved from their chosen seat since they'd sat and had left Lynn alone to valiantly struggle for wakefulness. Well, Kate's appearance had woken her up just fine.

"Lynn, could I talk to you a minute?"

Lynn jumped despite anticipating Kate's question. *Deep breath.* "I guess." She put the bowl down reluctantly and stepped out of the square of benches.

After barely sparing her a glance for most of the evening, everyone now stared at her.

"Ren, take him, please?" Kate tried to pry Toby off her again, but every time she'd loosened one hand, Toby's other had taken a renewed hold.

Toby whimpered and pressed his face more tightly against her leg.

"Sure." Ren got up and lifted the boy.

The second she did, Toby started crying. "Mommy, no!" He took a big gulp of air and released a cry so high and sharp it was physically uncomfortable.

Lynn turned her head to the side to angle her ear away from the source of the sound.

"It's okay, baby. I'll be right back." Kate reached out to stroke his hair but retracted her hand quickly when Toby tried to grab at it.

"I've got him." Ren lifted Toby into her arms and rocked him to calm him down.

He kicked at her, pushed, and clawed until she was forced to sit down quickly and take hold of his hands.

The anguish on Kate's face made Lynn uncomfortable, but not as much as the sheer volume of Toby's shrieks did. She fingered the strap that usually held her tomahawk in an almost subconscious effort to regain her composure. She hated noise. The warmed metal of the knife in her boot reminded her that, while vulnerable and alone, she was not defenseless.

Still, no one had taken it from her. Lynn suspected that they might have actually forgotten this time.

Kate guided her wordlessly away from the fire and into the shadows. Once she stopped, Lynn halted at a safe distance and eyed her.

“Let’s make this brief.” Kate had to raise her voice to be heard over her son’s cries. “My husband was an honorable man. He did what he had to do for his family.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“We want to bring him home.”

It was strangely anti-climactic to hear the actual words. “Why can’t he stay buried where he is?” She didn’t even try to take the edge out of her voice.

Kate regarded her. “I don’t trust you. You say he was killed by a snake, but for all we know you killed him and took his stuff.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know you didn’t take anything. We went through your backpack, but that doesn’t prove you didn’t kill him. You did take Skeeever.”

Lynn’s anger rose. “You did *what?*” She took a step closer.

Kate’s gaze hardened. Her hand slid down to the hilt of her machete. “Careful, Lynn.”

“Or what?” Her whole body tensed as she prepared to grab her knife, consequences be damned.

“Or we’ll be a lot less friendly to you from here on out.”

Lynn set her jaw but forced her body to relax. “I’m not doing it.”

Emotions and schemes played in the cold gray of Kate’s eyes. “I don’t think you have a choice.”

“Oh, I have plenty of choices.”

Kate smirked. “Really? Like what? I know you still have that knife in your boot—and you’ll be handing that over—but even with that knife, we’ll kill you before you can do any real damage to us.”

The telltale sounds of the group behind her rising as one and Dani’s spear extending sent a shiver down Lynn’s spine. Her heart thumped in her chest. “You will never know where Richard’s body is if you kill me.”

“True, but I think you value your life too much to risk dying right here, right now.”

Dammit! Everything in Lynn screamed to turn around so she could see the Homesteaders coming, but she fought the urge. “I’ll draw you a damn map, and you can get him yourself.” Even agreeing to that felt like admitting defeat.

Kate shook her head instantly. “I’m not that stupid, Lynn. Who says it’s accurate? Who says you’d not be leading us into a trap? No, you’re coming with us.”

Lynn swallowed as reality hit. There was no way around this; she could put up a good fight, but at the end of the day, Kate had the power. She could make Lynn go back under armed escort if that was what it took. Cody, Flint, and Dani together would be able to control and guard her around the clock, even out there, where she was much better equipped for survival. No, she couldn’t fight this, but she could try to survive it. “I have demands.”

Kate frowned. “Demands?”

The ruckus behind Lynn continued.

“Yes.” She needed to make sure she would be in control at all times out there, which meant she needed to avoid an armed escort—or at least one she couldn’t take in a direct fight. “I’ll do it if Dani comes with me. Just Dani—and Skeever.”

Kate’s gaze darted to the group, lingered, then returned. “Why would I agree to something as ludicrous as that? You’ll take off the first chance you get.”

Damn right I will! “It’s a risk you’re going to have to take. See, you can force me to take all of you, but I swear I’ll make it hell on you. I’ll lead you through every wolf-packed, snake-infested, crater-pocked hell terrain I can find in the hopes it’ll kill you all.” Lynn all but hissed the words out, and in the moment, she wasn’t even bluffing. She didn’t know if she could stand by and watch anyone get mauled, but as she stared into Kate’s squinted eyes, she knew she might be able to with Kate and Cody and the whole damn lot.

Seconds ticked away. Kate was considering the proposal, and Lynn knew she had her. She could all but see the gears in Kate’s head turn. Again, Kate glanced past Lynn to the group—probably at Dani.

Finally, she set her jaw and nodded once, sharply. “You can take Daniela.”

Murmurs started up all around her. Lynn caught slivers of the conversations.

“...did she want Dani?”

“...how come Kate didn’t...?”

“We should have forced...”

She ignored them. *Dani’s full name is Daniela.* Lynn suppressed the thought. Now was *so* not the time for that. “And Skeever.” As she said it, a deep longing for her companion settled in her heart. “He’s used to being out there. He’ll hear danger coming long before we do. I plan to live through the insanity of walking around with a buffet for carnivores—”

Kate flinched at the description of her husband’s body.

Lynn relished her discomfort. “...and I need Skeever to do it.”

Again, Kate first held out but then gave in. “Okay.” Her eyes had gone colder than Lynn had ever seen them. She was undoubtedly planning murder.

Dizzying relief flooded Lynn’s system, but she held it at bay. If she wanted a shot at making it through this affair now that she’d antagonized the whole lot, she needed to get out of here quickly. “Good. Now, I want to wash myself, and I want enough food and water for a weeklong trip as well as any equipment I can think of.” Unlike everyone else, she was still covered in blood and dressed in her blood-soaked clothes. She hated it.

“Agreed.”

“Dani and I are leaving in the morning, after breakfast. Have everything ready then.” Without waiting for Kate to speak again, she turned on her heel, squared her shoulders, and pushed straight through the throng.

Everyone stared at her, weapons still at the ready.

In a stroke of masochism, she searched for Dani’s eyes in the crowd. She half expected her not to be there, but she was, standing next to Cody.

Their gazes locked.

Dani’s emotions had been impossible to read so far, but the events of the last few minutes had shattered the mask. There was fear in Dani’s eyes, mixed with shock and surprise.

Lynn set her jaw and met the gazes of the others. Her heart pounded in her throat hard enough that she feared it would be obvious how terrified she was. She used it as fuel to darken her voice. “Which of you assholes wants to show me where I can wash up, hm?”

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SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

BY MAY DAWNEY

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