

"This is a mistake".

Those words running through my head tested my resolve to remain for that door's opening. Thus began a cycle of crossing and uncrossing my arms. It only broke when a pinned sketch of a fallen leaf caught my eyes. AJ said he drew that a while ago, yet I've only seen it once. When was the last time I went up here?

"Right. No left foot." This unspoken thought forced a sigh out of me.

My train of thoughts came to a crash when the door opened. I throttled an impulse to reach for my weapon, when Dr Wilson's lanky frame emerged to face me. His rice dark skin contrasted against his blue shirt, together forming a stomach-churning yet comforting familiarity.

"Hello, Clementine." He bowed slightly with a polite smile, not yet aware of my confused state. I got a hold of myself long enough to manage a short, if awkward *Yeah*. Following an equally awkward handshake, Mr Wilson gestured for me to pick my seat as he sat in the facing armchair. I chose the furthest seat from him and settled on its edge.

His brown-eyed You-can-talk-to-me gaze forced me to kill any idea of complying to get it over with. One look, and I was like a bird he tried to lock in at my own home. I won't let him.

"Why don't we talk about why you're here?" He said after what felt like a minute, "My understanding, from your nurse Ruby, is that you nearly collapsed and had trouble breathing? Possibly a panic attack?"

"*She* says it's a panic attack." I shifted on my chair uncomfortably. "I thought she and I had established that."

He nodded, rubbing his chin. "So, you're saying you disagree with her diagnosis?"

I laughed out loud. Too loud. "Let's just say my friend won't take 'no' for an answer because of it. He practically dragged me here."

"Louis, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Friend. Was it even the right word? Or were we just having cold feet in front of dangerous grounds? It felt like the latter these days, and I still had no idea how to deal with that mess.

"You don't seem too happy about it." Dr Wilson kept his tone neutral.

"I don't care." I lied. "I'm not a kid who needs to be looked after."

The doctor raised an eyebrow, prompting me to turn away from his face in favor of the window.

“Besides” I continued. “I’m only doing this to inspire confidence in my friends for our trades. They should be in this room, not me.”

“But they’re not.” He remarked. “It also means you don’t need to pretend.”

“Who said I’m pretending?” I asked. “Maybe I’m really fine?”

“Then let me ask you.” Dr Wilson leaned closer. “Are you fine?”

“I—” The sentence never ended. I wanted to hide the truth. Shelter everything in the depths of my mind. But both of us could tell the mask was starting to crack. There was nowhere to hide. I was a cornered prey in my own home.

Why did it feel like that? He wasn’t trying to hurt me. No, he was trying to fix us all. How? It wasn’t like we were just broken mugs whose shards can just be found and glued back together. Even if we were, we could never be whole again without scars. Did I even want this for AJ? For myself? What if all this time, the scars were my glue? What would I be without them, then?

A brief, but warm flutter spread through my belly in a split second.

Was there... really a way out of the flames?

“Clementine?”

I rubbed my forehead as **he** said my name and looked at the direction of his voice. It was the therapist’s voice.

“Are you okay?” His deep yet soothing voice betrayed his concern.

“Yeah.” I lied. “I was just... far away.”

“I can see that. And where were you?”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t, I suppose. But no one who took charge of their lives did so without risks.”

He was right. It was my whole idea behind this coalition. To convince everyone not to be afraid of reaching out and working with other people, adults or not. Teach them to face their problems instead of hiding from them like they used to. What kind of example would it set, if I ran away from this now?

“I... don’t know. There’s just... so much in there to unpack. I don’t even know where to start. Or how to.”

"It's okay. We have the time for it."

"I'll start with the panic attack, I guess."

"Any thoughts on why it happened?"

"Stress."

"About what?"

"I dunno. Have you ever thought what you wanted might not be what you needed? Or at least, what you pictured? Like...I've got a place to call home. Friends. A boy who means the world to me. And we defended it all from the raiders. I should be happy now. But I'm not. I'm more upset than ever and I don't know why."

"Many people felt that way. Did you get that feeling more acutely the hours before the incident?"

"I'm not sure... that morning..."

It was two weeks ago, when AJ woke me up for breakfast. He always disliked being called "goofball", yet often greeted me in the world of the awoken with that goofy smile of his. After a failed negotiation for two more minutes in bed, we stepped outside. The winter had ended quite recently, but I almost couldn't tell. Trees filled up quite quickly.

