

NINE

Red walks the cracked pavement, headed home. Two wild hare swing from her fist, spilling droplets of blood from slit throats. Ahead of her, Blue has his finger pointed and thumb cocked as an imaginary gun. He shoots at the small birds that scatter up from the sound of their footsteps.

Red smiles, at times like this she remembers how young he must actually be.

She's in a good mood as well, the hare had come from the first two snares they had checked, making this an easy day. The animals had migrated in from the deserts, and as far as Red could tell were unmutated. Though the meat was stringy and tough regardless.

As Red walks, she contemplates setting more snares. They were simple to the point of primitive, but only sporadically successful. Copper wire was stripped out of computer cords that were scavenged anywhere in the town. Fashioned into a slip knot, then attached to a trigger, usually a crudely notched piece of wood as long as her thumb. This was attached to the spring, which she made out of anything from a sapling to scavenged fishing poles. Bent under tension, then held in place by a notched stake the wire loop was held at head height of unsuspecting rabbits.

All it took was an animal to pull the slip knot until the trigger pulled from the stake, and the whole apparatus snapped tight, turning wild game into trapped dinner.

She can remember Paul teaching her and the other new recruits to make the snares as they trekked through some South American jungle.

Sweating through their uniforms, rifles slung across their back. Red had asked, "Won't command be sending us rations?"

Paul, then only known as Sargent Paulo Sanchez, had looked at her, perhaps noticing her for the first time. "You want to count on that?"

Of course, she had never used snares while in uniform. Only once she was trying to stay alive while avoiding any hint of civilization did she put them to work.

From that first notice, she had felt Paul's attraction to her, even as he had gone through elaborate lengths to hide it. He seemed fascinated by her red hair, in fact it had been him who first gave her the nickname she still bore. He was dismayed after she hacked most of it off in response to the humidity.

After hours, Paul made the rounds, checking on the men like any proactive commander. Red would watch him go from tent to tent, joking or chiding as needed. The whole time Red felt him drawing inextricably closer to her, pretending that wasn't his true goal.

Casualty Paul worked nearer to her tent, the one she shared with the only other female in the platoon.

The two of them had been dividing up a care package from some religious group back home that had taken to adopting female soldiers.

In the package they would find Bible pamphlets, tampons, birth control pills, two chocolate bars and a signal mirror. The mirror is the same rectangle with the hole in the center that she had in her survival kit.

They joke about what they are expected to do with it. *Make ourselves look pretty?*

The other woman, thick and butch, had laughed. *More like slit our wrists. Should have just sent a vibrator.*

They decided the chocolate is mildly offensive as well, but that the best form of protest would be to eat it, so they did.

What I wouldn't do for some chocolate now...

"Wait," Blue says, interrupting her thoughts. He freezes, finger gun pointed down range.

He touches her shoulder, then steps into an overgrown yard off the street. She follows, dropping the dead rabbits and unslinging her rifle.

"What is it?"

Blue moves his head side to side, nose in the air. "There's something ahead. At the library."

Her hands flex around her rifle, "Bandits?"

"No," Blue says, "I smell diesel."

"Trucks?" Red feels suddenly cold. Trucks are much worse than bandits.

Blue nods, looking as frightened as she felt.

Seeing the fear on his young face saves her, turning her own fear into rage.

I am was there! Under the dubious protection of the elderly Martha and the others.

"We need to hurry," she says, "They won't stay for long."

Blue stares at her hesitantly.

"There will be guards, a perimeter. You need to lead me through it."

Blue nods reluctantly, fearful, then they're jogging down the street toward camp.

It's been seven years since she wore a uniform, ten since boot camp, but without thought her rifle comes to her shoulder, she sweeps the street in front of her. *Old habits die hard.*

Blue runs with eyes slitted, nose in the air.

They get within a quarter mile when he pulls her off behind a half-collapsed garage, leading her through backyards. Already the rumble of the diesel engine corrupts the normal silence. They crouch under an abandoned swing set as the sounds of boots pass on the street. Through cracks in the window she sees fragments of men wearing black body armor. *They found us!*

Blue leads her down alleyways and backyards until they are across the street from the library.

Peeking around the corner, Red spots a perimeter guard. He leans against a parked Humvee, rifles slung casually. The mutant pup squirms in his gloved hands as he makes kissy faces at it. He calls out, "Hey, you think these savages were gonna eat this little guy?"

A second guard is nudging around the dirt of a front yard with the toe of his boot. Laurie's garden. He shrugs. "Why else would they have it?"

Red catches Blue's arm. Whispering directly into his ear she says, "Back entrance."

Blue seems frozen against the side of the building.

"Blue!" Red hisses.

His eyes flick to hers, but he doesn't move.

"Fuck." She drops his arm. He's just a kid.

She checks the perimeter guards one last time, sees them still looking away, and darts for the side of the library.

Rather than risk the main doors, she skirts around the stone wall to the back. The foundation dips into a hill, with a concrete staircase leading into what used to be the basement entrance.

The door opens with a worryingly loud creak, but Red presses on. An ancient card catalog had been overturned, the cards crunching under foot like leaves.

Red runs light footed up a back staircase to the second floor. Through the windows Red can see a row of three humvees lined up outside, over-sized grills scratched from pushing through the town's debris. She looks for Blue still crouched by the building, but he's vanished.

She reaches the main stair, overlooking the lobby. She drops to a crouch and moves forward until she can look down.

Shit, she curses silently. The whole camp is in the center of the lobby, ringed by four men in black body armor. A single dark-skinned civilian moves through the hostages, back turned to her.

Red scans the group, finds lam tucked under old Martha's arm, looking scared. Red feels her throat constrict around a scream. *Not now, no softness now.*

Martha stares coldly at the soldiers.

The civilian finishes scanning, checks a clipboard.

"How long have you been living here? This is a restricted area." *That voice...*

Martha stays silent, staring hard at the civilian.

He switches to a smoother tone, "We have some food and supplies that might help you. Especially with the children. Are there any others?"

The civilian looks around the group, but no one answers, distracted by the rifles pointed at them. Martha shakes her head slowly. As the civilian turns, Red feels the panic she's been keeping at bay rise up and threaten to make her scream. *It's him! Venter found us!*

Unaware of his effect, Doctor Venter squats down in front of Martha, addressing her. Red sees his hand pat lam's head, her finger tightens on the trigger.

"No others?" he asks.

Martha doesn't answer. Venter glances at a soldier who steps forwards and puts his pistol against Martha's forehead.

Calmly, the Venter repeats his question.

"Any other children?"

"They're dead, you bastard." Martha spits out.

Doctor Venter nods slowly. "That's expected, I guess." He looks up at the soldier still holding his gun to Martha's head, then back to her. "Where are they buried?"

Martha looks shocked, "So you can dig them up? The other animals got there first."

Doctor Venter nods again, then contemplates lam in Martha's arms, smiling gently at lam, "This cutie's healthy enough. Bald though." Venter strokes lam's head fatherly.

Red has her scope locked on his spine, right below his neck. For a moment, all that prevents her from taking the shot is the fear that the bullet would pass right through him and hit her son.

She barely hears Martha saying, "He had lice."

The civilian straightens, turning away, "Of course he did." To the soldier he says, "The boy comes with us."

Red fires at the soldier before he even reaches for lam, the bullet finding the gap between his helmet and chest armor. The shot cracks loudly in the stone library, filling the space with its violence as the soldier crumples to the ground in a spray of blood.

Return fire splinters the marble railing in front of Red, she rolls backwards out of view.

The firing hesitates, she hears the Doctor swearing, "What the fuck is a man doing up there? You were supposed to have us secure."

Red is crawling to the side, rifle dragging beside her. She moves forward again, peeking down, but bullets whip past her head before she can get a shot off.

The Doctor's voice again, cutting through the gunfire. "Cease fire, damnit. Cease fire!" The shots stutter to a halt in time for her to hear Venter say, "And grab the old lady."

Red hears a scuffle, then a voice, "You have three seconds to show yourself or we shoot the old lady."

Red keeps crawling. *Three soldiers left.*

"Three," Venter's voice calls.

Unless they've called in the perimeter guards already.

"Two." She imagines she can hear the murmur of Martha praying. She needs to move quick.

"One." Venter says, then Martha's voice, "*Shema Yi*—" a gunshot cuts her off..

A cold knife pricks Red's heart, knowing Martha's dead. She pushes that away. *lam...*

Red pushes up, sights and fires. A soldier falls, but she may have just hit body armor.

She drops and rolls away as the wall over her head puckers and sprays her with plaster. She starts crawling sideways as Venter yells at the soldiers to stop firing.

"You want me to go through all these people over one kid?" The Doctor's voice yells up.

Red doesn't answer, still inching her way to a new firing position.

She hears him cursing under his breath, then, "Captain, grab the kid, we're leaving this shit-hole now."

Red hesitates just a moment, the soldiers will be ready. *But if only two are left and one is busy with her son...*

She rolls to her feet, willing time to slow. The remaining soldier is aimed away from her, he jerks his weapon around, but too slow, her rifle is already against her shoulder, sight picture steadying, she squeezes the trigger.

The hammer clicks on an empty chamber, she hasn't reloaded since shooting the last mutant.

Red has just enough time to hate herself before the world explodes into darkness.