"Look, a nest!" AJ pointed to it. Aasim's reading lessons were paying off, and indeed the nest was indeed up there. I had never been much of a fan of the woods or nature. But watching the birds looking after their eggs... for some reason, something warm burst within me.

"About time you woke up!" Ruby interrupted my daydreaming. "We were wondering if we would starve waiting for you first or if AJ would eat us all."

"Hey!" AJ and I said in unison, with me continuing "I don't sleep in that late."

"Sure you don't." Violet snickered.

Good thing her sight wasn't totally fucked, but it had been enough she missed the side-glances Omar and Willy gave her. I let them know I didn't, before changing the subject. But it wasn't just for Vi's sake.

"Where's Louis?" If there was one thing he would never skip, it was Omar's breakfast.

"He's... he's still sleeping." Aasim answered. "He assigned himself to almost all duties yesterday."

"Again?!"

"I swear, Clementine, I tried to talk him out of this. He just wouldn't have it."

"I'll talk to him. In the meantime, we'll need somebody else to fill in his hunting duty."

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, it became clear just how much Lilly and the Delta took from this school. From us. Sometimes, the others were still half-expecting Brody to step up for it. Or Mitch to fill in when Louis was lollygagging. Or even Marlon to give orders. Few dared talk about it, but we were a strong group. Helping each other was the point of it all.

"I'll do it." I declared. At least my idea had the merits of drawing unanimity. A disarming unanimity, but one nonetheless.

"No!" Willy said.

"Absolutely not!" Aasim seconded.

"Alright, then." I said. "Guess we'll just not use our main trading source."

"I mean... are you sure about this?" Ruby asked. "I mean your leg—"

"It'll be fine. Willy has made me a nice leg." I turned to him. "Didn't you?"

"I did, but—"

*"But nothing. If we get attacked, and I'm not saying we will... but if we were, I'd **really** like to have gotten used to fighting again."*

None of them argued against the point, but I recognized something in their eyes. Something I haven't seen in their eyes in a while. AJ must have sensed my discomfort somehow, because he set his empty bowl to the table and said:

"Then I'm coming with you."

I didn't have a choice in the matter, but beyond some disapproving murmurs, this intervention stopped any opposition. Defeated, Aasim reluctantly handed me Marlon's bow and faced me with a be-careful stare.

"That one stare I have come to hate." I concluded.

"Why?" Dr Wilson asked.

"Haven't you figured out what's happening? They're not just worried."

I shifted again on my seat. "No, it goes beyond that. They're... doubting me. They no longer respect me. Not as a leader. Not as a friend. Not as... as..."

"An equal?" Dr Wilson asked.

Not a single word escaped my lips for a little bit, but I managed a nod.

“I’m sorry they made you feel that way.” There was such sincerity in his voice, I almost believed it.

“But there’s more to it, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t just that I wasn’t ready to say more. The words just weren’t coming out. An invisible noose may as well have tightened around my neck. I had the... aching, burning sensation that diving deeper than this could lead to... a moment I would rather wash away.

“Let’s just finish my story on what happened.”

The hunt went quite well. It didn’t take quite as long as I thought to readjust my aim. The time to retrieve the arrows we fired had come. We had racked up about nineteen rabbits. Probably could have caught another one... but something stopped me.

A baby rabbit had a... strange behavior. As I prepared to fire another arrow at it, it snuggled at the last target I took down. Once the implication hit me... I couldn’t do it. There were few scenes that had me misty-eyed like this.

Unfortunately, the world soon let me know I stood there for too long. That walker came out of nowhere and gripped me by the foot. The left, wooden one. Landing on my knee wasn’t a pleasant moment for me. In fact, it literally hurt like fucking hell. Despite that, I frantically tried to push the walker off of me. But it just wasn’t budging. There came a sensation that time was slowing down as the creature approached to claim my other leg.

But again, with the reassuring crack of a revolver, I got lucky.

“Clem! Are you okay?”

When AJ stood over me to offer a hand, he seemed more grown-up than ever. Once more, he saved me when I thought he couldn’t. Just like last time. It had come to a point I briefly wondered if he still needed me. Aasim came to assist him, perhaps resisting the smug desire to tell me “I told you so.”

Or perhaps he simply prepared for another storm. Cause as soon as we came back...

“Clem!”

I remember all too well resisting the desire to do a full body eye-roll that’d scream Here-We-Go-Again. Louis was awake and... as one could imagine, not amused. Especially not with Aasim.

“How could you let her go with you?!”

“I tried to stop her! It was an accident.”

"An accident?!"

I couldn't help, but start feeling a bit annoyed. They were arguing about me, but acted like I literally wasn't right here. It was time to cut that shit out.

"Aasim doesn't speak for me!" I told Louis. "If you want to take it out on someone, it's gotta be me!"

He turned to me. For some reason, his blood-shot eyes made his stare a bit more unsettling to look into. But I sure as hell wasn't about to back down. And apparently, neither was he.

"Look!" Vi interrupted us. "Let's just take the rabbits and we're all alive. That's what matters."

Louis casted one last glare at me before going back to his room. Others have decided to do the same. The heavy atmosphere was too much for them. It was easy to forget they were all still reeling from the Delta's crisis.

"Mon dieu" Mr Wilson commented, "It has gotten quite tense."

"That's not all you have to say, right?"

"You're right, it isn't. But before I do, I would like to make sure."

"Hey" Violet whispered to me. "I get it. He just needs some time."

"I hope so."

"I'll talk to him."

Vi got up, with AJ guiding her. I haven't talked much lately. But given how things panned out between us, she probably expected me not to talk to her at all.

"I don't know your story, but I've still got to ask." Wilson said. "Why didn't you?"

"I... just couldn't. After spending so much time pushing others away and counting mostly on herself...now she has to have someone near her at all times."

"You relate to her, in a way."

"... I guess I do. Back to the story."

After this, I was alone for a bit. Perhaps that was for the best. Between AJ becoming more independent and Louis getting overprotective, the breeze that settled on my skin helped clear my mind. As did watching the birds again. Only this time, their eggs hatched. That warm feeling I mentioned earlier? It had now radiated through my chest, like the sunrays did on my skin. These peaceful, quiet moments, in-between all the surviving? They had now become a routine of mine. But again, it made me wonder what I was unhappy about.

That was when the peace had been stopped. Again. As though by instinct, I reached out to the birds when they flew away, one by one, dropping the nest in the process. Far out of reach. Out of sight. This was how it was meant to be... yet came the overwhelming sense that something very wrong was about to happen.

Then a burning scent filled my nostrils. Aasim had just dropped the burning nest, standing there with a blank stare towards the growing flames. I tried reaching out to him, but I may as well have been talking to a brick wall. In full swing, that dread came back. Only this time, it had been accompanied with an incessant pounding of my heart. I would swear something was damn near crushing it with a jackhammer. Yet my legs turned to jelly. I could do nothing more than barely catch myself on the table with one hand and clutching my chest.

Abel's last words came back to me. It wasn't a walker who caught me by surprise. Nor a human filling my body with bullets. It wasn't even the elements that were killing me. Just... my own body, failing me. Taking control away from me for an eternity wrapped in the tiny space that was my chest. Wrapped in the brief time that sure as hell didn't feel like it.

"Lem... Clem..."

Without thinking, I turned around and went for a slash.

I breathed in and out. Even recounting the experience was an ordeal of its own.

"I can tell it was quite a traumatic experience for you." Dr Wilson said.

"I... I just wanted to understand why it happened."

"I see now."

"What... what do you see?"

Dr Wilson now had a smile akin to the mad scientists I used to see on Saturday morning cartoons. It was both unnerving and... reassuring?

"The birds. The baby rabbit and its parent. The eggs, once they hatched... and the burned nest. Don't you see a common thread there?"

"... Family."

I understood the link.

"I understand why I'm not happy now. I'm afraid... everything we've found and built... will come burning down."

"What are you so afraid will happen?"

I... left the question unanswered and simply thanked him.

As far as possible, I went to talk to Louis. His face had been scared with a slash across his cheek. It was a shallow cut... but one that still warranted a look after by Ruby. Oh my god... I wanted to apologize again so much.

But he didn't say anything. Instead, he stepped towards me. I closed my eyes... and felt his embrace. How... how could he forgive me so easily? Didn't he know that one day, I would get them all killed? Just like everyone else? Or... he just didn't want to fight anymore? Was he offering an apology? Letting me know I wasn't alone? It was difficult to guess what his intent was...

Yet my eyes filled themselves with tears... but not from a bad place. I finally returned his gesture. Neither of us were willing to break it. That was when I knew for sure.

That was where I belonged. Where I would live.